Return to the Kingdom of Childhood
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Re-envisioning the Legacy and Philosophical Relevance of Negritude

Cheikh Thiam
For Sidy and Codou
For Monika and Jeffner
For Papa Ndiaye, Edou, and Oussou
For Fifi
For all those who taught me to appreciate difference
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The trium vira, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas, met in France during the turbulent times of the 1930s. It was a time when, in the name of the modern paradigm and its corollary, the universalization of “Western reason,” Europe subjugated the non-European world. This very subjugation also led to the expansion of racism within European metropolises. The racist political, social, and intellectual environment of the 1930s corresponded, however, with a growing anti-rationalist philosophy and the development of what Bennetta Jules-Rosette calls “Black Paris.”

On the one hand, major French scholars and artists such as Henri Bergson, Pablo Picasso, and Leo Frobenius questioned the supposed supremacy of rationality, one of the philosophical underpinnings of colonization, and prepared the ground for the refutation of the modern hierarchization of races. On the other, members of the New Negro movement such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen transformed Paris into the Mecca of black cultures, thereby giving Negritude scholars the means to reclaim, defend, and illustrate “the sum total of Negro cultural values.”
Threatened by the racist colonial system, influenced by the emerging anti-intellectual paradigm, and encouraged by the positive reception of black cultural productions in Paris, Senghor and his fellow students of African descent could not help but ask, as Césaire recalls, “the tormenting question, who am I? Who are we? What are we in this white world?”\(^2\) The answer to these questions pre-empted their subsequent critique of the philosophical foundations of colonization: the modern de-humanization of the Negro self. Senghor clearly explicates this purpose as he asserts, in one of his first published articles: “to be black is to recover the human being crushed under the wheel of inhuman conventions.”\(^3\) In other words, to be black is, for the Senegalese scholar, to reclaim one’s humanity, unacknowledged by modern universalist definitions of the world, denied by inhuman colonial political systems, and derided by vicious social structures that presented certain members of society as second class citizens. Césaire adds, in the same volume, that the history of the relation between blacks and whites has been a history of the denial of blacks’ humanity, followed by a period of representation of blacks as children and, finally, the period of their emancipation from Western prisons of the mind. This diachronic understanding of history led the Martinican poet, along with Senghor and Damas, to call for a revolution against France, particularly its colonial politics of assimilation, through the philosophy of Negritude.\(^4\)

For all the reasons outlined above, most of the major critics of Negritude have read the Afri-centered movement, Senghor’s theorization of its philosophical underpinnings in particular, as a reaction to colonization. Meanwhile, analyses that tackle the complexities of his entire oeuvre beyond its antithetical manifestations are rare. There are only a handful of works addressing the intricate philosophical definition of the human, the critique of Western modernity, and the development of a particular ontology and epistemology that constitute the crux of Senghor’s philosophy. This situation is due to the fact that the interpretation of Senghor’s oeuvre has been defined and determined by the history of its critique, which has traditionally focused on other aspects of Senghor’s texts, such as its anticolonial manifestations, rather than its philosophical positions. Most of these critics, namely Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel d’Arboussier, and Marcien Towa, limit Negritude in space and time and read Senghor’s philosophy in relation to how well it represents the aspirations of colonized Negro subjects. Given the anticolonial condition of the birth of Negritude, these scholars present it as nothing short of a moment condemned to be buried in the same grave as that which led to its birth: the colonial system.
critical tradition seemed all the more convincing that at the dawn of the post-colonial era, the vindication of the Negro race that Negritude was associated with had seemingly become superfluous.

During the first decade after most African countries were liberated from the colonial grip, the intellectual and socio-political contexts that led to the birth of Negritude were fading away. In this intellectual context, postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, revealed the limits of modern metanarratives that led to the hierarchical representation of races. The supremacy of the universalist philosophies developed by the so called “3H” Generation (Georg W. F. Hegel, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger) was, therefore, replaced by the philosophies of the “masters of suspicion (Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud). As a result, the very basis of colonization, the universalization of Western modes of understanding the world was questioned from within. It had seemingly become a truism to say that knowledge is an invention and the universalization of Western reason was an effect of the problematic historicity of the idea of “man.” Why then bother with Negritude scholars’ anti-rationalist theory since the limits of modern metanarratives were already questioned within mainstream Western intelligentsia? For young African scholars such as Stanislas Adotevi, it was time to focus on more interesting and timely issues such as the conflict of class and the pervasive effects of capitalism.

The political and economic contexts were just as alarming as the intellectual one. African countries, led by the same people who questioned the supremacy of Western humanity, namely Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah, etc., had a lower GDP than before the decolonial period. Most of these states were under the strong hold of dictators such as Idi Amin Dada, Sékou Touré, and Michel Micombero. And there were more than seventy coups and thirteen presidential assassinations in the first two decades following the 1960 independence era. In this murky political context, anticolonial movements of defense and illustration of the “sum total of negro cultural values” were considered redundant since what matters most seemed to be, from then on, the very political conditions of the decolonized African nations led by black people. It is therefore not surprising that Adotevi received a standing ovation when he declared, at the 1969 conference of Algiers: “Negritude is dead!” In the subsequent decades, major intellectuals such as Aliko Songolo followed his lead and theorized post-Negritude. The primacy of the question of identity in African literature was slowly dying off, to give way to the critique of the post-colonial state.
The word was finally on the street and Sartre’s prediction seemed to have been fulfilled. Race seemed to be, at best, a strategic essentialism that needed to be surpassed by a more pragmatic understanding of “the African problem.” Accordingly, as opposed to European and American intellectuals such as Sylvia Washington and Irving Markovitz, most of the 1970s literature on Negritude produced by Africans presented Senghor’s theory as a mystification or a négrologie. This tendency to consider Negritude as passé dominated its critique until the late twentieth century, when a resurgence of discourses on race and the birth of postcolonial African studies allowed scholars to revisit the Negritude movement, particularly its critique of modern European universality.

New Beginnings

Jean-Paul Sartre’s pronouncement of the imminent death of Negritude and the second generation of African critics’ confirmation and celebration of its burial were based on the assumption that the question of race was only a moment of the universal struggle of the oppressed. This understanding of the racial question was rooted in the idea that racism is an accident of history imbedded in ignorance and economic exploitation. Accordingly, it was assumed that the end of colonization and segregation was supposed to coincide with the one of the social, political, and economic relevance of race. The problem, it seemed, was ignorance and greed. The education of masses and the liberation of the colonized territories, it was presumed, would solve it. However, fifty years after the end of colonization and segregation, Negritude is still relevant today because race still matters.

Race matters because although for Sartre it is, in the same vein as racism, a pathological accident, one can argue that race and racism are constitutive of the modern state. In the 1930s state racism legitimated the compartmentalization of races. Today, the fundamental structure of the state achieves the same results in the name of freedom. As Michel Foucault illustrates in his 1975 lectures at the Collège de France, modern revolutions, which led to the birth of the modern state, were conceived in racial terms. It is, in other words, in the name of the sovereignty of masses, defined in terms of their racial particularities that the modern state was founded. In the case of England, for example, the revolutionary forces based their struggle on the idea of the “Saxon Race,” whose identity was fundamentally different from that of the “Norman Race.” This
conception of the state as constituted of a unified body that defines itself
in relation to those who originate from outside the imagined monolithic
“us” led to the foundation of the modern British state. The state is under-
stood, accordingly, as based on the idea of saxonness, thereby ignoring
all those who are not primarily members of that group. The same process
applies to France and most modern European States. This perspective,
founded on the analysis of the modern state as essentially racialist, has
been developed in American academia since the late 1980s and cham-
pioned by scholars such David Goldberg, 7 Rey Chow, 8 Benedict Ander-
son, 9 and Cornel West. 10 All these authors agree on the fundamentally
racialist nature of the state and the necessity to acknowledge the perma-
nence of race in all our present social lives. This perspective has caused
a renewed interest in racial discourses that goes beyond the tiresome cul-
tural nationalist tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

These recent developments in the study of race and its importance
in our contemporary world correspond to a renewal of interest in Seng-
hor’s philosophy. This rebirth is materialized by the recent publication of
sympathetic and interesting studies of Senghor’s life and philosophy by
important seasoned and upcoming scholars, such as Wole Soyinka, Sou-
leymane Bachir Diagne, Donna Jones, Simon Njami, and Seghers Nimrod.
It is equally important that, in the past ten years, major African Studies
journals based in the U. S. such as Research in African Literatures have
dedicated special editions to Senghor’s work, while conferences on his
philosophy have been organized around the world. That is precisely why
Abiola Irele acknowledges, in his recent book, Negritude and African
Condition, that:

Even in the postcolonial era, Negritude has not lost its pertinence and its
timeliness [. . . . ] The concerted effort to revalorize the importance of
Senghor’s intellectual and personal lives materialized by, among others,
Simon Njami’s excellent study of his life and his intellectual production
and Nimrod’s touching homage to the poet and the man of culture show
it very well. 11

This renewed interest in the philosophy of Negritude confirms the
premise of Return to the Kingdom of Childhood that, eighty years after
Senghor’s first philosophical productions and half a century after the inde-
pendence of most African countries, it is time to break down the ideo-
logical barriers that limit the Senegalese philosopher’s rich intellectual
production to a reaction to colonization, and to show the complexity of
his philosophy. This premise has been recently applied by scholars such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Donna Jones. Using Bergson’s *lebensphilosophie* as the foundation of Senghor’s theory, they both attempt to unearth the frequently ignored epistemology and ontology that constitute the crux of the philosophy of Negritude. Despite their significant contributions, however, these scholars have not accorded a prominent role to the very African foundations of Senghor’s philosophy. This perspective has led them to read Negritude as a particular version of Bergson’s philosophy, thereby falling short of producing a truly decolonial reading of Negritude. Such a perspective would have allowed them to present Senghor’s philosophy as central to contemporary discourses in Africana scholarship.

In order to read the philosophy of Negritude in its own right, however, one needs to analyze it from a new perspective. One way of reading Léopold Sédar Senghor’s work and his concept of Negritude from a new perspective is to focus on the African foundation of his methodology. An Afri-centered reading of the philosophy of Negritude shows that the concept of “time” occupies a central place in Senghor’s theory. Senghor considers time as duration, the attribute of the object that inscribes it in a constant élan of becoming. This Afri-centered conception of time as a flowing movement that links past, present, and future in the *same* relation of becoming correlates with the conception of being as becoming, denotes his conception of roots as always changing, and stipulates that it is the essence of cultures and races to change constantly, to die, and to be born again permanently. For Senghor traditions and cultures reinvent themselves, evolve, but can neither be lost nor kept “authentic.” This fluid conception of cultures and therefore races, the fundamental manifestations of cultures, shows that despite the anti-racist categories in which the critics of Negritude place his theory, Senghor offers a refreshing conceptualization of race and the Negro. His definition of races and his conception of Negritude as a prospective movement that cannot be limited to a definite space and time offer a heterogeneous conception of Africa that erases the established lines of demarcation between a supposed authentic pre-colonial Africa and a post-colonial hybrid Africa.

More than a simple reaction to the imperialist de-humanization of the Negro, Senghor proposes an Afri-centered critique of the epistemic limits of modern Western universalization of “man” and a conception of the human through a particular analysis of the meaning and manifestations of race. Races, for the theoretician of Negritude, manifest themselves through their relations to the world, which are, in turn, determined by
their cultural particularities. To be a Negro, for example, is, for Senghor, to have a distinctive emotional relation to the object of knowledge. This relation to the object of knowledge, a consequence of Negroes’ conception of being, is the effect of the particularity of their cultures. In other words, Negroes’ particularity is determined by their epistemology, which is based on their understanding of the ontological manifestation of being. The definition, analysis, and explanation of this ontology and its ensuing epistemology constitute the foundation of his entire oeuvre, the analysis of which shows, as will be clarified, that Negritude is a philosophy that stands on its own.

Despite the essentialism suggested by the idea of a Negro ontology and epistemology, however, Senghor’s culturalist understanding of race implies that races, like cultures, are fundamentally mixed. The theoretician of Negritude lays the groundwork for a non-essentialist essentialism and sets the condition for the conception of Negro cultures as entities, which, since prehistory, develop, change, and mix with other cultures, while they remain fundamentally African. Reading Senghor’s philosophy of Negritude beyond the anti-colonial paradigm does not suggest, however, that the state and conditions of black men and women living in France between the two World Wars did not participate in the development of Negritude. Of course, these conditions were fundamental to the rise of a black racial consciousness in 1930s France. But, Negritude cannot be limited to a reaction to the West. Although it is a defense of Negro cultural values, it is primarily, as Senghor constantly argues in his philosophical oeuvre, an illustration of these values beyond Western definitions of the Negro.

Reprendre

Re-visiting Senghor’s oeuvre as an Afri-centered discourse, with a particular focus on his philosophical production, shows that he proposes an original epistemology, an Afri-centered ontology, and a progressive theory of race and métissage. This philosophy needs to be carefully read and analyzed, rather than labeled as an anti-colonial or a Euro-centric discourse and quickly disregarded. As will be shown in Chapter 1, “The Limits of the Colonial Paradigm: Negritude and Its Critique,” interesting aspects of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s theory such as his epistemology, his ontology, and his culturalist conception of race have seldom been studied because, until recently, the critique of Negritude had constricted it within its anti-
colonial expressions. Despite their fundamental differences, the major early critics of Negritude follow the same paradigm as they consider it to be a reaction to colonization. Accordingly, they contain Senghor’s philosophy in space and time, present it as an anticolonial movement limited to France and the Francophone world, and read it in relation to how well it represents the aspirations of colonized Negro subjects.

Beyond this ideological paradigm, the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have witnessed a new dawn in heralding a departure from the traditional critique of Negritude. Contemporary scholars such as Abiola Irele, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Donna Jones, and Messay Kebede analyze Senghor’s oeuvre as a philosophical interpretation of the world that needs to be placed in its intellectual context, in order to be appreciated in all its complexity. These scholars announce a new way of reading Negritude as a philosophy that proposes a particular Negro epistemology and a progressive race theory such as the one I propose here. Yet, they consider Negritude as springing from the philosophical works of Henri Bergson, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and therefore implicitly lend Senghor to occupy the space of the subject of the West thereby re-instating the West as the central subject of history. I argue, conversely, that despite the fact that Senghor is constantly in dialogue with these scholars, his philosophy finds its roots in African cultural traditions. Looking at Senghor’s oeuvre in these terms places Negritude beyond the anti-colonial dialectic and allows contemporary readers to discover new developments in his philosophy such as his epistemology and his ontology.

The study of Negritude as an Afri-centered epistemology and ontology that questions the philosophical underpinning of colonization, the universalization of Western reason, is the focus of Chapter 2, “Negritude, Epistemology, and African Vitalism.” It is a truism to say that from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Western imperialist thought had presented whiteness as the mode of irradiation of humanness and defined other human groups according to their degrees of resemblance to, and difference from, Western cultures. This conception of the human had as a corollary the universalization of European ratio and the assimilation of otherness with sub-humanity. African scholars understood therefore, as early as the nineteenth century, that the best way to bring colonization to its demise is to shatter its philosophical foundation: the universalist representation of Western rationality. It is in this vein that Léopold Sédar Senghor proposes an Afri-centered definition of being based on the representation of race as a relation to the world. This ontology leads him to
develop a particular philosophy that enables him to show the epistemic limits of Western reason and to propose a vitalist epistemology based on an intuitive relation to the world. The ontology and epistemology that one can decipher from Senghor’s theory constitute a radical and timely critique of modern Western philosophy that is comparable to Bergson’s theory of intuition, the epistemic tools of which Senghor uses to better support his philosophy.

The exploration of Senghor’s ontology and epistemology leads to the central questions of Chapter 3, “Métissages”: how does the theory of Negritude as a relation to the world overlap, in Senghor’s philosophy, with the conception of Negroes as mixed? In other words, how does Senghor define what seems to be an essentialist representation of blackness and yet present races as fundamentally métisses? What does the concept of Métissage entail? How does it differ from twentieth-century theories of hybridity such as those of Fernando Ortiz and José Vasconcelos? The answer to these questions allows me to argue that even if it is undeniable that Senghor postulates the fundamental particularity of Negro cultures, reading his philosophy from the perspective of his conception of time as movement shows that he is an essentialist of a different kind. In spite of the “anti-racist” categories in which the traditional critique of Negritude places his theory, Senghor erases the established lines of demarcation between a supposed authentic pre-colonial Africa and a postcolonial hybrid Africa and presents Negroes as constantly mixing with other cultures with which they are in contact. Thus, if there is an essentialism in Senghor’s philosophy, I conclude, it is an “essentialism of hybridity” as shows his theory of Métissage. In fact, Senghor foreshadowed contemporary theories of mixture and hybridity such as Édouard Glissant’s Tout-Monde. Three decades before the Martinican poet and philosopher, he dreams of a mixed world that, unlike the monolithic Euro-American universalism disguised under the veil of globalization, is founded on an infinite repetition of otherness, mixture, and multilingualism.

The complexity of Senghor’s ontology and epistemology (Chapter 2) and the timeliness of his race theory (Chapter 3) leads me to claim, in Chapter 4, that despite Sartre’s prediction, in the late 1940s, of the imminent death of the Negritude movement, and notwithstanding the traditional representation of Senghor as the man who dared to say “emotion is Negro, while reason is Hellenic,” Negritude is still a pivotal discourse in Africana studies. In this chapter, entitled “Negritude is not Dead!” I show that Senghor’s philosophy continues early Africanist intellectual productions such as Du Bois’ “double consciousness” and is engaged in a
permanent dialogue with contemporary discourses such as Edouard Glissant's "Antillanité" and Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic." Like Du Bois, he questions the epistemological foundation of colonization and goes beyond the seemingly natural tendency to view the world and the Negro self through the colonial veil. In the same vein as Glissant and Gilroy, he participates in contemporary reflections on the meanings and functions of continental and Diasporic black identities and insists on the importance of modern experiences of Africans in the development of their contemporary identities. Yet, beyond Du Bois' aporetic choice between his two selves, Gilroy's black Atlantic theory, and Glissant's celebration of Antillanité, Senghor proposes a new paradigm. He questions the ontological possibility to separate the past from the present and therefore pre-colonial identity from postcolonial hybridity. Thus, he acknowledges the influences of Western modernity in the formation of contemporary African and Diasporic cultures and claims, nonetheless, that despite their new manifestations, contemporary African cultures function as developments of pre-colonial African civilizations and remain fundamentally African. In this vein, the philosophy of Negritude shows the relevance of theories of double consciousness, Antillanité, and the Black Atlantic, while noting their reiteration of the dichotomous modern logic. Senghor offers these scholars a way to think of the African condition in terms that take into consideration all of their manifestations. The comparison of Senghor's philosophy with Du Bois', Glissant's, and Gilroy's, shows that even though his oeuvre was developed in an anti-colonial atmosphere and despite the fact that it was written more than fifty years ago, Negritude is still an important voice in contemporary discourses on Africa and African descended people as it continues early African descended scholars' theories while constantly questioning and expanding some of the most complex contemporary discourses on the African condition.

I do not mean, as will be developed in the concluding chapter, that Senghor proposes a flawless theory. Of course, his anti-colonial discourse and his critique of Western colonial reason have been influenced by major European scholars such as Henri Bergson and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Senghor's critique, thus, risks speaking of the Negro from the prism of a European intellectual tradition thereby reinstating the West as the center of production of knowledge. But can we limit Senghor's philosophy to a blackened version of modern Western scholarship? In philosophy as in life, one should avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water. In fact, notwithstanding the pernicious effects of power, a hermeneutics of Senghor's work shows that even though, at times, he falls in the
modern paradigmatic trap and repeats the Western essentialist conception of race of the time, the modern philosophers’ influence has a less defining effect on his philosophy than it is assumed. Looking at Negritude from an Afri-centered perspective, that is, considering it as rooted in African realities rather than in a reaction to colonization shows that he does not always repeat the aforementioned modern scholars. He is, rather, more often than not, in dialogue with them. Reading Senghor’s oeuvre in these terms will place Negritude beyond the anticolonial ethnophilosophical perspective of the postcolonial era. It will also enable contemporary readers to discover new developments in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s oeuvre such as his radical and groundbreaking ontology and epistemology. It is for these reasons, I argue, that a decade after his death and eighty years after his first texts, it is time we stopped celebrating or denigrating Léopold Sédar Senghor and the “ideology” with which his name is associated. It is time we started reading Negritude as an Afri-centered philosophy that can stand on its own. Such a relation with Senghor’s oeuvre will lead to a better understanding of Negritude and to new ways of reading his work.
The early 1930s can be presented as the golden age of the Negritude movement. During this vibrant time, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Gontran Damas, along with a number of other intellectuals of African descent such as Paulette Nardal and Jacques Rabemananjara, wrote pamphlets questioning the validity of colonization, articles illustrating the vitality of black cultures, and poems celebrating Negroness. And yet, it is not until 1948 that Jean-Paul Sartre published “Black Orpheus,” the first systematic study of the Negritude movement. Sartre’s representation of Negritude as an anti-racist racism destined to be consumed in its own fire was met, a year later, by Gabriel d’Arboussier’s critique of both Negritude and Sartre’s interpretation of its literature in “Negritude: A dangerous mystification.”

These first critical studies of Senghor’s movement were followed by a period of relative silence that lasted for more than a decade. By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the wave of independences in African countries gave rise to a renewed interest in Negritude and what can be called Senghorian studies. Following Sartre’s lead, young African intellectuals such as Wole Soyinka, Eziekel Mphahlele, Stanislas Adotevi, and Marcien Towa,
attempted to rethink the effect of colonization beyond the traditional racial paradigm. What better way to achieve this goal, they thought, than to substitute Negritude’s racialist perspective with a Marxist analysis of the colonial question? Thus, in the same vein as d’Arboussier’s critique of “Black Orpheus,” the enthusiastic young intellectuals presented the birth and development of Negritude as a consequence of Senghor and Césaire’s longing for Western recognition. The latter scholars’ desire to be acknowledged by the West culminated, the critics thought, in the invention of a mythical “Negroland.” It is time, the young intellectuals argued, to go beyond the myth of the Negro in order to consider colonization as what it really is: a manifestation of capitalism.2

Although the critics mentioned above have such radically opposed interpretations of Senghor’s oeuvre, they agree in regard to how they read his work. Considering Negritude as an expression of Negro nationalism, the literary wing of a militant ideology, they present it as a legitimate resistance against the colonial system, as a compliant leniency towards Western cultural domination, or as an anachronistic myth that has run its course. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, portrays Senghor as the authentic voice of the colonized Negro; Marcien Towa refers to him as a proponent of assimilation; while Stanislas Adotevi calls for post-Negritude. In all these cases, Negritude is presented as, at best, a necessary evil, at worst, a superfluous mystification that should be abandoned in the postcolonial era. The confinement exercised by such a limited understanding of the Negritude movement is a direct result of its critics’ constant focus on the socio-political situation in colonial France. This paradigmatic relation to Senghor’s oeuvre fails, however, to take into account other important manifestations of his philosophy such as his ontology, his epistemology, and his constructive non-essentialist race theory.

Fortunately, by the end of the 1970s Abiola Irele proposed an analysis of Negritude as a philosophical reflection on the meaning of Negroness that needs to be placed in its intellectual context in order to be appreciated in all its complexity. Irele invites his readers to consider Negritude “not so much [as] a descriptive analysis of African culture but as a synthetic vision. Rather than an empirical sociological investigation of African institutions, he says, his [Senghor’s] method consists in a personal interpretation of African values, and in a statement in philosophical terms, of their informing ‘spirit.’”3 This intellectual posture prefigured what has become, in the twenty first century, the new paradigmatic relation to Senghor’s oeuvre: The understanding of Negritude as a philosophical project, particularly, an ontology, an epistemology, and a critique of
the supremacy of Western ratio. This mode of reading Senghor’s oeuvre is, however, still rare, although it led to the publication, in 2007, of Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s *Léopold Sédar Senghor, l’art africain comme philosophie* (*Leopold Sedar Senghor, African Art as Philosophy*) and informs the last chapter of Donna V. Jones’ *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*, which has won, this year, the prestigious Annual Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies.

Diagne maps the intellectual roots of Senghor’s philosophy and sets the possibility to analyze Négritude as a philosophical system that can be read beyond any predefined ideology or political agenda. He invites the reader to identify the founding principle of Senghor’s entire oeuvre in order to explain what he presents as the fundamental question of his philosophy: Why do Negroes sculpt a certain way and not otherwise? The answer to this question enables the contemporary Senegalese thinker to decipher, in Senghor’s representation of African art, the theory of a Negro ontology and epistemology based on rhythm. Along the same lines as Diagne, who has reviewed *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, Donna Jones develops a compelling analysis of Senghor and Césaire’s philosophies of Négritude. Without looking at the limits of her critique of Négritude, the details of which I will explore in chapter 2, it is important to note, in the following analytical overview of Négritude’s critical tradition, that she participates in the rather groundbreaking shift of the twenty-first century that takes the time to develop a careful reading of Senghor’s complex critique of modernity and its corollary, the idea of rationality. In this sense, Diagne’s book and the last chapter of Jones’ essay, foreshadow my reading of Négritude as a philosophical system. Unlike Diagne and Jones, however, who, despite their innovative analysis of the complexity of Négritude, define it as a continuation of modern Western philosophy and ethnology, looking at Senghor’s oeuvre as rooted in particular African epistemologies will open new ways of analyzing its meanings. Such a perspective will show Senghor’s philosophy beyond the imagination of Africa as a reaction to Western imperialism and its corollary, Sartre’s announced death of Négritude.

**“Black Orpheus”: The Poisoned Chalice**

The year 1948 marks the centenary of the abolition of slavery and the introduction of free and obligatory education in the French colonies.
This year, Léopold Sédar Senghor claims, the “colored man, Negroes in particular, succeeded in reaching the type of freedom that only culture can provide [ . . . ]” because they acquired the tools that enable them to contribute to “contemporary French humanism. A fundamentally universal humanism since it was fecundated by all human races!” To commemorate these significant historical and cultural events, Senghor published an overview of the actual state of Negritude, entitled: Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry. In order to give the publication of his anthology all the legitimacy that it needs, the Senegalese thinker invited Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the time, to preface it. Sartre accepted Senghor’s invitation and wrote “Black Orpheus,” arguably the most influential analysis of Negritude to date. As the most significant account on Negritude, Sartre’s preface to Senghor’s anthology enabled the French philosopher to fulfill the mission that was assigned to him: to place the publication of Senghor’s anthology and the poetry of Negritude in their veritable historical, political, and literary contexts and to praise the major poets of Negritude’s revolutionary stance. Yet also, to the surprise of some of the major African scholars of the time such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Franz Fanon, Sartre defines Negritude as a moment of the grand narrative of the struggle between classes, thereby belittling the importance of “race” in Negritude scholars’ conception of their philosophical and political movement.

As the title of “Black Orpheus” suggests, Jean-Paul Sartre starts by presenting Negritude poets, children of the muse and fathers of songs, as determined to save the downtrodden Negro race through the poetic praise of her humanity. The existentialist philosopher starts from the postulation that the representation of Africans as subhuman species with no kings and laws is the condition of existence of colonization. The latter, as implies its etymology (organization), pretends to be a “humanistic endeavor” destined to bring the colonized into the inner human circle. However, Sartre claims, colonization, appears as a “humanism” only because its control of the discourse and the order of things enables its proponents to present the colonizer as the quintessence of the human, while defining the colonized as a subhuman species that needs to be civilized. As a result, Sartre argues, Negroes’ access to speech threatens the structural foundation of colonization, the conception of the world as divided into two compartments [ . . . ] inhabited by two different species: the voiced subject of history and the silenced object of colonization.

For Sartre, Negritude thinkers were conscious of the ways in which the control of all the modes of production of knowledge enabled the
imperialist universalization of Western man and led to the justification of the colonial system. This consciousness allows these scholars to reiterate, in all their discourses, the title of Georges Balandier’s article, published in the first issue of *Présence Africaine*: “The Negro is a man.” Their discourses, more than an engagement in communication, is a performance of their agency, as the power of the pen guarantees them, the ability to name, define, and therefore, own the world. “In their turn, Sartre states, black torches light up the world and our white heads are no more than Chinese lanterns singing in the wind.” In other words, Negritude thinkers’ occupation of the subject’s position inverts the Western gaze from which the world has been defined and invented since the eighteenth century. This redefinition of the location of the historical subject reveals the paradigmatic problems underlying imperialist representation of Negroes and foreshadows a new order of discourse. From now on, the existentialist thinker writes, it is undeniable that:

Being [*L’Être*] is black, Being is made of fire, we are accidental and far away, we have to justify our mores, our techniques, our undercooked paleness and our verdigrisy vegetation. We are eaten away to the bones by these quiet and corrosive looks.

Straying away from the colonial dialectic, which considers the Western subject as a producer of knowledge whose fate it is to objectify and define the “other,” Negritude, the irruption of silenced Negro voices in the field of knowledge production, proposes an Afri-centered point of stasis that functions as a means to reinvent a world regulated by Western doxa. For the existentialist scholar, the poetry of Negritude questions the seemingly universal worldview imposed by the “white man” and, through the exercise of Negroes’ right to speak, the proponents of Negritude deride and surpass Western essentialization of humanness. For all these reasons, Sartre defines Negritude as an eminently poetic and political endeavor, the only great revolutionary poetry of the twentieth century.

For Sartre, however, Negritude thinkers’ participation in the discursive practices that have defined the world for centuries makes them face an important challenge: they are bound to speak in French, while to speak in the same way than those who have always defined the world is less to speak than it is to echo the loud resonance of “the same.” If to speak is a performance of one’s humanity, to speak in the language of the colonizer is, he contends, to remain in the prison of exile, which led them, in the first place, to yearn for a discourse of their own. Sartre warns his readers that:
There is a certain risk of dangerously slowing down the efforts of black men to reject our tutelage. Having been dispersed to the four corners of the earth by the slave trade, black men have no common language; in order to incite the oppressed to unite, they must necessarily rely on the words of the oppressor’s language. [. . .] And since words are ideas, when the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he accepts with one hand what he rejects with the other; he sets up the enemy’s thinking-apparatus in himself, like a crusher.12

But Sartre adds, fortunately, the aporetic condition of any “minor literature,”13 that is, the feeling of loss triggered by this impossibility of writing in French and the impossibility of writing in a language other than French, leads Negritude thinkers to poetry, the language of totality that questions the traditional modes of manifestation of language. He states:

They answer the colonist’s ruse with a similar but inverse ruse: since the oppressor is present in the very language that they speak, they will speak this language in order to destroy it. The black herald is going to de-Frenchifyze them; he will crush them, break their usual association, he will violently couple them.14

In other words, Negritude thinkers propose a new language that destroys from inside the logical structure of French and thereby prefigure a new dawn. In the same vein as Erasmus of Rotterdam, who, in the sixteenth century, calls for a praise of folly that is more reasonable than reason,15 Negritude poets’ praise of emotion through a seemingly irrational language conveys the adversative position of “those who have invented neither gunpowder nor compass, those who tamed neither steam nor electricity those who explored neither the sea nor the sky but those without whom the earth could not be the earth.”16

Sartre proceeds to present Negritude as a political movement: the only revolutionary poetry of the twentieth century because it is a destruction of Western imperialist logic and a promise of the reinvention of the modes and means of definition of the world. The racial dimension of the movement, he insists, is important, because, unlike the exploitation of the proletariat, the one of the Negro is also based on his or her phenotypical particularities. Hence, it is in race consciousness that the poets of Negritude find their path to liberation. This race consciousness starts with the realization that the Negro’s immediate interest is different from the consciousness of the European proletariat. The latter, in the colonial context, benefits from colonization, which threatens the existence of the former.
Sartre deduces, from this observation, that the colonized Negro’s race consciousness must manifest itself through an “anti-racist racism,” that is, the discovery of Negroes’ humanity through an antithetical negation of white supremacist essentialization of the human.

“Anti-racist racism” constitutes, however, for Sartre, the weak stage of a dialectical movement, the necessary path to the synthetic stage of the history of human development as a raceless and classless society. He declares:

\[
\text{Negritude appears like the up-beat of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity.}^{17}
\]

For Sartre, the condition of existence of Negritude, particularly the necessity to claim the Negro’s humanity, is also the condition of its death. As an antithetical reaction to Western definitions of the Negro, Negritude is condemned to be consumed by its own fire. He depicts Negritude as nothing but a moment in the long process of human evolution, or, as Diagne rightly puts it, for Sartre Negritude is not even a moment, but a moment of the real moment, the conflict between classes.\(^{18}\) This representation of Negritude leads Franz Fanon to declare in *Black Skin White Masks*:

When I read that page, I felt I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends: “The generation of the younger black poets had just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven. . . . Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing. . . . Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal.”\(^{19}\)

This representation of Negritude as a moment of the struggle between classes shows, however, that despite the complexity of Sartre’s representation of Negritude as a poetic and a political revolution, the analysis he proposes in “Black Orpheus” is similar to the one of the most severe critiques of Negritude. It is even arguable that his postulation that Negritude is an anti-racist racism and, mainly, an anti-colonial movement is, if not the backbone, at least a stepping stool for the traditional representation of Negritude as a mythical theory of return to the source. Like the second generation of the critique of Negritude, the particularity of which will be explored, Sartre considers Negritude a myth that is necessary for the anti-colonial struggle but that needs to be surpassed when reality sinks in.
This representation of Negritude as a moment of the struggle between classes shows, however, that despite the complexity of “Black Orpheus,” Sartre’s analysis of Negritude is oriented by his own existentialist agenda. This existentialist reading of Negritude distorts the philosophical foundation of the Afri-centered movement. “Black Orpheus” was thought to be a celebration of Negritude and an explanation of its significance. It turned out to be, however, an existentialist discourse that uses the Negritude movement to prove the validity of the French scholar’s own philosophy. As early as 1949, one year after the publication of “Black Orpheus,” Gabriel d’Arboussier had already noted the limits of Sartre’s critique. He warned the reader against Sartre’s substitution of his own existentialist agenda for Negritude thinkers’ representation of black identity. “Here we are, he stated, at the heart of existentialism. From a ‘Heideggerian standpoint,’ Sartre tries to explain the notion of Negritude.”

Moreover, the existentialist theoretician had also shown, three years before his preface to Senghor’s anthology, that the racial aspect of Negritude is nothing but a manifestation of a more profound and more universal problem: Capitalist exploitation of lower classes. He argues, in an article published in _Le Figaro_, in 1945,

There seems to be only one solution to the Negro problem, and it is a long time coming: When the American proletariat will acknowledge that their problem with the employers is the same as Negroes’, the latter will
fight along white workers for the respect of their rights . . . blacks have one thing in common: the treatment that is reserved to them.23

It is not surprising then that Sartre presents Negritude as the weak link of a dialectical movement, a moment of the universal class struggle. His conception of “blacks” as having only in common their different treatments presupposes his denial of the basic principles of the Negritude movement: a certain relation to the world, “subjective Negritude,” triggered by the sum total of Negro cultural values, “objective Negritude.” If the philosophy of Negritude is based on the principle that cultural particularities determine one’s relation to the world—and therefore one’s race—for the Sartre of Being and Nothingness, on the contrary, the subject is always free to define himself or herself beyond her historical and social functions. For the existentialist philosopher, the self is not static. She is always in the making and existence depends on the different choices the subject is free to make because it precedes essence. In other words, since existence precedes essence, freedom of choice enables one to define the self and the world beyond the identity bestowed on him by “the other.” Despite the seemingly natural essence of the Negro, for example, one’s identification as a Negro is the manifestation of the subject’s “false consciousness.” The famous example Sartre gives of the waiter, who is less a waiter than a subject who has the false consciousness of being a waiter and plays at being one, is applicable to Negritude thinkers. To show the nature of being, he invites us to:

[C]onsider [a] waiter in [a] café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid, Sartre tells us. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to changing his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seems to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café. There is nothing there to surprise us.24
Considering race in the same vein, Sartre assumes that Negritude scholars are playing at being black. He questions, thus, the fundamental principle of Negritude, which Senghor understands as the sum total of Negro cultural values and a relation to the world that emerges from those values. For Sartre, Negritude can, at best, be tolerated as a discursive moment, a strategic political stance, a necessary and timely performance that is bound to make place for the veritable revolution: the revolution of the proletariat. Under Sartre’s pen, Negritude becomes nothing short of an illustration of existentialism. He was asked to give Negritude its *lettres de créances*. He uses Negritude to give existentialism its own. Sartre’s reading of Negritude through his existentialist agenda leads Abiola Irele to say:

Sartre’s essay is in many ways characteristic—trenchant, lofty, altogether compelling, but very personal. Without doubt, in analyzing the work of the Negro poet, he tells us a lot too much about himself, and indeed his interpretation amounts to an act of annexation.²⁵

Along the same line, Souleymane Bachir Diagne places “Black Orpheus” in the tradition of Sartre’s prefaces. For Diagne,

Sartre’s prefaces, as we know, are never mere invitations to discover the pages they present. On the contrary, when Sartre takes up an oeuvre, it is to cover it with all his body . . . and to make it his by telling its ultimate message, the message that defines it.²⁶

Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” is, in effect, nothing but another page of existentialism. And yet, the understanding of Negritude as a necessary strategic essentialism that he postulates is repeated by the entire historiography of the movement from the 1940s to the 1980s. This paradigm was particularly important for the second generation of critics who consider Negritude an anti-colonial doctrine, limit it to a senseless mystification of the “Negro race,” before they celebrate its death.

**Death Sentence: A Marxist perspective**

A decade after Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” all the seeds for the rise of a new generation of African intellectuals were planted. The decolonization of most African countries and the expansion of a new black bourgeoi-
sie had led young intellectuals such as Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa, and Eziekel Mphahlele to follow the Marxist understanding of colonization as a manifestation of capitalism. For these scholars, as Eric Williams contends, “slavery [ . . . ] was not born from racism, it is racism that is the consequence of slavery.” They substitute, accordingly, a historical materialist analysis of colonization for Negritude’s racialist discourse and announce the latter’s death. Eziekel Mphahlele, for example, advocates “that the historical factors, which gave rise to Negritude in the first place, do not exist anymore [ . . . since] it served its worthy purpose as a rejection of French models and as an affirmation of la présence africaine.” Adotevi proclaims, along the same line, “Negritude is dead. [ . . . ] We need to free the Negro.” Sartre’s prophecy seemed, thus, to have been fulfilled.

The Marxist perspective adopted by the second generation of critics of Negritude was rooted in their particularly distrustful relation to its main theoreticians. Negritude thinkers, for these scholars, were bourgeois elites who had benefitted from colonization, lost touch with African realities, and whose interest it was to disseminate the myth of the perpetual struggle between races to the detriment of the ongoing class struggle. The theoreticians of Negritude, Adotevi claims, were never militants. On the contrary, they lived in posh metropolitan centers, far from the hard realities of those for whom the value of human dignity is not a discourse, but a hard-felt everyday physical struggle. For Adotevi, the socio-economic situation in which the Negritude bourgeois lived made them theorize the beauty and morality of Negroes while, after all, these évolutés in the clothing of native informants had lost touch with contemporary Africa. All they remembered was the myth of a kingdom of childhood, a mythical land of innocence, peace, and riches.

It is undeniable that the politics of assimilation had created in Francophone Africa a clear class distinction between African masses, who had remained French subjects, and educated African elites who, at least officially, could taste the succulent fruits of the colonial exploitation of the masses. Given the French colonial class structure, Mphahlele describes Negritude as an elitist movement by and for Francophone African intellectuals and politicians living in Paris between 1932 and 1960. He declares:

It is significant that it is not the African in British-settled territories—a product of “indirect rule” and one that has been left in his cultural habitat—who readily reaches out for his traditional past. It is rather the assimilated African, who has absorbed French culture, who is now passionately waiting to recapture his past.
Along the same lines, Adotevi asks Negritude thinkers and Senghor, in particular,

[T]o let it [Negritude] climb down from its stale presidential, ambassadorial, conference, festival, élite platforms and listen to the real cries of Africa. Let it stop telling the masses how beautiful they are while they starve, while they swelter under new lords, while they stand outside State House or City Hall where their lords are junketing. . . . Negritude [should] come out of its mythical planet and assume a role that must be seen to be revolutionary.\(^{31}\)

The necessary decolonial revolution, as Adotevi implies, is the deed of the enslaved masses. Following Fanon’s and Sartre’s logic, he considers the colonial world as a world divided in two: the colonizer and the colonized, the master and the slave. This dialectical understanding of colonization allows him to explain that a classic struggle between master and slave is the necessary condition for liberation. This struggle would lead to the necessary cleansing violence against the colonizer that not only frees the colonized, but also changes the entire system. Yet, for Adotevi, Senghor’s socio-economic status and his uncritical acceptance of the French system makes him oblivious to the essentially economic realities of colonization and to the necessity to radically change the system.\(^{32}\)

On these grounds, Stanislas Adotevi and Eziekel Mphahlele, two of the most important examples of the second generation of Negritude critics, come to deny Negritude’s pertinence and to refute the validity of its nationalist claims. For these intellectuals, Negritude cannot escape the filter of Western domination; the poets and theoreticians of Negritude are Eurocentric thinkers who respond to the concerns of their social class more than they re-think the concept of Africa from an African perspective; the history of Negritude is interrelated with the history of racism and Negro oppression; it is a Francophone African re-articulation of modern Western philosophy. In consequence, although the effects and manifestations of Negritude exceed the colonial period, the second wave of the scholarship on Negritude defines it as a myth that needs to be buried with the French colonial empire.

These young African intellectuals’ representation of Negritude as an elitist mystification of African cultures is relatively pertinent. Their distrust of African elites is equally justifiable. It is indeed puzzling, as Abiola Irele acknowledges in his recent book, Négritude et condition africaine (Negritude and the African Condition), that Senghor has never seriously engaged the political question of decolonization in his work. Through-
out his oeuvre, one does not encounter a demand for the unconditional political emancipation of African nations although he frequently pleads for equal opportunity between colonizers and colonized. One must therefore wonder if Senghor’s indulgent political stand on colonization is an effect of his elitism and his role as a member of the French parliament and government. Or, is it the result of his firm belief that colonization, as a political system, was a consequence of the racial problem, rather than either its cause or even an actual problem? Although any attempt to answer these questions would be somewhat speculative, it is clear that the political position of the man who dared to declare that “colonization is a necessary evil,” legitimizes the skepticism of African intellectuals such as Adotevi and Mphahlele.

It is also indisputable that despite their role in the anti-colonial “struggle,” elites such as Senghor benefitted from the colonial system through political privileges and occupied, at the dawn of the post-colonial era, the same social, economic, and even geographical spheres as the colonizer. Senghor was a member of the French parliament, a secretary of state and a member of cabinet in the French government. At the end of colonization, he became the first president of Senegal. During his presidency, his politics of occupation of the urban space in Senegal mirrored that of the colonial administration. He resided in the mythic palais du gouverneur and the dignitaries of his regime lived in the plateau, the colonizers’ quarter, while the ex-colonized masses remained in the médina, the natives’ quarter. Furthermore, Senghor attempted to create a local bourgeoisie through the creation of the infamous “K account,” which gave generous loans to a particular group of individuals, thereby establishing a new Senegalese elite, culturally and socially similar to the colonial bourgeoisie.

Beyond his elitist politics, Senghor’s philosophical stands can also be presented, at times, as repetitive of Western imperialist thought. Declarations such as “emotion is Negro while reason is Hellenic,” “We [Negroes] will never beat them [Europeans] in math,” and “French is a language of honesty,” abound in his text. It is even difficult, if not impossible, to dissociate Senghor’s racial theory from Gobineau’s dichotomous representation of the “Negro” as fundamentally emotional and the “Aryan” as essentially rational. For all these reasons, one can argue that the second generation of critics’ analysis of the Negritude movement is pertinent. Despite its pertinence, however, the Marxist ideology that supports it, keeps scholars such as Adotevi and Mphahlele from seeing the progressive agenda that Negritude proposes. Adotevi, and Mphahlele’s Marxist dialectic simplifies Senghor’s philosophy, as it limits it to its political
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Abiola Irele’s critique of Negritude can be presented as the transition from the anti-colonial readings of Senghor’s oeuvre to its understanding as a complex philosophical system that goes beyond the colonial paradigm. While Irele participates, sometimes, in the traditional representation of Negritude as an anti-colonial ideology by considering Senghor’s oeuvre a reaction to Western universalist definitions of the world, he also reads Negritude as a postcolonial philosophy. This mode of reading Negritude is illustrated in his famous book, The African Experience in Literature and Ideology published in 1981 and the main ideas of which he reiterates twenty-seven years later in Négritude et condition africaine (Negritude and the African Condition). In this essay, Irele divides Negritude in three distinctive moments: an anti-colonial ideology, an African-centered literary movement, and a philosophical system. The two first manifestations of Negritude (Negritude as an ideology and Negritude as...
a literary movement), he claims, show that it is partly a reaction to colon-
ization and its immanent hierarchization of races.

It is not likely, Irele states, that the acute awareness of race manifested 
by Senghor could have developed outside of this historical fact [coloniza-
tion], for in its most immediate aspect, this awareness is born of a revolt 
against the practical implications of the colonial relationship. 34

In other words, for Irele, Negritude is an anti-colonial ideology triggered 
by imperialist negations of the Negro's humanity. It is, in its most imme-
diate aspect, the reactionary theory of a unique Negro identity, peculiar 
to Negro African and Caribbean communities that developed within the 
social, political, and cultural limits of the French empire. This conten-
tion echoes another article he published four years earlier and which is 
still one of the most cited critical analyses of Negritude to date: “What 
is Negritude?” In this major text, Irele places the birth of the Negritude 
movement in the historical realities of the colonial polity. This situation, 
he affirms, triggered, in the black intellectuals living in Paris in the early 
1930s, a feeling of revolt and of belonging to a particular racial group.

Irele goes on to show, in both texts, that the representation of Negri-
tude as an anti-colonial ideology manifests itself through the writing of 
French speaking Africans and Caribbeans and their effort to theorize a 
black cultural nationalism. This body of writing, for Irele, has come to 
describe a literary movement that he presents, in Senghorian terms, as 
“the sum total of writing of black French intellectuals.” He adds, these 
texts have, through “a passionate theory of blackness and a romantic 
imagination of Africa, ‘developed’ a consistent tone, style, and particular 
themes.” 35

It is noteworthy that Abiola Irele’s analysis of Negritude as an ideol-
ogy and a literary movement is, to some extent, similar to the traditional 
limitation of Negritude to a reaction to colonization. This perspective 
does not, however, stop him from presenting Senghor’s philosophy, the 
third manifestation of Negritude, as “not so much a descriptive analysis 
of African culture as a synthetic vision. Rather than an empirical, socio-
logical investigation of African realities,” Irele says, “Senghor’s method 
consists in a personal interpretation of African values, and in a statement, 
in philosophical terms, of their informing spirit.” 36

Irele is the first scholar to present Negritude as a synthetic vision of 
one man that needs to be considered as a philosophy that stands on its 
own. It is from this perspective that he presents the Senegalese scholar’s
spiritualist conception of a Negro mode of consciousness as an antirationalist epistemology based on a particular ontology. Although, for Irele, this epistemology is influenced by the intellectual productions of modern European scholars such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Henri Bergson, he sets, thirty years before Diagne and Jones, the condition for the contemporary readings of Negritude beyond the anticolonial dialectic.

Moreover, Irele suggests a reading of Senghor’s philosophy as an Afri-centered theory. This postulation is all the more innovative in that it prepares the ground to read Negritude as a prospective movement rather than as a reaction to colonization. As opposed to Sartre and most earlier critics, the Nigerian scholar shows, in his essay entitled “A Defence of Negritude: A Propos of Black Orpheus by Jean-Paul Sartre,” that:

It is possible to see [Negritude’s] progression from a different point of view, that of the black man himself, for whom its thesis would be the pre-colonial Negritude, colonial occupation the point of negation, and the new awareness, the “subjective Negritude,” the synthesis. It is because the traditional African life represented for the poet of Negritude is both a valid human system and also something that he could claim for himself that his recreation of the world is based upon it.37

As Irele postulates, although Negritude questions Western definitions of the Negro, it is also arguable that it finds its main sources in African cultural realities and cannot be confined to a reaction. This Afri-centered understanding of Negritude enables one to place Senghor’s philosophy and, for that matter, Africa and Africanness outside of the colonial box. This perspective makes it possible to go beyond the representation of Negritude as an ideological reaction in order to analyze it as what Irele presents as its third manifestation: a philosophical system that goes beyond a colonial reaction or a descriptive representation of an original pre-colonial myth.

Irele’s representation of Negritude as a philosophy sets the conditions of possibility for the postcolonial critique of Senghor’s oeuvre. While traditional limitations of Negritude in space and time have led to its constriction within the borders of the 1930s France, Irele suggests a more prospective reading of Senghor’s philosophy by presenting it as a theory that attempts to re-think postcolonial black identities from an Afri-centered perspective. He affirms, as a philosophical doctrine, Negritude is “the philosophy of one man, Senghor, whose efforts have been outstanding in the extension of what started out as the ideological stand of
a historical class into a comprehensive world-view.”\textsuperscript{38} That is why, for Irele, the philosophy of Negritude is more than,

[... ] A nostalgic attachment to the values of an old way of life, it registers as well a sense of discovery of a new perspective on life and experience, and the exploratory movement towards the constitution of a mode of thought that is at once modern and African in its references, as a reconciliation and synthesis of the traditional European approach and the African mode of apprehension (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{39}

Senghor’s method denotes, in Irele’s texts, the Senegalese scholar’s personal interpretation of Negro cultures, and an articulation, in philosophical terms, of their fundamental aspects. This perspective allows for the inscription of Negritude in its intellectual context and its analysis as mainly a philosophical system. Irele’s critical oeuvre announces contemporary analysis of Negritude as an ontology and, as will be shown in the following chapter, a black epistemology. The particularities of this ontology and epistemology, Irele tells us, are to be found, respectively, in African art, “the prime mediator of the African consciousness,” and in Senghor’s fellowship with “a group of writers, thinkers, and scholars in the West who can be situated within a single perspective—that of the anti-intellectual current in European thought.”\textsuperscript{40}

The innovative understanding of Negritude that Irele suggests in the late 1970s and that he repeats throughout his career will remain unexplored by the critical tradition of Negritude until the twenty-first century when Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Donna Jones attempt to read it afresh. Both of these scholars start from the postulations set by Irele in the two above-mentioned groundbreaking articles and develop it accordingly. While, in the shadow of Irele, the former finds in African art the very manifestation of the philosophy of Negritude, the latter follows Irele’s advice and reads Negritude as a continuation of modern anti-rational philosophy. Yet, neither of these authors pushes Irele’s logic to that of the Afri-centered perspective he proposes.

In his recent book, \textit{Léopold Sédar Senghor: African Art as Philosophy}, a good example of the burgeoning renascent critique of Negritude, Souleymane Bachir Diagne carries out the paradigmatic relation to Senghor’s philosophy heralded by Irele. Notwithstanding his timely and original analysis of Negritude and African Art as philosophy, Diagne’s essay, the first book-length study of the philosophy of Negritude, will be remembered for having clarified that Negritude is primarily the philosophical
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project of one man that needs to be read accordingly. *African Art as Philosophy* succeeds also in making relevant the important question: “How to read, or how not to read the philosophy of Léopold Senghor?” Starting his text with a nod to Henri Bergson, Diagne posits that in order to understand the intricacies of Senghor’s theory, one needs to go against the current of critics who focus on his simplistic formulas instead of reading his complex oeuvre as a whole. The contemporary Senegalese scholar urges the reader to start the analysis of Negritude from the source where the movement springs and to follow its current to the delta where it plunges in the vast ocean of contemporary thought, in order to reach the pith and marrow of its message. Such a relation to Senghor’s philosophy allows, in turn, the discovery of “something infinitely simple, so extraordinarily simple that the philosopher has never been able to state it”: 41 a Negro epistemology.

The question that must be asked is, thus, where does Diagne locate the fundamental source of Negritude? His answer is unequivocal. For Diagne, Senghor’s theory of African art is the quintessence of the philosophy of Negritude. He writes:

One must find Senghor’s starting postulation [in] the hermeneutic posture, which gives him as early as his first texts the possibility to answer the question [ . . . ] what do African masks want to say? 42

The Negritude scholar’s reflection on the meaning of African art, for Diagne, allows one to find the point of departure of the philosophy of Negritude in the fundamental question that Senghor asks, and which determines the angle from which his entire philosophy needs to be undertaken: Why do Africans sculpt a certain way and not otherwise? The search for an answer to this question, Diagne claims, constitutes the essential drive of Senghor’s entire philosophical production. 43

One can add to Diagne’s premise that although for Senghor art is Negro cultures’ privileged means of relation to the world, it still is just a means and not an end in itself. The question “why do these people sculpt this way and not otherwise,” which Diagne presents as the epistemological foundation of Senghor’s oeuvre, is indistinguishable from the question “why do these people think this way and not otherwise?” because what is important to Senghor is precisely the different ways in which Negroes define and relate to the world. Negroes’ distinctive relations to the world constitute their particularities and define their Negroness. Diagne’s interpretation of Senghor’s “intuition première,” the reason that
led him to delve into the question of Negroes’ humanity, revives Irele’s perspective, frees Senghor’s oeuvre from the ideological prison in which it is frequently limited, and announces a new era in the historiography of his thought, by calling for the analysis of Negritude as, mainly, a philosophical reflection on the meaning of being and the modes of understanding the world. Beyond critics’ traditional focus on Senghor’s essentialist and simplistic representations of race, Diagne insists on the fundamental manifestation of Negritude as an ontology and an epistemology, the tools of which are offered by high-modernist scholars such as Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s invitation to read Negritude as an ontology and an epistemology foreshadowed Donna Jones’ award winning book *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*, published in 2010, three years after Diagne’s book. In the last chapter of her text, Jones proposes a timely reading of Negritude as philosophy. She claims, in the same vein as Diagne, the necessity to seriously consider Negritude as a complex philosophical production that goes beyond the naïve biologism in which the above-mentioned second generation of scholars limit it. “For a properly deconstructive analysis, she writes, the problems of antipositivist reason as well as irrationalism need to be explored with the limitations of their antitheses.”44 This perspective leads her to argue that Senghor’s oeuvre reveals a subtle “vitalist epistemology and a theory of culture.”45

Despite the subsequent complex analysis of Senghor’s philosophy that Diagne and Jones propose, and which I will analyze more closely in the second chapter of this book, both scholars place the condition of the birth of Negritude in the development of high modernism. Diagne’s reading of Negritude, for instance, is organized from the perspective of the different European influences on Senghor’s philosophy. In chapter 2 of his essay, for example, he claims that Senghor’s understanding of African art is rooted in Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro’s *La sculpture Nègre primitive*. In chapter 3, he presents Senghor’s conception of African art as an epistemology founded on a particular reading of Bergson and Lévy-Bruhl’s philosophies. And in Chapters 4 and 5, he argues that Senghor’s encounter with the Jesuit intellectual tradition, especially Teilhard de Chardin’s conception of cosmogenesis, and Gaston Berger’s prospective, constitute the root of the former’s theory of *Métissage* and his practice of dialogue. Donna Jones, on the other hand, places the birth of Senghor’s theory in his reaction to Western modern philosophy. Negritude, she argues, is a reaction to the modern limitation of African-
ness to a congenital anti-technological and “pre-logical” mentality. This intellectual situation, for Jones, obliged Senghor to feel bound “to avail himself of the only theoretical vocabulary in which the validity of this putatively alien mode of cognition could be defended. [. . . ] This vocabulary was found, she adds, in Bergson.”46 Along the same lines as Sartre, Diagne and Jones present Senghor’s philosophy as a reaction to modernity enabled by the anti-intellectualism of Europe’s high-modernity. In other words, they present Negritude as nothing short of a blackening of modern Western philosophy.

Diagne and Jones’ methodological relation to Negritude is innovative as far as they propose complex and timely readings of Senghor’s theory as a critique of modern epistemology through a vitalist philosophy. Yet, their readings of Negritude are weakened by their conception that Senghor’s oeuvre is fundamentally a continuation of the anti-intellectual traditions of the Paris of the 1930s, if not a simple repetition of Bergson’s philosophy. Silencing the African sources of Negritude, they see in the image of the ex-colonized intellectual, a reincarnation of Prometheus, ready to steal the miraculous weapons of the West to deliver the Negro race from their barbaric states. This understanding of the history of anti-colonial theories insists on the role of Western influences on the liberation process, overemphasizes the importance of Western educated elites and, thereby, exaggerates the role of Western intelligentsia in the process of decolonization. Diagne and Jones’ critiques can be pushed further if we take into consideration the centrality of African epistemologies in Senghor’s theory that Abiola Irele suggests. As Irele suggests, Senghor’s philosophy is not what Sartre calls “the anti-thesis of the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy,”47 the weak link of a dialectical movement, but an Afri-centered thesis of a black ontology. It is not a continuation of Western modernity but a philosophy that happens to agree with some of the anti-rationalist philosophies developed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

The anti-colonial foundation of Negritude originates, as Irele implies, in African cultural practices. When Negritude thinkers started, in the 1930s, to defend and illustrate the sum total of Negro cultural values, many critics thought that their discourse was revolutionary. And it was. But the revolutionary aspect of their discourse is determined by the ways in which it was carried out and not by the originality of its message. Negritude thinkers’ anti-colonial stance were, partly, relays of African discourses that remained inaudible for a long time, because the languages in which they were delivered and the discursive practices that structured
them were inaccessible to those who saw in their different relations to the world a mark of savagery. Senghor, for example, argues frequently that his Negritude finds its roots in the Sereer kīm njoms; and that he was initiated to African epistemology by his uncle Waly. When, thus, his school teachers claimed the primacy of colonial values, his experience in Joal and Djilor enabled him to stand his own ground and defend the value of African cultures. Moreover, Senghor’s intuitive subject is different from Bergson’s subject. While, as will be shown in the following chapter, Bergson’s subject reaches intuition through a personal reflection and somewhat rational critique of the limits of rationality, it is, for Senghor, African cultures’ particular conceptions of ontology that leads African subjects to have an intuitive relation to the world.

I do not mean, however, that Negritude thinkers were not influenced by Western intellectual traditions, or that their theories were not anti-colonial. It is obvious that Senghor, for example, was profoundly influenced by the works of Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Leo Frobenius, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Pablo Picasso, and many more Western thinkers, and it is undeniable that Negritude was fundamentally anti-colonialist. Yet, his philosophy cannot be understood as, essentially, the product of his relation with the above-mentioned scholars who supposedly opened his eyes to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Although it is indisputable that, had he not studied in the best and most conservative French academic institutions, Senghor’s understanding of Negritude would have been different, it is equally arguable that Negritude would not have seen the light at all, if the Sereer poet had not been introduced to African cultural traditions by Marone Ndiaye’s praises of the Negro’s beauty during the nocturnal veillées that pervade his childhood memories.

**Starting on the Wrong Foot: Making Sense of the Historical Misrepresentation of Negritude**

This short history of the critique of Negritude of the past sixty years shows that Léopold Sédar Senghor’s œuvre has mostly been read as an anti-colonial philosophy. Accordingly, most of the critics either celebrate or denigrate the philosophy of Negritude depending on how successful they think it was in the political and ideological liberation of colonized subjects. The intricate ontology, epistemology, and race theory that Senghor proposes has, consequently, received very little attention from the
critical tradition. One cannot, however, blame these early critics for falling into the reductionist anticolonial trap. The anticolonial limits in which Negritude has been constrained are the logical effects of the very conditions of its birth. It is clear, as shown, that the colonial condition and its corollary, the hierarchization of races and cultures, led Senghor, Césaire, and Damas to insist on the necessity to defend and even vindicate Negro cultures. It is therefore just logical that, to the expense of the other manifestations and *raisons d'être* of the philosophy of Negritude, its first interpretations focused on the question of authenticity and the ways in which it represented, effectively or not, the “anti-colonial cause.”

In addition to the condition of the birth of Negritude, other less studied issues such as the political weight of the term Negro rather than black allows for a better understanding of the historiography of the critique of Negritude. The *trium viri*’s adoption of the concept of “Negritude” is one of the most important reasons for the early Negritude critics’ political readings of Senghor’s philosophy. “Negritude” is composed, as Senghor informs us in 1971, of the prefix “Negr-” and the suffix “-itude.” The prefix “-Negr” denotes his definition of Negritude as a movement organized around the singularity of Negroes’ cultures, their shared-experience-of-suffering, and their consequent relations to the world. The suffix “-itude,” on the other hand, presents Negritude more as an attitude and a performance of Negroness than as a theoretical concept. The choice of “-itude” instead of “-ité” is important for Senghor, the first Francophone African grammarian, because in French, as he recalls, the nominalization in “-ité” expresses more abstract ideas while the nominalization in “-itude” refers to concrete matters. Césaire’s adoption of the term “Negritude” in place of “Negrité” shows, thus, that their movement can be defined as “the concrete way for every Negro and every Negro nation to live as Negroes.” Words, however, have their own histories, which determine the way they are understood and referred to, no matter their real or alleged meanings.

First employed by Portuguese and Spanish explorers to designate African slaves and repeated for over three centuries as a derogatory term to refer to people of Sub-Saharan African descent, the use of the term “Negro,” even in a subversive way, tends to limit the discourse of Negritude within the paradigmatic boundaries of racialist discursive practices. Despite Sartre’s claim, in “Black Orpheus,” that Senghor “picks up the word ‘nigger’ which was thrown at him like a stone, draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself a black man, face to face with white men,” and in spite of Senghor’s explanation that the choice of the word
is rooted in his will to define a concrete way of being black, the history of the concept “Negro” implies a reactionary tendency and limits the different possibilities of understanding the very meanings of Negritude. That is precisely why the historiography of Negritude has limited Senghor’s philosophy to its anti-colonial manifestations.

While the political conditions that led to the birth of Negritude and the implication of its name explain the anti-colonial limits of the subsequent scholarships that has governed its historiography, we must, more than half a century after the end of colonization, ask the question: is there any other way of reading the philosophy of Negritude? Or should we just acknowledge its death and move forward? As opposed to the proponents of a post-Negritude era, however, a careful analysis of Senghor’s philosophy from a new perspective shows that there are other developments of his philosophy that still need to be studied. One way of reading Negritude from a new perspective is to engage with a hermeneutic of his fifty-year-long philosophical production. The hermeneutics of Senghor’s philosophy shows that the anti-colonial characteristic of Negritude is just one out of many functions and manifestations of this philosophy. Unfortunately, however, traditional interpretations of Senghor’s oeuvre, such as Sylvia Washington’s *The Concept of Negritude in the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor* and William Kulback’s *Léopold Sédar Senghor: From Politics to Poetry*, focus on his poetry or on his political writings, while they relegate his philosophical texts to the periphery. Along with Diagne’s *Léopold Sédar Senghor, l’art africain comme philosophy* and Jones’ *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, I offer in the following chapters, a reading of Negritude as philosophy. While, however, Diagne and Jones’ present Senghor’s oeuvre as a repetition of modern Western philosophy, the Afri-centered reading of Negritude I propose shows that it is, ultimately, an epistemology based on an African perspective.
May the reader examine the following pages in a spirit of fraternity. That is what I would like my message to be. If there is such a thing as race—and how can one deny its existence?—the voice that speaks to it, here, is devoid of hate. We have forgotten everything, as we know how to: the two hundred million deaths of the slave trade, the violence of the Conquest, and the humiliations of the colonial rule. We only remember the positive inputs. We have been the trampled grain, the grain that dies, so that the new Civilization may emerge. At the level of the totality of Man.¹

To philosophize is to invert the habitual direction of the work of thought.²

We know that the attitude of Man facing nature is the essential problem, the solution of which determines the destiny of men.³

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mark a radical shift in the historiography of race theory. In reaction to the traditional biblical genealogy, Western thinkers such as Friedrich Blumenbach, Carolus Linnaeus, and Arthur Gobineau develop a biological classification of humanity, present the European as the epitome of reason, and define the “white man” as the embodiment of humanness. This theory of race has, as a consequence, the universalization of Western humanity and the equivalence of otherness with “deficiency.” Accordingly, in the name of humanism and humanists’ subsequent will to bring degenerate races into the scope of Western rationality, Europe subjugated part of the non-European world and
assigned itself the burden of bringing into reason the lost sheep that had no kings or laws.

It is therefore not surprising that African intellectuals have, since the late nineteenth century, confronted Western rationality, while they attempt to be the voices of,

[T]hose who invented neither powder nor compass  
those who could harness neither steam, nor electricity  
[. . . ]  
those who they inoculated with degeneracy.4

In this vein, Léopold Sédar Senghor proposes an Afri-centered definition of being that challenges the biological understanding of race, its hierarchical classification, and its corollary, the universalization of colonial reason. He starts from the postulation that “race” is the effect, rather than the cause, of cultural particularities. Races, for Senghor, manifest themselves fundamentally in the way collective groups relate to the world. They are, he claims, the effect of “geography multiplied by history.”5 Negroes’ relation to the world, for example, which he subsequently opposes to the imperialist universalization of Western episteme, constitutes the particularity of the Negro as a racial category. This culturalist perspective enables Senghor to develop a groundbreaking philosophy of race based on the theory of a fluid Negro logos that questions the supremacy of the rigid Western ratio.6 He defines the Negro logos as a divine élan vital (aliveness), reachable only through a fluctuating emotional reason, as opposed to Western ratio, which he presents as the material limitation of the object to a defined moment of its multiplicity. How does this relation to the world, this mode of knowing, function? What does Senghor understand by Negro emotion? How does his epistemology shift the entire history of race theory? The answer to these questions is the fundamental purpose of the Negritude scholar’s entire oeuvre.

It is important to note that although Senghor postulates that races are real and seems to posit an essentialist perspective repetitive of eighteenth-century race theories, a close analysis of his philosophy through his conception of time illustrates that he develops a less static understanding of race. As will be shown, for Senghor time cannot be understood as a unit of measure transforming the fluidity of life into mechanistic snapshots. It is duration, the attribute of the object that causes its constant and permanent becoming. This conception of time allows him to contend that cultures and roots keep their substrate although they change constantly.
Negro cultures, for example, share a common cultural foundation despite their diverse manifestations. This cultural foundation, the essence of their racial particularity, leads Negroes to react to the world in a specifically emotional way.

I do not mean, however, that Léopold Sédar Senghor was not an essentialist. The racialist undertone of his philosophy is undeniable. He frequently fails to go beyond the dichotomous conception of race implemented by nineteenth-century Western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Robert Knox, and Arthur Gobineau. As the structure of his famous formula, “emotion is Negro, and reason Hellenic,” shows, he repeats, sometimes, imperialist thinkers’ conceptions of race and defines the Negro in relation to the European subject. Beyond the question of essentialism, however, it is important to explore the underlying principles that lead Senghor to think a certain way and not otherwise. In other words, it is necessary to think with him, in order to understand the logic of his message. Such a relation to Senghor’s text allows one to ask, beyond the question of essentialism: what does Senghor’s philosophy entail? What is the logic of his text? And how does that logic explain his theory of Negritude? These questions open the possibilities for a better understanding of the meanings of his philosophy. They lead to the realization that the founding principle of Senghor’s philosophy is based on the idea that people of sub-Saharan African descent share a particular cultural background. This cultural background leads Negroes to think a certain way and not otherwise. It is precisely this way of thinking that determines, for Senghor, their particularities. The father of Negritude’s conception of the existence of a shared African cultural background is similar to Molefi Kete Asante’s concept of an African djed, that is, a relation to the world based on an African worldview, fundamentally different from other Weltanschauungs. This shared African worldview is, for Asante, the consequence of African cultures’ emergence from ancient Egypt. It does not matter, for the time being, that Senghor and Asante (the recipient of the 2011 Franz Fanon Lifetime Achievement award delivered by the Caribbean Philosophical Association) are right or wrong. The validity of the concept of an African djed, is less important than the possibility of understanding the meanings of Negritude that it offers. In other words, it is primordial to understand the logic of Senghor’s philosophy before we engage in its critique, be it positive or negative. Beyond the possible epistemic limits of the foundations of Senghor’s philosophy, taking into consideration the particularity of the latter will enable one to better understand the reasoning behind his texts and to take on the intrica-
cies of his epistemology, be it to support it or to show its flaws. Reading Senghor’s oeuvre from this perspective will enable contemporary scholars to take the time to examine Negritude carefully and decipher the meanings of his philosophy, rather than submit his theory to a computational function of a truth table. Such a reading will facilitate the presentation of Negritude as an epistemology based on particular cultural experiences and facilitated by his conception of time as “duration.”

Bergson’s Time: A Pre-Condition to Senghor’s Theory

When, in the early 1930s, Negritude thinkers attempted to speak in the name of their people, they had to engage the narratives that constituted the foundation of Western universalist representation of races, which had defined, that is, invented, the Negro subject. What better way to question this seemingly universal conception of the human than to challenge Western cultural and epistemic imperialism and their essentialization of “whiteness”? The necessity to challenge the universalist claims of modern Western philosophy led Senghor to discover nineteenth-century anti-rationalist philosophers and, in particular, the scholar who dared to philosophize otherwise and who set the conditions for the negation of white supremacy through the refutation of the supremacy of “rationality”: Henri Bergson. Senghor was particularly interested in Bergson’s reaction “to discursive rationalism and to materialist positivism,” which, as he claims, changes the traditional direction of philosophy. Bergson’s Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience (Time and Free Will: Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness) Senghor says, is the second revolution after the collapse of the absolute monarchy. It marks “the first major and convincing reactions to Descartes’ Cogito, ergo sum.” It is important to note, however, that the concept of duration, the philosophical pillar of Bergson’s vitalist theory, is the most important innovation of his theory. It enables him to question the entire history of Western philosophy.

Bergson’s theory of duration is all the more important to the theory of Negritude in that, as the lebenphilosopher states:

Metaphysics, as a matter of fact, was born of the arguments of Zeno of Elea on the subject of change and movement. It was Zeno who, by drawing attention to the absurdity of what he called movement and change, led the philosophers—Plato first and foremost—to seek the true and coherent reality in what does not change. And it is because Kant believed
that our senses and consciousness are in fact exerted in a real Time, that is, in a Time which changes continuously, in a duration which endures; it is because, on the other hand, he took into account the relativity of the usual data of our senses and consciousness.\(^\text{10}\)

Because of the centrality of the concept of time in the historiography of Western thought, a critique of the primacy of intellectual reason and its corollary, the theory of intuition, must start with a radical critique of the traditional understanding of time. In the context of the development of Negritude, Bergson’s challenge of the chronological and spacialized conception of time that makes possible the illusion of “pure reason” and the conception of being as fixed, prepares the ground for the African and Caribbean scholars’ refutation of the limits of the concept of time as one of the logical foundations of mechanical reason in modern philosophy. This particular epistemic stand gives Negritude thinkers the technical means to show the limits of the rationalist foundation of colonization and to validate, if not “humanize,” Negroes’ epistemic particularities.

Although I will develop later a more comprehensive study of Bergson and Senghor’s philosophies, a brief comparative analysis of their epistemologies is necessary for a more careful analysis of Senghor’s conception of time. For Senghor, emotion constitutes the fundamental means to reach the “immediate data of consciousness” because it enables the subject of knowledge to have a direct insight into the object. To know is, for him, to die in the other in order to reach the object’s ultimate being. He states,

To know is to live—the Other’s life—by identifying oneself with the object. To know (con-naître) is to be born in the Other while dying in oneself: It is to make love with the Other, it is to dance the Other. “I feel therefore I am.”\(^\text{11}\)

This theory of the primacy of emotion is similar to Bergson’s, for whom, as will be more carefully demonstrated, it is through intuition that one can reach the immediate data of consciousness.\(^\text{12}\) This intuitive relation to the object of knowledge is, for the lebenphilosopher, reached through creative duration. As Donna Jones acknowledges, in her reading of Bergson’s vitalism, it is precisely, “from our own creative temporal oneness [that] we can become one with nature. Self-intuition allows one to understand by analogy nature itself as the same kind of never-repeating, continuous, ever-creative process.”\(^\text{13}\) While Bergson gets to his conclusion through a particular understanding of duration and the conception of
the subject as participating in the unfolding of time, Senghor reaches the same conclusion while only giving vague allusions to the concept of time such as: “Intuitive reason, the Negro’s reason-touch, goes beyond the visible, beyond the signs, to arrive at the object’s sub-reality and cease its meanings.” Even though Senghor does not propose a systematic theory of time, however, one can argue that his critique of Western reason’s intellectual fixation of the object of knowledge in the interval of the before into the after can lead the reader to decode, in his philosophy, a theory of time as duration, which is a precondition to the possibility of ceasing the object of knowledge in its fluidity. In other words, no matter the reasons why Senghor does not develop a systematic theory of time, his critique of mechanical reason in modern philosophy as unable to reach the immediate data of consciousness—precisely because “objectivity” tends to fix being in space, and thereby fails to reach the immediacy of life—suggests a conception of time as duration.

It is equally arguable that, as the concept of duration has repercussions on all aspects of Bergson’s epistemology, the ramifications of Bergsonian influence on Senghor’s philosophy reaches the latter’s understanding of time. From this standpoint, a careful reading of the relation between Negritude and Bergson’s philosophy must take into consideration the foundation of the latter’s concept of duration and its effect on Senghor’s theory. Although one may claim that the influence of Bergson’s philosophy and Senghor’s sometimes allusive references to duration are not enough to deduce a particular Senghorian theory of time, it is nonetheless true, that they suggest a particular reading of the Senegalese scholar’s understanding of time.

Beyond Bergson’s influence on Senghor’s theory and the intrinsic relation between the concept of emotion and a particularly fluid understanding of time, the analysis of Senghor’s long poem Que m’accompagne koras et Balafon also indicates a Senghorian conception of time. In this text, which functions as a lyrical journey through time, the poet recounts the story of his odyssey from Senegal to France and back. The analysis of the relation to memory that transpires in the poem shows the evolution of Senghor’s thought from a common separation of past, present, and future to the conception of time as the constantly becoming present ceaselessly reborn.

As early as the first strophe, Senghor’s representation of his geographical situation discloses a conception of time that separates the present from the past and imagines memory as something that can be lost. “To the
music of koras and balaphon” starts with a temporal and spatial indication. Senghor is in Paris, “au détour du chemin la rivière bleue par les prés frais / de septembre (“At the bend of the road the river, blue in the cool September/meadows”). Separated from his native land and confused by his new location, the poet describes the past as an innocent paradise spoiled by his present situation in these nostalgic terms: “Un paradis mon enfance africaine, qui gardait l’innocence de l’Europe” (“Paradise my African childhood, keeping the innocence of Europe.”) The representation of this idyllic virgin past, in opposition to the invading metropolitan presence that spoils the young African student’s innocence, prefigures a future that threatens the poet’s present and past identities and confirms the conception of time as snapshots.

As time enfolds and his understanding of his relation to his traditional culture becomes more and more complex, however, Senghor starts to question the linearity of time and even its chronological and teleological manifestations. As soon as the second strophe, for instance, he problematizes the division of time into snapshots. The poet’s reluctance, or his inability, to answer the questions, “Quels mois alors? Quelle année?” (“What months? What year was it?”), illustrates the impossibility of situating the supposed paradisiacal past, representative of his formerly imagined innocent childhood, in the time-space of the calendar. Rather, because of the influence “des Muses latines que l’on proclamait mes anges protecteurs,” (“Latin Muses, / My so-called angel protectors”) that is, the influence of his present state, he is incapable of making the difference between past and present as shows his inability to dissociate Soukeïna and Isabelle, respectively, his African and French “sisters.” These women, who function, in this text, as metaphors of the African past and the Western present, become united and presented as manifestations of an evolving unit, illimitable to a fixed past or a definite present. As he laments: “ah! Je ne sais plus qui est ma soeur et qui ma soeur de lait / De celles qui bercèrent mes nuits de leur tendresse rêvée, de leurs mains mêlées (“ah! I no longer know who is my sister and who is my foster sister/ among those who cradle my nights with their desired tenderness, with their clasped hands”). In other words, the very nature of time as duration makes it hard to define African roots. Time, like Soukeïna and Isabelle, is not a moment that can be fixed in a delimited past or present.

This seeming confusion of past and present leads Senghor to develop, later in the same poem, the idea that the present is nourished, shaped, and fecundated by the past. He affirms, “[m]on enfance, mes agneaux,
est vieille comme le monde et je suis jeune comme l’aurore éternellement
jeune du monde”21 (“[m]y childhood, my lambs, is as old as the world, /
And I am as young as the ever-young dawn of the world”). The Senegalese
poet inscribes his childhood in an eternal youth, which implies the neces-
sity of constantly becoming. The historical events of his childhood are,
thus, as inseparable from his present condition as he shows in strophe VI,
when he declares,

J’étais moi-même le grand-père de mon grand-père
j’étais son âme et son ascendance, le chef de la maison
d’Elissa du Gabou

I myself was the grandfather of my grandfather
I was his soul and his lineage, head of the Elissa house of /
Gabu22

before he adds,

Ma sève païenne est un vin vieux qui ne s’aigrit, pas
le vin de palme d’un jour.

My pagan sap is an old wine that doesn’t spoil,
Not the palm wine of one day.23

Beyond the conception of time that leads Senghor to present himself as
his grandfather’s grandfather, the understanding of the inseparability of
past, present, and future enables the poet to refer to the past in the present
tense in order to reconcile the history of Africa, its present condition, and
its future manifestations.

The poet’s journey ends with the presentation of Sîra-Badral—who, in
the fourteenth century participated in the creation of the first Sereer king-
doms—as the symbol of the future of Africa. He declares,

Mais sauvée la Chantante, ma sève païenne
Qui monte et qui piaffe et qui danse
Mes deux filles aux chevilles délicates, les princesses cerclées
de lourds bracelets
de peine . . . Et parmi elles, la mère de Sîra-Badral,
fondatrice de royaumes qui sera le sel des Sérères, qui seront le sel des
peuples salés.24
But the Music is saved, my pagan sap
That rises and prances and dances
My two daughters with delicate ankles, the ringed princesses
with heavy bracelets
of woe. . . . And among them the mother of Sirè-Badral,
founder of kingdoms, who will be the salt of the Sereers,
who will be the salt of the salted people.

The poet’s relation to the past, which was marked, in the beginning of the
poem by his fear to forget the cultural particularities of his Sereer upbringing threatened by the politics of assimilation, is substituted by an understanding of time that functions as constantly becoming. This relation to time is all the more important that the ancestors, the founding mothers of his traditional land are called to participate in the present enfolding of history. The past, thus, becomes intertwined with the present and the future, which leads him to declare, in another poem, “D’autres Chants” (other songs),

Je ne sais en quel temps c’était, je confonds toujours l’enfance
et l’Eden
Comme je mêle la Mort et la Vie-un pont de douceur les relie
[. . . ] Je ne sais en quel temps c’était, je confonds toujours passé et présent.

I do not know what time it was, I always confuse childhood
and Eden
Just as I confuse Death and Live—a tender bridge joins them.
[. . . ] I do not know what time it was, I always confuse past and present.25

Moreover, the conception of time that can be deciphered from “que m’accompagnent koras et balafong,” implies an understanding of the subject as participating in the unfolding of time, rather than being out of time, measurable, and définable. As Senghor claims, along with Bergson, “Matter and energy have this in common: their conservation and their continuity.”26 This representation of being as becoming in time is reified by his definition of the postcolonial Negro subject: “Negroes, he claims, have evolved since the decree of 16 Pluviôse, year II; they have remained the same.”27 In fact, it is only if time endures that the fundamental manifestations of being—matter and energy—can conserve their
authenticity in spite of, or rather, because of the transformative function of time. It is equally arguable that “to terribly evolve and yet remain oneself,” which implies the possibility to conserve one’s essence and yet be prone to change, is fathomable only if the present is an unfolding past and if, as Senghor claims, the past is “the promised land of the future, in the emptiness of the present time.”\(^{28}\) If matter and energy are out of time, then time either defines the succession of their different stages, or it only names the already passed or the thing to come. When, conversely, time is not a unit of measure, but an attribute of the object that participates in the latter’s unfolding, it becomes possible for the subject to be at the same time the same and other. In this sense, as Senghor postulates, conservation is not the contrary of continuity because we live in and with time, not the time of the clock or the one of the calendar that fixates the subject, but the time that Bergson calls \textit{duration}, and which inscribes the subject in a constant dimension of “becoming-in-time.” Senghor reiterates Bergson’s idea that,

\begin{quote}
There is no doubt but that for us time is at first identical with the continuity of our inner life. What is this continuity? That of a flow or a passage, but a self-sufficient flow or passage, the flow not implying a thing that flows, and the passing not presupposing states through which we pass; the thing and the state are only artificially taken snapshots of the transition; and this transition, all that is naturally experienced, is duration itself. It is memory . . . a memory that prolongs the before into the after, keeping them from being mere snapshots appearing and disappearing in a present ceaselessly reborn.\(^{29}\)
\end{quote}

Despite the importance of the concept of time in Senghor’s philosophy, I do not mean that his interpretation of time is an absolute in itself. What is important is that it informs his method and enables the reader to better understand his philosophy. The application of Senghor’s conception of time to his understanding of race and culture helps to explain his theory of the singularity of the Negro race, despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences between contemporary Negro cultures. Following Senghor’s logic, one can state that even if the diverse Negro cultures of continental Africa or of the Diaspora are bound to constantly become other, they remain African in that their present is inseparable from their past, since past-present-future participate in the same movement of becoming. As implies the Negritude thinker’s concept of time, one can claim that roots,
tradition, or places of origin reinvent themselves, evolve, but can neither be lost nor be kept authentic.

The conception of time as duration infers a particular understanding of memory because if past, present, and future cannot be separated, memory cannot be presented as something that can be lost. The future is within the present, which functions as a continuation and a rearticulation of the past. One can therefore neither separate a supposed pre-colonial past from a mixed and hybrid present, nor imagine the possibility of going back in time. There is no reason to fear acculturation and no need to attempt to retrieve supposedly lost African roots. Senghor’s understanding of time and its effect on his relation with history and roots allows him to declare, “[Negroes’] civilization has disappeared. It’s been forgotten; their culture has not vanished. And slavery, as a matter of fact, replenished the vacuum left by the new milieu and the one instilled by the disaggregating effects of Métissage.”30 In other words, despite the change, becoming, and movement that Negro cultures have gone through, they have not lost their fundamental particularities. Starting from the postulation that Negro cultures originate from the same background even though they have evolved differently, Senghor posits that they share certain cultural particularities, no matter their present condition and location.

History seems to have given Senghor reason. Regardless of the four hundred years of separation between continental Africans and the African Diaspora, it is a truism to say today that Africans living outside of the continent have succeeded in retaining different cultural elements in all aspects of their societies, from cosmologies to social values, folk stories, languages, art, music, and cuisine, etc. The observation of contemporary popular culture shows that there are more practitioners of traditional African religions in the African Diaspora than within the borders of continental Africa; languages such as Jamaican Creole and African American Vernacular English have retained the grammatical structures of West African languages such as Wolof, while folk tales like “Anancy,” the Shanti tale, are still popular in the Caribbean and in the South of the United States, where it has become Aunt Nancy. The more evident survival of African traditions in the music and dance of the Diaspora is not to be proven anymore. Likewise, the cuisines of African descended communities such as those of the South of the United States, Jamaica, Haiti, and Brazil are still fundamentally African. The preponderance of African cultural archetypes in black communities around the world shows that
Senghor was right when, as early as 1937, he refers to the sum total of Negro cultures as a unique and unitary civilization despite its diversity. To repeat a point I already made, this situation is made possible by the very nature of these cultures being-in-time, which enables them to constantly change yet remain the same.

If I have spent so much time showing Senghor’s understanding of the concept of time and its implication on his understanding of roots, memory, and cultures, it is because his conception of time is crucial to a good analysis of his representation of the Negro. Senghor’s conception of time underlines his theory of a diverse, yet real, Negro culture and enables him to infer, from the postulation that cultural *epistemes* determine subjects’ relations to the world, a particularly Negro way of apprehending the world. This relation to the world constitutes, as stated, the fundamental particularity of the Negro race. Senghor’s culturalist conception of race shows, in turn, that he challenges, as early as the first half of the twentieth century, the traditional biological paradigm of race theory.

Senghor’s conception of race is based on the postulation that although the existence of a biological race is questionable, cultures do exist. Moreover, for Senghor, cultural practices, along with each culture’s discursive orders, lead human beings to relate to the world in particular ways. One’s way of looking at the world is, for the theoretician of Negritude, what determines his or her race. This postulation constitutes an important paradigm shift in the historiography of race theory as it goes beyond the traditional biological paradigm and proposes a culturalist understanding of race. This paradigm entails also a conception of culture as the cause rather than the effect of the existence of races. He declares:

Negritude is twofold, objective and subjective: a culture and a mode of being. It is, first, the sum total of the black world’s cultural values: from Negritie, in Africa, and from the Diaspora, in the Americas. It is, subsequently, for each Negro, a way to live with these values.

The Senegalese thinker conceives Negritude as a performance of Negroness rooted in Negroes’ cultural, historical, and socio-economic experiences. This cultural distinctiveness creates a state of mind, a distinctive Negro way of relating to the world: subjective Negritude. The representation of Negritude as “the sum total of Negro cultural values” and the specific relation to the world that emerges from these values denotes that racial particularities are, for Senghor, determined by not only the historical past, but also by the present and the future cultural experiences of a distinct human group.
It is precisely from this epistemological standpoint that the study of Senghor’s understanding of race and Negritude should start. His entire theory stems from the philosophical question: why do Negroes relate to the world in a certain way and not otherwise? This epistemological interrogation is comparable to Picasso’s reaction, when, amazed by a Negro mask, he asked: “Why do these people sculpt this way and not otherwise?”

**Negritude and Epistemology**

In a paper presented at the University of Bayreuth, in 1966, Senghor replies to the question what is Negritude in these terms:

> Who will deny that people of Negro-African descent also have their own particular way of conceiving and living life? A particular way of speaking, singing, and dancing, of painting and sculpting, and even of laughing and of crying? [. . . ]

He had already argued, in another attempt to define the Negro, in 1939:

> It is frequently acknowledged that Negroes are more sensible to words and ideas, and even more to the concrete—should I say sensual—qualities of words, that is, the spiritual, rather than intellectual, qualities of ideas. Emotive sensibility. Emotion is Negro, while reason is Hellenic.

Senghor repeats frequently these definitions of the Negro, which critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel d’Arboussier, Marcien Towa, and A. R. Duckworth, have presented as, at best, a strategic essentialism, at worst, the theorization of the existence of innate racial characteristics. They have, in consequence, implicitly or explicitly, presented Senghor’s theory as another version of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biological essentialization of races. While for Sartre, for example, it is a strategic essentialism, d’Arboussier finds it shocking to put the West Indian, the Malagasy, or the African in the same category, and Towa declares, in 1999, in an interview with Ndachi Tagne,

> Senghor conceived culture as something biological and he considered the Negro as emotive. The two hypotheses, that we are biologically emotive and that we cannot go beyond that state, entail that we are predetermined by history. In fact, Senghor never hesitates to make these types
of conclusions thereby showing that the White man’s domination of the Black man was logical and natural [. . . ]. Senghorian Negritude’s irrationality had something racist and colonial. It was hideous.37

Along the same line, A. R. Duckworth claims, in a recent article published in February 2010,

Senghor’s conception of Negritude holds that one’s inner and outer essence is informed, defined by one’s race. This position—that race is biological and informs one’s character—has encountered criticism because it relies on an incorrect conception of race. Senghor’s conception of race asserts that a person from Ghana, Senegal and Liberia are all biologically African—and therefore share the same African essence. However, as Michael Jones notes “there is no biological or genetic foundation for the grouping of individual humans into a racial group.”38

Senghor’s own answer suffices to show the limits of these accusations. He wonders: “But are the differences not in the ratio between elements more than in their nature?”39 He insists, subsequently, that the difference between races resides on the level of the effects of “their ideas and their languages, their philosophies and their religions, their mores and their institutions, their literatures and their arts.”40 In other words, the fundamental particularity of each race is less determined by their biological essence than by their cultural particularities. Race is the epistemic community created by the experiences of specific groups who originate from connected cultural spheres, share the same ontologies, and have developed, consequently, similar epistemological relations to the world. This conception of race is based on the premise that, between the “I/eye” that sees and the object seen there are diverse discursive practices that orient the “I/eye” and participate in the definition of the object. These discursive practices and societal norms not only create the object, they also invent and frame, in particular ways, subjects who are from similar cultural spheres.

The premise of Senghor’s methodology can be clarified if it is compared to Michel Foucault’s analysis of the modes of production of knowledge. For Foucault, knowledge is the effect of the intertwined relations of power and subjectivity. It is the product of the order of discourses established by specific power structures in definite spaces and times. He states, in 1966:
Our [Modern Western] culture has shown that there is order and that, to the modalities of that order, exchanges owed their laws, living beings their regularity, words their sequence and their representative values. . . . According to what space of order knowledge has been constituted; on the basis of what historical a priori and in the element of what positiv- ity have ideas been able to appear, sciences been established, experiences been reflected in philosophies, rationalities formed, only, perhaps, to dis- solve and soon to vanish.41

As the French philosopher implies, knowledge is the product of different cultural practices, that lead the subject to relate to the object of knowledge in particular ways, and not otherwise. While the subject has, since Descartes, been considered the point of origin of knowledge, Foucault shows that the subject is invented by power structures and cultural and discursive practices. For the postmodern philosopher, “the subject [a predominantly modern phenomenon] is a product of history. It invents itself within history and is constantly established and reestablished by history.”42 This conception of the order of knowledge and its modes of production makes it arguable that every society that has its own power structure, has a distinctive relation to the world because thinking is always thinking from the perspective of pre-established cultural and discursive practices that orient the way one sees, thinks, and knows. This logic is precisely the starting postulation of Senghor’s definition of races. Like Foucault and before him, Senghor argues that cultural and discursive practices differ from one culture to another and create particular subjects who have different relations to the object of knowledge. That is precisely why he repeats Paul Grieger’s observation:

Just like individuals, natural groups of humans, with their own psychological constitutions, will neither feel, nor think, nor act the same way. . . . Psychologically, the humanity of mankind is a fact; it does not deny another aspect of the truth, that of the diversity of characters, collective, as much as individual.43

Of course this does not save Senghor from essentialism. Yet, considering the premise of his philosophy from a Foucauldian perspective, that is, reading his philosophy as a reflection developed from an Afri-centered djed shows that his culturalist definition of race is, as Molefi Kete Asante argues two decades later, based on the fact that “all analysis is cultur-
ally centered and flows from ideological assumptions” because “human actions cannot be understood apart from the emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context.” Such a perspective leads Pius Ngandu Nkashama to the conclusion that,

One easily perceives that [Senghor’s conception of the Negro] goes beyond the purely anthropological and cultural (even pragmatic) dimension revealed by Calame-Griaule, in order to take this lucidity of the Negro to the level of a theory and a “way of knowing.”

This epistemology can be better understood if it is examined through the lens of Bergson’s philosophy.

**From Bergson’s Intuition to Senghor’s Emotion**

Bergson showed that facts and matter, as objects of discursive reason, were just the superficial surface beyond which we needed to go, with intuition, in order to have an in-depth vision of the real.

Bergson’s oeuvre is central to the philosophy of Negritude. Beyond its epistemological relevance, the *lebenphilosopher’s* work has an important political weight for anti-colonial thinkers. As one of the most popular intellectuals of his time, his theory of the supremacy of intuition legitimizes Negritude thinkers’ attempts to question one of the most important philosophical foundations of colonization, the universalization of Western *ratio*. His conception of intuition as an alternative to intellectual reason, in particular, validates Senghor’s frequently caricatured concept of emotion. That is precisely why Negritude, partly an anti-colonial refutation of Western imperialist thought, finds, in Bergson’s vitalist critique of positivism and scientism, the conceptual means to support its critique of one of the most important effects of the universalist understanding of rationality: colonization. The comparison of Bergson’s philosophy with Senghor’s theory shows that Negritude is, on the one hand, a critique of the foundation of Western colonial reason and its corollary, the definition of the Negro as less human because of his or her emotional relation to the world. On the other hand, it functions as an epistemology comparable and similar to, yet different from, Bergson’s *lebenphilosophie*.

Bergson’s critique of positivist and mechanistic philosophy and his subsequent vitalist epistemology start from the premise that, traditionally,
we base our relation to the world on an intellectual foundation, which tends to fix the essentially fluid and intensive nature of life into extensive, *spacialized*, and measurable time. He notes:

Beneath the evolutionary becoming, beneath the extensive becoming, the mind must seek that which defies change, the definable quality, the form or essence, the end. Such was the fundamental principle of the philosophy, which has developed throughout the classic age, the philosophy of Forms, or, to use a term more akin to the Greek, the philosophy of Ideas.\(^48\)

In other words, in our habitual propensity to count, the mind tends to reduce *intensivities* and *extensivities* to mere *spacialized* and homogenized units, through serial time. Yet, he posits, the intellect was “created by life, in definitive circumstances, to act on definite things,”\(^49\) and therefore, the static and fragmented intellectual mode of apprehending the world is, in its purely logical form, incapable of grasping the true nature of life, the full meaning of the evolutionary movement. This incapacity, for Bergson, makes us feel at home with matter, solids, “where our action finds its fulcrum and our industry its tools.”\(^50\) For the sake of convenience, the intellectual mind, unable to espouse the contours of a constantly becoming life, fixes reality in a time understood as the interval between the before and the after. We even “create it [life] as we create the figures of men and animals that our imagination cuts out of the passing cloud.”\(^51\)

Although serial time is, for Bergson, useful, practical, and necessary for the analysis of the object, this intellectual way of apprehending the world, which reduces duration to snapshots, is not sufficient to capture the object in its fluidity and its “fundamental” movement. Intellectual reason limits the object in a *spacialized* time and stops the subject from reaching the immediate data of consciousness. Ultimately, he or she only reaches, conveniently, the superficial aspects of the object because pure reason cannot encapsulate reality in its movement. Bergson claims, as a result, that an adequate understanding of the immediacy of reality needs to be based on a way of apprehending the world that “can place [intellect] within the mobile reality, and adopt its ceaselessly changing directions; in short, [our intelligence] can grasp it [reality] by means of that intellectual sympathy which we call intuition [. . .].”\(^52\) Intuition, by understanding both the object and the subject as participating in an *élan* of duration, enables the subject to go beyond the superficial aspects of “signs” to set a new relation to the object of knowledge. This relation
to the object of knowledge constitutes a movement toward the object. In this movement, the subject loses itself into the object in order to know it totally. As Bergson affirms, “by intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.” Intuition enables immediacy and direct insight into the object of knowledge.

Bergson’s innovation gives Negritude thinkers the tools to argue that intellectual reason cannot be presented as the essential attribute of the human and to state that alternative ways of understanding the world, such as those exercised by Negroes, can be acknowledged as equally valid manifestations of humanness. Through his theory, Bergson prefigures the recognition of African civilizations as representative of humanity and announces the collapse of the philosophical foundations of the colonial white supremacist ideology. This critique of intellectualism constitutes one of the foundations of Senghor’s theory of Negritude, read as a defense of Negro cultural values, a critique of colonial reason. It is even arguable that the main difference between Bergson’s critique of scientism and Senghor’s critique of colonial thought resides at the level of the terminology they use and, as will be shown, on the ways in which they understand the process that leads to intellectual sympathy. Otherwise, Senghor’s philosophy is similar to Bergson’s theory although the former replaces concepts such as “intellectual logic,” “intuition,” and “mystic and religious heroes,” etc., with “ratio,” “emotion,” and “Negro.”

Like Bergson, Senghor postulates that Western reason, which he calls the “Albo-european ratio,” “reason-eye,” “*le logos desséché*(the dried up logos),” etc., limits itself to a practical geometrical relation to the world and is, therefore, unable to reach the immediate data of consciousness. He states,

> Man facing nature, is the subject facing the object. For the European, Homo Faber, the question is to know nature in order to transform it into an instrument of his will of power: to use it. He will immobilize it through analysis, turn it into a dead thing in order to dissect it. But how can we make Life from death?  

Following Bergson, for whom this epistemological attitude leads the intellect to feel at home with matter, Senghor claims that this “objective” relation of knowledge is a relation of violence, a relation of violation because the object of knowledge is “killed” and re-created at every moment. As the theoretician of Negritude declares, “the white European keeps the
object at a distance; he observes it, analyses it, kills it—or rather tames it—in order to use it.”

While Bergson does not relate this relation to the world to race, culture, or ethnicity, however, Senghor contrasts “Western ratio” with subjective Negritude, Negroes’ emotional relation to the world, which he presents as the direct effect of African historical experiences and cultural values. He states:

> As far as we can go in his or her past, from the North-Sudanian to the South-Bantu, the Negro-African’s conception of the world has always been different from the one proposed by classical philosophy. The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomous and, therefore, Manichean. It is based on separation and opposition: on analysis and opposition. The Negro-African, on the contrary, thinks of the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally shifting, synthetic, but unified reality.

In other words, Negro-African societies’ conception of being in time, explains their radically different relation to the world. Since, for the Negro, time is constantly changing and the subject participates in its unfolding, the subject/object dichotomy is erased and knowledge functions as an experience in which the subject and the object lose themselves in each other. It is the unspeakable that the subject can only experience or know in a relation of identity with the object of knowledge, a relation of emotion that urges the subject of knowledge to go beyond ratio in order to reach further towards the object-in-movement. This relation of knowledge is the experience of being the other, a relation of identification with the other when the subject becomes the object of knowledge, goes beyond “discursive reason,” and adopts the *raison-oeil* (reason-eye), *raison-touché* (reason-touch), to seize the object in its totality, that is, in its fluidity.

Like Rimbaud, who Senghor frequently recalls as saying “I am a Negro,” the Negro goes beyond, or to be more Senghorian, below, the shadow of reality in order to reach the hidden parts of the “real,” although this “non-rational” attitude does not make him or her irrational. As the Negritude scholar claims:

> It is, on the contrary, from his subjectivity that the Negro, open to every breeze, discovers the object in its reality: Rhythms it. And there he is, abandoning himself, docile, to this living movement, from the subject to the object, “playing the game of the world.” What else does this mean
but that for the Negro, to know is to live—from the Other’s life—by identifying oneself with the object. To know (con-naître) is to be born in the Other while dying in oneself: It is to make love with the Other, it is to dance the Other. “I feel therefore I am.”61

From this perspective, it is clear that Senghor’s critique of colonial reason is inseparable from Bergson’s critique of pure reason. For the latter, intellectual reason, or as Senghor calls it “reason eye,” conveys a limited understanding of the world because understanding life rationally is understanding partially that which needs to be engaged emotionally, in its duration since it is essentially dynamic. As Bergson writes:

It is no longer reality itself . . . that it (intellect, reason-eye) will reconstruct, but only an imitation of the real, or rather, a symbolical image; the essence of things escapes us, and will escape us always, we move among relations; the absolute is not in our province we are brought to a stand before the Unknowable.62

Senghor adds, along with the Lebenphilosophie,

While the white man’s discursive reason focuses on appearances, intuitive reason, the Negro’s reason-touch (raison étreinte), goes beyond the visible to reach the object’s sub-reality, in order to understand its meaning, beyond its signs.63

As opposed to the traditional mechanistic methodology, Senghor proposes, in the same format as Bergson’s theory of intuition, an epistemology based on emotion as fundamental to the Negro logos.

To recall a point from last chapter, I agree that the fundamental problem of Senghor’s epistemology is his designation of this mode of knowing as Negro. But, should that, as it has been the case, lead to the desacralization of his entire epistemology? In philosophy as in life, we should keep the baby when we empty the bath. Doing so will enable us to reach the complexity of Senghor’s epistemology. It is equally important to acknowledge that reading Senghor’s philosophy along with Bergson’s risks limiting Negritude to a mere reiteration of the latter’s Lebenphilosophie and to another Eurocentric invention of the Negro. Donna Jones, for example, equates Senghor’s oeuvre to a repetition of Bergson’s critique of positivism and, consequently, deprives the Senegalese thinker of any agency. The critique of her representation of Negritude as a vitalist ontology and epis-
temology that follows will show that Senghor is not a traditional Bergsonian and the roots of this theory of knowledge need to be found in African cultures’ particular ontologies.

Negritude and African Vitalism

In the last chapter of her recent book, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, Donna Jones proposes an innovative critique of Negritude. Following ground-breaking critical trends such as those of Abiola Irele and Souleymane Diagne, she reads Negritude beyond its traditional representation as simply irrationalist and culturally particularist and argues that Senghor’s philosophy is rooted in Bergson’s vitalism. This perspective allows her to show that Senghor’s ontology, his epistemology, and his “essentialist” theory of the Negro character follows an epistemic paradigm that questions the supremacy of pure reason and enables him to extol participant reason. Yet, despite this innovative reading of Negritude, Jones, who disregards Senghor’s essays on African Socialism (in which the father of Negritude proposes a modern socio-political organization adapted to contemporary Africa)\(^64\) concludes that Senghor’s Bergsonian theory leads him to “accept the Marxist myths of the primitive communism and technological aversiveness of African societies”\(^65\) and “threatens to validate our colonial disqualification in science, technology, and even aesthetic experimentation.”\(^66\)

While, as shown in the precedent chapter, Negritude is presented by thinkers such as Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa, and Gabriel d’Arboussier, as a Euro-centric eulogy of instinctualism, Donna Jones claims that Negritude is, fundamentally, an anti-positivist and anti-mechanist theory. In order to ascertain such an interpretation of Negritude, she reads two of the epistemic foundations of Senghor’s philosophy, that is, his ontology and his epistemology, as means to question, in a new light, Western representations of people of African descent. Jones argues, thus, that Senghor’s ontology is based on the conception that beings are constituted by a single life force and are, therefore, part of a “supralational ontological commitment to an all-pervading force.”\(^67\) She claims, in turn, that Senghor opposes this vitalist ontology to Western rationality, which, since Aristotle has de-defined (limited) being, that which is constantly becoming, in space and time. While the restrictive rational relation to the world is unable to know the ultimate underlying reality of being, Negro logos, based on an emotional relation to the world, can reach the
sous réalité into which “both matter and life were dissolved.” On the basis of this premise, Jones argues, Negritude thinkers reject instrumentalism and call for a different mode of knowing based on African’s “participant reason.” This epistemology de-universalizes Western modes of cognition and vindicates the Negro race. Jones adds, in defense of Senghor, that he “and the other Negritude poets were not instinctualists but intuitionists, with intuition working as a middle category between reason and instinct; they also tried to do away with the spectator model of perception for a participatory one and with mechanistic explanations, which always did violence to the phenomena of lived experience.” She also goes on to show the particularity of Negritude as an egalitarian, pantheist, and vitalist ontology.

Despite Jones’ defense of Negritude, she claims that Senghor does not transcend Western imperialist essentialization of race. For Jones, his attempt to vindicate the Negro-race simply reverses the nineteenth-century racist paradigm: emotional Negro vs. rational Hellen. Thus, Donna Jones presents Negritude as a mystification, “destined to awaken a latent feeling of affinity for the common descent of all Africans who had long become separated into seemingly independent groups.” Senghor, she maintains, prefers to focus on a mythical past that never existed, rather than question the biological paradigm of race theory and look at Africa as what it ought to be. Although this critique of Negritude is somewhat similar to the one of the second-generation of critics of Negritude that I examined in the first chapter, the particularity of Jones text is that she presents the philosophy of Negritude as a repetition of Bergson’s vitalism.

For Donna Jones, Bergson’s philosophy constitutes the theoretical foundation of Senghor’s conception of Negritude. The premise of Senghor’s philosophy, the idea of the Negro ontology, for example, which enables him to question Western reason and leads him to announce the liberation of the Negro, is, for her, a repetition of the works of Leo Frobenius and Placide Tempels. Yet, while Frobenius and Tempels “break for the Negritude thinkers the Western monopoly on cultural validity and creation,” Jones argues, they both “inscribed a vitalist epistemology into African personality.” It goes without saying, thus, that Negritude is less representative of African realities, than it is another reaction to the “invention of Africa,” through the repetition of the “idea of Africa” proposed by Western modern thinkers. Even Senghor’s epistemology, the theory of the particularity of Negroes’ ability to reach la sous réalité through participant reason, she argues, “means nothing other than Berg-
sonian immediacy: participant reason is intuition by another name.” In other words, for Jones, the crux of Senghor’s theory of Negritude, that is, the theory of the existence of a Negro character and the idea of the Negro epistemology, is a nuanced repetition of Bergson’s idea of the “fundamental character,” even though, in Senghor’s case, the essential Negro character is less the effect of a personal endeavor than the manifestation of a collective character.

For all these reasons, Jones concludes, Senghor’s theory of Negritude is affected by “the same damaging consequences as Bergsonism generally—a devaluation of the scientific aptitude and technological skills on which the African future inevitably depended and the access to which Africans had been denied through centuries of slave trade and colonialism.” In Jones’ critique of Senghor’s philosophy, the ultimate point of the philosophy of Negritude, that is, the theory of the existence of a Negro essence, gives birth to a mythical imagination of history and a dangerous invention of a right-wing classless African society.

Despite Donna Jones’ interesting analysis of Negritude, her confinement of Senghor’s work within the limits of Bergson’s philosophy is a consequence of her own announced goal: “to rethink critically the effect of the vitalist forms of antipositivism and antirationalism on colonial and postcolonial theory.” Her focus is, thus, on Bergsonism. Negritude is, for Jones, a tool that will enable her to “suggest lines of criticism of today’s renascent Bergsonism, of which, she believes, Senghor was a brilliant and self conscious exponent.” In fact, in Jones’ text, Senghor’s prolific oeuvre is reduced to Abiola Irele’s article “What is negritude?” with quick references to the primary literature produced by Senghor and secondary literatures developed by scholars such as Sylvia Washington Bâ, Janet Vaillant, and Gary Wilder. It is only in some rare instances that she cites directly from Senghor’s own writings. It is therefore not surprising that Negritude appears in her text as a reaction to the essentialist and racist paradigm of nineteenth-century race theories. Allegedly, this reaction finds in Bergson’s Lebenphilosophie, the means to reinterpret the negative representation of “blackness.” Jones’ focus on the effect of Bergson’s philosophy on “colonial and postcolonial thought” limits the Senegalese scholar’s agency, while her omission to carefully examine Senghor’s own texts leads her to overlook the multifaceted manifestations of Negritude, especially its Afri-centered paradigm. I do not mean, however, that Negritude is not partly a reaction to Western representation of Africans. It was. But, a more extensive reading of Senghor’s oeuvre shows that this reaction is not the source of his philosophy. It is one of its manifestations.
The starting point of the philosophy proposed by Léopold Sédar Senghor is not Western modernity. It is his cultural background. To recall another point from the precedent chapter, nineteenth-century interpretations of African realities do not constitute the thesis of Senghor’s philosophy. They are, rather, the anti-thesis of the real thesis: Traditional African ontological representation of being. In this sense, Bergson does not just enable African thinkers to extol participation and vitalism. They had already learned it in Africa. Bergson is, at best, engaged in the same quest as African cultures: the quest of absolute knowledge. This pursuit leads the vitalist thinker to conceive what Senghor would call a Negro ontology: the understanding that the ultimate value of being is life insufflated by a vital force. Bergson, like Negro African societies, develops a theory of knowledge based on intuition and intellectual sympathy, rather than dry and definite ratio. That is why he provides Senghor with the technical means to express, within Western discursive practices, what he had already learned from his traditional African experience in Joal and Djiloor.

Despite their similarities, Bergson’s intuition and Senghor’s emotion, which he presents as the Negro African manifestation of the idea of intuitive reason, are not identical: the former is an individual effort reached through, among other things, a conscious deconstruction of the modern rational subject; the latter, equally individual, is the logical effect of what Senghor calls the sum total of Negro-African cultures’ ontology. This is not to say that Senghor does not sometimes fall into a plain repetition of Bergson’s philosophy. As will be shown, his critique of colonial reason, for instance, is undoubtedly, repetitive of Bergson’s critique of positivism. Yet, this paradigm should not be generalized. Although the influence of Bergson’s philosophy on Senghor’s theory is undeniable, the latter is not a Bergsonian in the traditional sense of the term; his philosophy cannot be read as a plain repetition of Bergson’s vitalism.

**Beyond Bergson**

Reading Negritude as a movement that finds its foundation in African traditions shows that even though it functions, at times, as an anti-racist racism and an anti-colonial movement, one cannot limit it to these reactionary manifestations. The theory of Negritude as a whole is not a simplistic adaptation of Bergson’s vitalism to the anti-colonial agenda despite Bergson’s influence on Senghor’s work. Although the Senegalese
thinker’s critique of colonial reason, for example, can be read as a repetition of Bergson’s philosophy, Negritude, as a whole, is not just a defense of Negro cultural values. It is also an illustration of African cultures from an African perspective. As Senghor says, in reaction to Sartre’s presentation of Negritude as an anti-racist racism: “No, Negritude is in no way that. It is neither racism nor self-negation. It is rootedness in one’s culture and confirmation of one’s self.”

A more careful analysis of other manifestations of Negritude, such as Senghor’s representation of Negro epistemology and ontology, shows that he is a Bergsonian of a different kind. Negritude and Bergsonism have different premises and manifest themselves differently. While, for example, Bergson’s epistemology is fundamentally a critique of positivist and mechanist philosophy, for Senghor, the critique of positivist and mechanist philosophy is just a logical consequence of the Negro ontology, which can be traced back to African cultures’ modes of understanding the world.

The African Sources of Negritude: 
Comme les Lamantins vont Toujours Boire à la Source

Senghor founds the roots of his theory of knowledge in Negro African ontologies such as Sereers’, Wolofs’, and Dagaras’. As stipulated in the Introduction, his conception of Negritude would have been different, had he not had a particularly rich childhood experience in Joal and Djiloor. Senghor’s first years in Joal prefigured his ontology, his epistemology, and his definition of Negritude as a prospective expression of Negro cultural values, that is, “A certain way of conceiving and living life. A certain way of speaking, singing, and dancing, of painting and sculpting, and even of laughing and crying. . . .” The analysis of his experience in Africa will show that Negritude is primarily an Afri-centered theory. This perspective opens the barriers that have participated in the constriction of Negritude in space (France) and time (the colonial era) and leads to a less ideological reading of his philosophy.

Senghor was born in 1906, in Joal, a rural area of three thousand people, into a wealthy aristocratic family. In Joal, as in many places around the world, being a member of the aristocracy facilitates one’s likelihood to know the official history of the local culture. Since history is frequently the history of the ruling class, members of upper classes tend more to preserve and value it in order to legitimize their own domination. Senghor’s family
was no exception. The young Sédar, the king of Sine’s nephew, was fully immersed in the traditional Sereer culture. He recalls, on many occasions, that “Senegalese veillées were organized every evening, after dinner, in one of the rooms of [his household’s] gynaeceum.” These veillées were not only the places where history lessons were taught, they also marked the moments when *kim njoms* were recited, sung, and commented. These séances constitute the young Sédar’s first in-depth encounter with African doxa. During these veillées, Senghor learned the values and the richness of the Sereer culture, and even, listened, for the first time, to Ndye Marone Ndiaye, the poetess of Joal, celebrate the beauty and blackness of her “prince,” as she exclaimed the young Sédar’s favorite verses:

Lang Saar a lipwa pay’baal;  
O fes a gennox, nan fo soorom. 

Lang Saar has worn a black dress  
A young man has risen like a filao tree.

As Senghor recalls, Marone Ndiaye’s poems triggered the first manifestations of his Negritude. He says: “these *kim njoms* would remain imprinted in my memory. [...] They were going to be one of the major reasons for my pride to be black. And as soon as the seminar years.”

Marone Ndiaye’s praise of the beauty of Lang Saar’s blackness makes possible a framework for theorizing Negroness, which, as her *kim njom* implies, focuses on the particularity of the Negro self, rather than on a comparative—hierarchic, oppositional—conception of blackness.

While Senghor’s experience with Marone Ndiaye can lead to a particular Afri-centered reading of Negritude, the lessons he received from his uncle Waly denote also his comprehension of his culture, which influences his epistemology and his ontology. It is important to note that in the Sereer society the maternal uncle is the teacher responsible for the nephew’s education. That is precisely why Senghor was sent, at a young age, to his uncle’s house, in Djiloor. As he recalls:

Until 1913 I lived in an animist milieu. My uncle Waly took care of my moral and religious education. [...] I was one hundred percent animist.

But what was this education about? Senghor gives us a hint that announces his own definition of the Negro ontology. He declares:
You Tokor Waly, you listen to the inaudible
And you explain to me the signs that the Ancestors tell in
the marine serenity of the constellations. 85

Although this description of his uncle, like his experience in Joal, is not
sufficient to claim that Senghor founds his ontology and his epistemol-
ogy on the lessons he received from this upbringing, it shows that the
Senegalese thinker is not, as he is frequently presented, the archetype of
the French assimilé; he was profoundly immersed in his traditional cul-
ture. The above-mentioned description of his uncle Waly as the man who
“listens to the inaudible” and “explain[s] the signs that the Ancestors tell
in the marine serenity of the constellations,” announces, be it in allusive
ways, a vitalist Negro ontology. This observation along with the com-
parison of Senghor’s theory to some African cultures’ relations to the
world, facilitates the argument that, unlike his traditional representation
as a black Frenchman who went to the best French schools and, for that
reason, developed a euro-centric mystification of the Negro, one can also
claim that Senghor’s theory is equally indebted to African traditions.

An Afri-centered Epistemology

Despite its similarities with Bergson’s Lebenphilosophie, Senghor’s vitalist
theory reflects, if not a plain description of the ontology of African cul-
tures such as Sereer, and Dagara, at least an Afri-centered understanding
of the world. It is even arguable that Senghor’s most important achieve-
ment is to have been one of the first African intellectuals to use Western
philosophers’ concepts in order to successfully explain, and even in some
cases just report, Africans’ relations to the world. Senghor himself under-
stood it very well as he declares: “The reality of the word [Negritude]
existed much earlier, 40,000 years ago, since the steatopigic Negroide stat-
utes of Grimaldi.”86

I do not mean that Senghor was not a vitalist scholar. It is undeni-
able that he was. For the Negritude thinker, “matter” is the symbol of an
underlying reality that constitutes the essence of the visible. He argues:

The different concrete appearances constituted by the animal, vegetal,
and mineral worlds are nothing but manifestations of a unique funda-
mental reality: the universe as a network of diverse forces, which, in turn,
are expressions of virtualities enframed in God, the only real force.87
This understanding of being as based “on an ultimate underlying reality, [ . . . a] vital force into which both matter and life were dissolved,” leads Jones to present Senghor’s theory as similar to Tempels’ philosophy and, indirectly, as a repetition of Bergson’s vitalism. Yet, the comparison of Senghor’s ontology to the one of the African societies mentioned above shows that the Senegalese thinker’s ontology of life forces is fundamentally representative of African traditions although it is somewhat similar to Bergson’s vitalism.

A quick overview of Senghor’s 1939 essay, “What the Black Man Contributes,” published six years before Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy*, shows that the Senegalese thinker’s ontology should not be presented as a re-articulation of Tempels’ vitalist interpretation of Bantu cultures because it predates the Belgian reverend’s text. In this text, one of Senghor’s most powerful analyses of Negroness, he invites the reader to discover the particularity of the “black man.” This endeavor, Senghor argues, necessitates that “[we,] first of all, study the Negro soul, briefly; then his conception of the world, which ensues from his religious life and his social life; finally his art.” This statement gives as early as 1939 a lesson on how to read and understand Negritude. Senghor’s laid-out method denotes the main logic of his understanding of Negritude: It is an ontology that determines a particular African conception of the world pervaded with religious life, which is manifested in all aspects of social life. But, how does this ontology function? How can it be understood? Senghor’s answer is unequivocal:

For the moment, I will say that the Negro cannot imagine an object that is essentially different from him. He gives it [the object] a sensibility, a will, a human soul, but the soul of a black man [ . . . ] Thus, Nature in its totality is animated by a human presence. It humanizes itself in the actual and etymological sense of the term. Not only animals and phenomenon of nature—rain, wind, thunder, hill, river—, but also trees and rocks become men; Men who keep some physical and original characters, as instruments and signs of their personal souls.

Six years before Tempels’ canonical book, Senghor insufflates every aspect of nature, in the Negro world, with “vital force,” although he does not use those exact terms. Senghor’s vitalist ontology can be read as a logical interpretation of the understanding of being proposed by African societies’ such as Sereer
and Dagara. The comparison of these cultures’ stories of genesis with their biblical version shows that Senghor’s vitalism is fundamentally African-centered. In traditional biblical interpretations of genesis, the world is presented as the deed of an all-powerful God, who invents it from nothing. It is conceived as an entity separated from its Creator and which can be imagined as something that has a beginning and arguably an end. This understanding of genesis also implies that the different entities of the world have been created separately and constitute different modes of being. Without engaging in the theory of a homogeneous Bantu religious vision of the world, one can nonetheless argue that, in most African religions, God is not the ex-nihilo Creator of the Bible. As Mbiti claims, even though the idea of a creation ex nihilo is reported in at least three African societies, and there may be others, it is still rare.92 Again, even if Mbiti’s argument may be questioned, and even if there may be many more African religions that propose different histories of genesis, it is undeniable that an ex nihilo understanding of creation is rare. In numerous African societies that Senghor is familiar with, God is either the father of the world as in the Dagara cultures of today’s Ghana and Burkina Faso and the Sereer cultures of contemporary Senegal, or the world emanates from Him.93 As this understanding of genesis pre-supposes, being is not outside of the existence of the spirit of God. It is God manifested in different ways through His or Her vital force, precisely because all beings, animate or inanimate, are emanations of His or Her own Being. As Mbiti declares,

God is seen in and behind objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest Him, they symbolize His being and presence . . . the invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, and Africans “see” that invisible universe when they look at, hear, or feel, the visible and tangible world.94

And Senghor adds,

Concerning the union of man and God, it is, in black Africa, at the center of religious life. It is the ultimate goal, as Dominique Zahan, after many others, has proven in Religion, Spirituality and African thought.95

From this perspective, one can claim that nature is not outside of God. Beings are manifestations of God or even in some cases, His or Her differ-
ent material expressions. Thus, Senghor proposes a definition of being as a “network of diverse forces that constitute the expression of virtualities enframed in God, the only real force.”

A quick overview of Malidoma Patrice Somé’s account of the concept of being in the Dagara society confirms that Senghor’s representation of the “Negro’s ontology” is equally Afri-centered despite its resemblances with Bergson’s theory. Malidoma, whose name means “he who makes friends with the stranger/enemy,” can be presented as an ethnologist of a different kind. While, traditionally, ethnologists are Europeans or Western educated Africanists who spend time with “indigenous” people before they recount, in Western or Westernized metropolitan centers, “the others’” lives and customs, Malidoma follows an opposite trajectory. He was sent to the West by his people so that he can fulfill the destiny predicted to him by Dagara ancestors and diviners: befriend the stranger, make his culture understood by others, and, by this means, initiate inter-cultural dialogue. After his initiation and two doctorates from Sorbonne and Brandeis, Somé currently divides his time between writing and teaching about his culture through experimental learning. The implications of the representation of initiation, African ontology, and rituals that he develops in his recent book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa,* confirms Senghor’s understanding of ontology in the African context and shows, by the same token, the Negritude thinker’s indebtedness to, if not all (as he claims), at least numerous African cultures.

In terms similar to the above-mentioned Senghorian definition of the Negro’s ontology, Malidoma Patrice Somé claims, “[Dagara] people see the physical as a reflection of a more complex, more subtle, and more lasting yet invisible entity called energy.” He goes on to show that everything, from material things to inanimate objects, actions, and experiences are determined by an energy that functions as the effects of life as we see and experience it. It is, he argues, precisely because of this understanding of reality that Africans resort to initiations and rituals as a means to transcend the traditional materialistic understanding of life.

Initiation, in Somé’s text, denotes Dagaras’ understanding of ontology. As the safe-guarded chamber of secrets, a process of transformation of the child into a full human being, initiation is an introduction to the other side of reality that one cannot see with bare eyes, the “sous réalité” that Senghor theorizes. Somé presents it as a collective movement that enables the entire society to enter in communication with the same but other side of their own selves. He states:
A person who walks through a ritual ends up feeling charged and invigorated is a blessed recipient of healing waves of energy that no one can see but everyone can benefit from. The full heart of a person blessed in this manner overflows into the needy souls of others, igniting the healing fire most wanted for self-replenishment. Ritual is central to village life, for it provides the focus and energy that holds the community together, and it provides the kind of healing that the community most needs to survive.

This understanding of the process of initiation implies that for the Dagara all physical entities function as symbols of a sous réalité and all individual members of the community participate, collectively, in the same spiritual movement in order to reach their ultimate beings as members of the community because material and spiritual aspects of reality are inseparable and the entire community shares a common vital energy the totality of which determines their ultimate being. Somé’s understanding of being recalls Senghor’s representation of the Negro ontology, as the latter presents beings as emanations of a coalescing supreme force and defines all beings as participating collectively in the same ultimate spiritual force. All beings, animate and inanimate, share this vital force, which is the inaudible and unseen aspect of life that Tokor Waly taught Senghor to see, to understand, and to develop. For all these reasons, one can claim that even if Donna Jones is right when she finds striking similarities between Tempels’, Bergson’s, and Senghor’s theories of ontology, it is equally arguable that the latter does not just propose a plain repetition of these vitalist philosophers’ works. Senghor’s vitalism is similar to that of African cultures such as Dagara. One can even argue that when it comes to vitalism, his theoretical indebtedness to Bergson is limited. In fact, although it is true that both authors consider matter as pervaded by a spiritual energy, their understandings of the meanings and processes to reach the ultimate manifestation of life differ.

For Bergson, the immediacy of life is reached through a conscious intellectual and intuitive effort. For Senghor, it is attained through a rational yet “quasi-normal” Negro emotional perspective. The Bergsonian intuitive relation to the world is a conscious subjective effort to question and transcend pre-established knowledge that shape the subject’s relation to the world. He declares: “The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colorless shadow, which pure duration projects into homogeneous space.” This critique of the self, which presents the subject
of knowledge as an “agent” whose relation to the object of knowledge is filtered through societal orders, leads Bergson to ask the question: How does one go beyond the societal veil that blurs reality? How can the subject who has been socialized in the convenient intellectual social order reach pure duration? For the vitalist scholar, “a theory of life that is not accompanied by a criticism of knowledge is doomed to accept, as they stand, the concepts which the understanding puts at its disposal: It can but enclose the facts willing or not in pre-existing frames which it regards as ultimate.”

It is from what he calls intellectual sympathy, an individual effort to de-mediate the object, that one can reach the immediate data of consciousness because “our intelligence [. . .] can place itself within the mobile reality and adopt its ceaselessly changing directions; in short, can grasp it by means of that intellectual sympathy which we call intuition.” This attitude is not only individual; it is also the fruit of an effort reserved to a few. That is precisely why Bergson celebrates mystic heroes, the chosen few who are able to reach the immediate data of consciousness through intuition.

As opposed to Bergson’s theory, Senghor claims that society, in the Negro African context, has nothing alienating. It functions as the mirror of African ontology and is geared towards the realization of life’s ultimate goal: an emotional relation to the world. One can even say that for Senghor the social order, in Africa, is the macrocosm of individual life. Individuals are ontologically related to each other through their vital force and each vital force develops towards the ultimate manifestation of life: God. It is from this perspective that all aspects of Negroes’ societies are to be read. As Senghor declares:

Negro-African ontology is not only unitary; it is existential. The entire system is founded on the notion of vital force. It is the latter that pre-empts being, makes being.

Three years later, presenting the same text at a different venue, he adds, “this double character, existential and unitary, can be found in all Negro-African cultures’ social activities, which are all geared toward the same end.” Senghor continues:

African society [. . .] is a community: the African stresses more the solidarity of the group and the contributions and needs of the individual persons. This is not to say that the African neglects the individual person,
but rather that it does not primarily conceive of the person as a member of a “mystical body” in which one can achieve one’s full development, one’s originality and one’s total potential alone. Indeed, this community goes beyond even the human members, since it involves a communion with all beings in the universe: stones, plants, animals, men, dead (ancestors) or alive, and God.\footnote{105}

Negro ontology, for Senghor, does not only transpire in social organizations, it also leads, naturally, to a vitalist epistemology. Because of the vitalist nature of the Negro ontology, which manifests itself in all aspects of Negro social, political, and religious life, the Negro’s relation to the world is essentially intuitive. As opposed to Bergson’s theory, no particular personal epistemic revolt is needed since Negroes’ “intuitive,” or rather, their emotional relation to the world, is nothing but the effect of the sum total of Negro cultural values. And Negro cultures are organized on the basis of a spiritualist ontology that denotes their relations to the word.

Moreover, this epistemology does not imply, as Jones seems to conclude, “a devaluation of the scientific aptitude and technological skill on which the African future inevitably depended and the access to which Africans had been denied through the centuries of slave trade and colonialism.”\footnote{106} “The man, who is a thoroughly trained grammarian, who reads Virgil and Plato in their original idiom, who devises quadrennial plans for a country of six million people, who at moments of leisure translates Hopkins into French,”\footnote{107} does not call for irrationality as an alternative to reason. He simply refutes the supremacy of colonial ratio over Negro logos. Despite the traditional opposition of matter and vital force, the concept of emotion is not necessarily the other of reason; it completes it. As Senghor asserts, “I do not believe in the existence of pre-logical mentality. The mind cannot be pre-logical, neither can it be a-logical.”\footnote{108} For Senghor, logic and rationality manifest themselves differently in Negro cultures because, when the Negro fixes the shadow, it is in order to unveil the hidden truth of the object, because he or she knows that evidence is a character of surface. As a Sereer proverb implies: “Boo giyàngàà tik, tik taxu.” This proverb can very well be translated by Senghor’s own words: “in order to reach the singular particularities of the object’s exterior aspect [one needs to understand that it] is only the sign of the object’s essence.”\footnote{109} Senghor’s theory of Negritude is to be read and understood as a different manifestation of reason. Souleymane Bachir Diagne shows this eloquently, when he declares:
Ratio, then, on the one hand, and Logos, on the other. That is how Senghor uses two ways of translating, ultimately, the same thing—except that one is Latin and the other Greek—in order to express a double approach of the real. He will speak also, maybe even in a clearer way, of the difference between “raison-œil” (“reason-eye”) and “raison-étrinte” (“reason-embrace”). In this case also, he attempts to establish the existence of two ways of knowing: first, an analytical cognitive approach, which, on the one hand, is based on the separation of the perceived object and the perceiving subject, on the other, it conceives the object as the addition of its parts; second, a cognitive approach that we may call synthetic, by symmetry: it is the approach that installs us immediately in the heart of the object (which is therefore not defined in a duality with the subject), in the heart of that which constitutes its “sub-reality” and which is its own rhythm. We understand thereby Senghor’s play on words when he defines thinking as a way of dancing.110

For all these reasons, one can argue that Negritude finds its most revolutionary manifestations when its main theoretician proposes an epistemology. One of the apparent contradictions of Senghor’s conception of race is, however, that one can argue that if races, as he defines them, are mainly a relation to the object of knowledge, a certain way of seeing the world, there must be as many races as there are men and women. But, for Senghor, ways of perceiving the world are as collective as particular. “The unity of mankind is a fact, he says. That does not deny another aspect of the truth, the diversity of collective and individual characters.”111 Therefore, one can indeed argue that there are as many races as individuals. Senghor, himself was, as soon as 1937, dreaming of a book and an education system for every single child.112 Yet, acknowledging the impossibility to realize this ideal, he managed to set up one book for all Francophone Negro-African children. In other words, it is true that if Senghor’s theory is pushed to its limits, his concept of race vanishes like any generalization. Yet, it is equally true that Senghor uses the concept of race, strategically, as a tool to understand particular groups’ relations to the world precisely because cultures do exist and they, more often than not, determine the ways the so-called subject functions.
I met Léopold Sédar Senghor for the first time in 1987, at my uncle’s wedding. At that time, my family was extremely proud of my brother Edouard. He was the most brilliant student in his class, the best checkers player in our neighborhood, one of the most cultured persons in his high school’s trivial pursuit team, and, to top it all, Edouard could read and write in Latin. It was therefore not a surprise that my granduncle took him to the former Senegalese president’s table in order to parade the family prodigy. I remember watching the scene jealously under my sister’s sarcastic look and the weight of my mother’s gaze, as she was admiring my brother, seemingly immersed in an intense discussion with the other prodigy of her family: the ex-president of Senegal. When Edouard came back to our table, he instantly proceeded to tell, frenetically, the story of his encounter with the theoretician of Negritude.

Ma, did you see? He said I should keep working hard in Latin. . . . Oh you know what else he did? He taught me a song in French and another one in Sereer and . . .

I could not help but burst: who cares about French? How’bout a song in Wolof?
But, before my brother reacted to my statement or even got to the point to sing the songs that I was nonetheless dying to hear, my mother, filled with pride, started to tell us the same story that we had already heard a million times, the story of her own grandmother, Marone Ndiaye, the woman who taught poetry to the greatest poet of our time . . .

I never had the chance to hear the songs Senghor taught my brother, especially because I was too busy showing him that I did not care, but the memory of this experience stuck with me for a long time. When, fourteen years later, I started to read and study Senghor’s oeuvre in graduate school, this memory came back to me, as vivid as ever. This time, what struck me most, was the message behind the nature of the two songs the theoretician of Negritude taught the young pupil. They were a traditional Sereer song and a French folk song, as if he wanted to give him the same lesson he gave the crowd of Senegalese évolués and colonial officers fifty years earlier, at his first public lecture: “We are not trying to form workers ready to execute an already designed plan, but inspired artisans, inspired by the old black techniques fecundated by the study of European techniques.”¹ This viaticum is the alpha and the omega of Senghor’s entire existence as it pervades his public and private lives, his theory and his practice. From one of his first texts, “Ce que l’homme noir apporte” (“What the black man conveys”) (1937), to one of his last major philosophical productions, Ce Que Je Crois (What I Believe) (1988), the entire Senghorian oeuvre can be read as a long movement toward the formation of a “Humanism of the twentieth century,”² which announces the realization of Métissage at the Rendez-Vous du Donner et du Recevoir.

There seems, however, to be a contradiction inherent in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy. On the one hand, he theorizes the particularity, if not the essentiality, of the Negro and, on the other, he celebrates Métissage as the ultimate stage of Negritude. The reader, used to the historiography of race theories (which until the twentieth century presented races as either authentic, that is, not corrupted by exterior additions, or as blended into a new racial stratum and mixed), is tempted to ask the questions: how can a subject be fundamentally Negro and métis at the same time? Isn’t the theory of Negritude as a form of Métissage a contradiction in itself? Doesn’t the concept of Métissage as the ultimate destiny of humanity question the validity of the concept of race as such, since the history of the invention of race is inseparable from the one of their essentialization? The stipulated contradictions of these questions are, however, rapidly overcome if one challenges the dichotomy characteristic of the historiography of race theory from the eighteenth to the first half of the
twentieth century and revisits Senghor’s understanding of race as the sum total of a definite group’s cultural values.

The historiography of race theory often struggles to go beyond the postulations set by nineteenth-century theoreticians such as Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Blumenbach, and Arthur Gobineau. These pioneers of race theory divide humanity on the basis of the supposed existence of biological characteristics and, accordingly, determine a hierarchical classification of human races by placing the “white race” at the top of the ladder and Negroes or Native Americans in the bottom. During the same period and in the first part of the twentieth century, however, African, American, and Caribbean thinkers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, José Vasconcelos, and Fernando Ortiz develop anti-racist discourses that question the centrality of the modern Western conception of humanness and/or call for the “vindication of the Negro race.” Yet, although they affirm the ability of “other” races to reach, or to already have reached, ideal modes of manifestations of being, these anti-racist discourses barely question the epistemological paradigm of race theories, which assumes that certain cultural qualities encapsulate the essence of humanness. This reactionary way of thinking of race focuses on effects of the racial problem such as racism, the exclusion of some “racial” groups from humanity, but it reiterates the major problem of racialism: its dichotomist and essentialist paradigm.

For Senghor, however, “[w]e have reacted against ‘our ancestors the Gauls.’ It is a mark of common sense. But the particularity of any reaction is to be unrestrained. It may be time that we reacted against our reaction.” In this vein, he reevaluates the essentialist epistemological paradigm that governs race theories, questions the imperialist homogeneous conception of the human, and sets the conditions for a heterogeneous definition of humanness. Senghor’s critique of the “white/others” dichotomy, constitutive of the history of race theories, leads him to theorize Métissage. Instead of following the definitions of race, which Gobineau, for instance, bases on oppositions between whiteness and “otherness,” the father of Negritude, like major theoreticians of hybridity in the twentieth century such as José Vasconcelos and Fernando Ortiz, challenges the notion of purity characteristic of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries’ definitions of race and presents races as fundamentally mixed. Unlike these major theoreticians of hybridity, however, Senghor does not imagine mixture as the emergence of a new mixed essence realized or to be realized at a definite point in history. He presents the mixture of races as inseparable from the development of humanity. Métissage...
Chapter 3

sage, for the Senegalese scholar, is always the *Métissage* of a *Métissage*. As the archaeological discoveries of the 1930s show, he claims, Negroes have been biologically and culturally mixed with Albo-Europeans, in particular, and other races, in general, from prehistory to the present time through ancient Greece and the European imperialist era. Accordingly, for Senghor, defining Negroes implies the acknowledgment of their biological and cultural ties with Europe since it is impossible for the Negro to apply, as Edward W. Blyden advises, “to forget European influences.”

This understanding of *Métissage* announces what he calls “a Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” a *Civilisation de l’Universel* that re-sets the lines of demarcation separating races and celebrates humanity as consubstantially mixed, yet diverse. The *Civilisation de l’Universel*, the ultimate point of human civilization, manifests itself at what he calls the “*Rendez-Vous du Donner et du Recevoir*” (“The Rendez-Vous of Give and Take”). One can therefore argue that even though it is undeniable that Senghor, the man who defines Negritude as “the sum total of Negro cultural values” and a “particular way of relating to the world,” is somewhat an essentialist scholar, he is one of a different kind as he is convinced that cultures, the very foundation of racial identities, are constantly mixing and becoming other. In this sense, Senghor announced contemporary theories of mixture and hybridity such as Edouard Glissant’s *Tout-Monde*. Like the Martinican poet and philosopher, he dreams of a mixed world that, unlike the monolithic Euro-American universalism disguised under the veil of globalization, is founded on an infinite repetition of otherness, mixture, and multiculturalism. This is precisely how to understand Senghor’s dream of a pluriversal world realized at the unreachable, yet always to come, “*Rendez-Vous du Donner et du Recevoir*.”

**Shifting the Paradigm of Race: A Pragmatic Method**

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mark a radical shift in the history of race theory. While up to the eighteenth century “race” referred to lineage or common descent and was employed, occasionally, to identify a population with a common history or origin, as opposed to one with a fixed biological character,” thinkers such as Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Blumenbach, and Arthur Gobineau develop a theory of race based on the scientific observation of the orders of natural beings. Beyond a biblical genealogy of the division of humankind, they proposed a “scientific” taxonomy of races based on human groups’ supposed biological, spiritual,
and ethical particularities. Although their conclusions and representations of race were different and even sometimes contradictory, they focused on the biological “nature” of race, determined the relation between biology, morality, and spirituality, and investigated the possibility of classifying human beings along predetermined static racial categories.  

This biological paradigm had informed most of the race theories up to the early twentieth century. Even African-descended scholars engaged in the “Vindication of the Negro Race” followed the same logic until the first half of the twentieth century. They either assume that European modernity constitutes the human ideal, and measure “other races” in terms of their inabilities, or abilities, to reach the European level of material development; or they oppose “other races” to white subjects, reverse the imperialist theory of racial essentialism, and end up repeating exactly what they question: the modernist assumption of the universal nature of man. Instead of questioning the possibilities of shifting the pre-defined Western essentialist definitions of the human, major pan-Negrist thinkers, such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, tend to address the racial question in terms of the possibility, for the Negro, to develop an essentialist, original, and authentic humanity. Edward W. Blyden, for example, considers that Negroes have to learn and appropriate Themistocles’ injunction to disregard European influences; Marcus Garvey believes that the “pure black race . . . should now set out to create a race type and standard of [its] own, which could not . . . be stigmatized as bastardly;” and W. E. B. Du Bois faces the dilemma of being a Negro and an American, which constitute, for him, “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” These dichotomous ways of conceiving race, which presuppose the fundamental separation of the so-called original racial stocks, constitute the basic paradigm from which the “idea of the Negro” was framed, even by African descended scholars, when Senghor started to write in the early 1930s.

This generalized mode of definition of race based on the opposition of “whiteness” to “blackness” made twentieth-century race theorists face an important epistemological problem: How can one think of “race” beyond the question of the ability of certain groups to reach universalized provincial “values” such as “Rationality,” “Democracy,” “Capitalism,” and “Christianity?” Senghor’s culturalist understanding of race offers a way out as it questions the epistemological grounds of the above-mentioned essentialist race theories. He refutes the concept of racial purity, silences
the assumed question of hierarchy that framed race theories, and avoids
the essentialist tendency of questioning Africa’s ability, or her inability, to
reach Western pre-defined ideals of civilization. Rather, Senghor thinks
of races as inseparable from one another and defines them as constantly
mixing in space and time from prehistory to the present time. Despite
some of its essentialist manifestations, thus, Negritude can be read as a
celebration of hybridity that questions the universalist modern paradigm.

The particular conception of race that Senghor suggests can first be
inferred from his understanding of the concepts of assimilation and asso-
ociation, which underlined most Francophone racial discourses of his
time. By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of the French
empire had triggered a serious reflection on the very meaning of citizen-
ship in France. This reflection was framed around the meaning of race.
Supporters of assimilation, on the one hand, posited that races are cul-
tural manifestations. Therefore, they assumed that “inferior” races could
(should) be civilized, that is, frenchified and included in the French
nation. The proponents of association, on the other hand, present races
as fundamentally different. Cohabitation through the politics of associ-
ation was, they thought, the only way to imagine the future of a multi-
racial French empire. For the Senegalese philosopher, however, the
problem of the modes of definition of races needs, first, to be reformu-
lated in less oppositional terms. Assimilation and association, which imply
respectively the possibility of erasing racial particularities and the pros-
pect of affirming the particularities of racial categories, do not, he argues,
constitute irreconcilable ideals. He contends, “we have to transcend the
false antinomy ‘association or assimilation’ and say ‘assimilation and
association’” precisely because races, like cultures, do not function like
instruments that can be extracted from time. It is therefore impossible
to utterly expunge the data of their mixed pasts. Placing himself at the
crossroads of the essentialist conception of race (which posits the purity
of races) and the less rigid theories of hybridity (which imagine an epiph-
anic reconciliation between races at the end of history), the Senegalese
scholar acknowledges the reality of race, yet presents them as fundamen-
tally mixed, each in its own way.

Senghor’s understanding of races as essentially mixed is based on his
conception of the history of humankind since prehistory. For the Senega-
lese scholar, the history of human civilizations is the history of mixtures
that started in prehistory and were carried out through all stages of our
historical development. He affirms,
It is in Africa . . . that one must place oneself in order to better witness the great wave of people, techniques, and ideas, as they form, expand out of Africa and then back to Africa, until the saturation point of habitable lands.\textsuperscript{18}

Founding his theory on the discoveries of contemporary scientists such as Paul Rivet, René Verneau, Henri Breuil, and Marcelin Boule, the Negritude scholar ascertains that the first populations who occupied the Mediterranean, Negroid species such as the Capsiens and the Grimaldi, met with the Cro-Magnon (white species) and the Chancelade (yellow species) before “the progressive albisation, that is, the whitening of the Mediterranean countries: from the superior Paleolithic to the historical period.”\textsuperscript{19} This understanding of the emergence of a common human culture in Africa leads him to state, frequently, that African history ought to be read along with “the history of southern Europe, or above all, the history of the Near East, with which it has often been mixed, be it in the matters of biology or of culture.”\textsuperscript{20} Understanding, as shown, that races are nothing but cultural manifestations and conceiving that modern cultures are embedded in an initial mixed prehistory, Senghor alleges that races are rooted in an original \textit{Métissage}.

In addition to the initial prehistoric mixtures, Senghor claims that \textit{Métissage} pervades all human civilizations, at each stage of their developments. He maintains, for example, that all great antique civilizations were \textit{métisses}. Greeks, for instance, Senghor reminds us in \textit{Liberté i},

Blond and blue eyed, arrived on the shores of the Mediterranean, drunk from the sun and from fury. There, they found a dark and civilized, peaceful and refined, people. [ . . . ] Greek warriors, as they always do in circumstances such as these, massacred some of them, yet mixed with the others: with women, in particular. Thus, mixing lucidity and emotion, vigor and fervor, they created a superior civilization. Aesop and Socrates, among others, have symbolized the delicious fruits of this mixture. This is certainly why some of us writers of the Negritude movement feel so close to Greeks, who, as the remote founders of modern rationalism, place intuitive reason before discursive reason. And the “Ethiopian” so close to the Olympian gods!\textsuperscript{21}

He adds, in the first chapter of \textit{Ce Que Je Crois} (\textit{What I Believe}) that, together, Albo-Europeans and Ethiopians have always engaged in the
development of humanity precisely because “since the superior Paleolithic, and this is one of the characteristics of the homo sapiens, when two people meet, they often fight, but they always mix.”

Rather than situate the moment of the mixture of races in a definite point of the historical time, Senghor presents Métissage as consubstantial to the development of humanity as such, from prehistory to the present time, through ancient Greece. That is why he understands his philosophy of Negritude as a means,

[T]o insert the history of the homo Africanus, the African man, in the permanent revolution constituted by the evolution of the human phylum: by the Human family. The history of the African Man, not withstanding the Southern European Man, and above all the Near-Eastern Man, with whom he has so frequently mixed, biologically or culturally.

Léopold Sédar Senghor’s conception of the mixed nature of cultures and races becomes all the more evident if one reads it along the same lines as his conception of time. As mentioned in Chapter 2, time is frequently presented as a unity of measure that calculates the distance separating subjects and objects from their original states and from their more or less imminent deaths. This conception of time leads one to reminisce about the glories of the time before the “new” perverted the original nature of the “old.” It is also for this reason that black cultures are, in the anti-colonial African tradition, and even today, frequently conceived as having an original archetype, and as having lost their fundamental nature with the beginning, in the sixteenth century, of the Western colonial enterprise. For Senghor, however, the idea of a time of purity when races and cultures were static is a myth. He believes, as shown, that time is a manifestation of duration and becoming. This particular understanding of time enables him to question a major upshot of the teleological conception of time: the traditional assimilation of the concept of origin with that of purity. Thus, even if pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial conceptions of Africa were imaginable, our very being in time would make the separation of our experiences during these three moments impossible. Negroes, for that matter, are unable to erase “foreign” influences on the ongoing formation, becoming, and development of African identities.

Senghor’s conception of races as constantly mixing in time is particularly true in Francophone Africa, where one of the characteristics of the French colonial system was the politics of assimilation. This colonial
project aimed at transforming the African subject into a black Frenchman or Frenchwoman. Everything, from the education system to the representation of the self, was destined to obliterate the African self. It is even frequently recalled that during that period, African pupils used to learn that their forefathers were Gallic. Thus, although colonized African subjects developed strategies to escape acculturation and to revive their cultures, the primary experience of their own traditions had changed in such a way that these traditions will never again have the same meanings that they had before the colonial experience. Accordingly, Senghor argues that colonization constitutes an integral part of the Negro’s past and, as such, participates in the formation and transformation of Negro cultures and traditions, even though it had been imposed on them. This conception of the role of colonization in the formation of contemporary Negro societies leads the Negritude scholar to reply, “I will answer that we did not choose”\textsuperscript{24} to all the critics who blame him for giving, in his conceptualization of Negritude, a too important function to Western influences. He adds, “I repeat, we did not choose; colonization and the politics of assimilation imposed on us the colonizer’s language.”\textsuperscript{25} In effect, even though it was imposed on Africans, colonization and its different socio-cultural politics influenced African cultures and participated in shaping and shifting Negroes’ modes of definition of the world. It is therefore more pragmatic to acknowledge that imposed yet inextricable part of post-colonial Negro cultures, since one can simply not erase it.

Straying away from the myth of a pure pre-colonial Africa, Senghor believes that authentic Negro cultures cannot be imagined in a sacred and virgin past that manifested itself before any contact between the Negro and the European. Negritude, understood as the manifestation of Negroes’ cultural values, cannot be separated from the other cultural forces constitutive of Negro selves and which have affected the development of Negro cultures. Thus, he questions the possibility of recalling an authentic pre-colonial African past, since cultures, for him, are neither to be situated in an exclusive past, nor in a restricted present. They are dynamic, always to-come.\textsuperscript{26}

This frequently ignored paradigm is one of the most important aspects of Senghor’s philosophy. It offers new modes of reading his oeuvre and new possibilities of understanding his conception of race. Interestingly, maybe even paradoxically, one can argue that the definition of races as fundamentally hybrid that Senghor proposes constantly negates the “essentialism” of his understanding of the Negro. One can even go all the
way to present Senghor’s understanding of Negritude as the theory of a mixed Negro essence. A “hybrid essentialism,” such could, in effect, have been another formula developed by the Senegalese scholar.

**Rethinking Hybridity**

Senghor’s conception of races as mixed yet profoundly different does not just challenge the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ essentialist theories of race, it also points out the limits of the theories of hybridity that dominated academic discourses on race in the twentieth century. The Senegalese scholar challenges the nationalist ideal of mono-culturalism and questions traditional theories of mixture such as those of José Vasconcelos and Eric William. While these scholars understand hybridity as the transformation of European, Native American, and African cultures into a unified Creole culture, Senghor refutes the possibility of the dissolution of Negro-cultures into a unique utopist civilization that erases multiplicity and suppresses racism through the invention of a new mixed race.

For José Vasconcelos, the different races that constitute the Mexican nation tend to mix ever more to form a new human type composed of the blending of all local ethnicities. He argues that this mixture is characterized by the potential civilization of other races—through Western Christian ideals.27 Hybridity or **Créolité** constitutes, for him, a means to reach an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation. This new essentialist understanding of hybridity is reiterated by Eric William, the first prime minister of Trinidad and many theoreticians of mixture, for whom:

> There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India . . . there can be no Mother Africa for those of African descent, and the Trinidad and Tobago society is living a lie and heading for trouble if it seeks to create the impression or to allow others to act under delusion that Trinidad and Tobago is an African society. . . . No person can be allowed to get the best of both worlds, and enjoy the privileges of citizenship in Trinidad and Tobago. . . . A nation like an individual can have only one Mother.28

Participating in the modern paradigm, these scholars conceive hybridity in singular. The new hybrid race that they imagine is based on the emergence of one superior mixed race that Vasconcelos calls **la raza cosmica**.
The understanding of hybridity postulated by Vasconcelos’ concept of *raza cosmica* (the cosmic race) can be opposed to Senghor’s concept of the *Civilisation de l’Universel*. The theory of the cosmic race posits an essentialist theory of hybridity based on the emergence of one race that encapsulates all other races. Yet, Vasconcelos does not leave room for otherness. Senghor, on the other hand, imagines a world composed of different races that constantly mix with one another, while retaining their ever-becoming particularities. For Senghor, Métissage is not a unification project although it celebrates mixture between races. His theory of Métissage proposes a forum of exchange where, although cultures remain fundamentally different, they nonetheless share their experiences and enrich each other mutually. These civilizations, the sum of which he names the *Civilisation de l’Universel*, that is, the project of a trans-cultural world, find their roots in the constant mixture of human cultures. The concept of the *Civilisation de l’Universel* is, for the Senegalese thinker, the ultimate moment of Negritude. It celebrates the moment when Negritude goes beyond the Negro and becomes a true Humanism.

Senghor’s idealist conception of the *Civilisation de l’Universel* allows him to present Métissage as a permanent project that is always to come. He asserts, “In order to be métis, we have to ‘be’ separately. That is why we used to say that each one of us has to be mixed in his or her own way.”²⁹ Senghor’s theory of Métissage is a way to claim the possibility of the realization of mixed races that find their essentiality in their generous multiplicity and their genuine differences. Métissage does not correspond to a moment when Western influences on other races are celebrated. It is the prospective yearning for a moment of dialogue, where every culture participates in “giving and taking” what they, and “others,” have to offer. Thus, Senghor calls for the “symbiosis” of cultures, rather than their syncretism. “I do not like the word ‘syncretism’ [ . . . ], he states, I prefer the word ‘Symbiosis.’”³⁰ The line of demarcation that separates “syncretism” and “symbiosis” implies the idea of the assimilation of different elements, rather than the one of addition. For Senghor, Negro cultures, in their symbiosis with European cultures, have to appropriate the latter rather than transform themselves into another version of Europe and, therefore, run the risk of being lost between two irreconcilable selves. This theory of the symbiosis of cultures calls for mutual enrichment since Métissage, as he argues, is simultaneously deep-rootedness and up-rootedness.³¹ Senghor beautifully conveys this message in a speech delivered in 1969 in Zaire, a country where Mobutu Sessesseko had turned into a dictator in
the name of the necessity to replicate traditional African modes of government. He declares:

Being faithful to one’s culture requires a willingness to be deep-rooted and up-rooted. To be deep-rooted in the heart of the native land: in its spiritual heritage. But also to be up-rooted: open to the fecundating influences of foreign civilizations.  

Senghor’s theory of Métissage is illustrated by his seemingly essentialist representation of Negritude as rooted in the Royaume d’enfance, The Kingdom of Childhood. Despite its apparently essentialist implications, the concept of the Kingdom of Childhood does not promote the essentialization of races. It shows that even seemingly pure African roots are, in reality, manifestations of the fundamental mixture of human cultures. Although unlike Césaire, Senghor does not literally call for a return to the native land, he situates the “sum total of Negro cultural values” in what he calls the Royaume d’enfance. He frequently presents this concept as a “place” of rootedness that constitutes the condition of possibility of Negritude. As he states, in order to determine one of the main sources of his theory of Negritude,

Remembering, not without sadness, the “Kingdom of Childhood,” the Senegalese village where I lived happily until the age of seven, I dared to question, in front of the Father Director, that we did not have a civilization.  

Or else,

That is [Negritude] the myth of Africa—Kingdom of Childhood, I mean, of found virtues. That is the ultimate moment of the pilgrimage to the roots, all our poets’ nostalgias, the Negritude they must live and preach as if it was the Gospel.  

It is therefore not surprising that major critics such as Josiane Nespoulos-Neuville, Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa, and Kofi Anyidoho, etc. present the concept of Royaume d’enfance as the symbol of Senghor’s rootedness in his own traditional culture and locate it in the geographical and temporal space of pre-colonial Africa. Kofi Anyidoho’s article, “Kingdom of Childhood, Senghor and the Romantic Quest” is a good example of this critical perspective. Reading Senghor’s oeuvre as a “nos-
talgie search of a lost childhood, Anyidoho places the birth of Negritude in “the peculiar social situation in the context of assimilation in which French speaking black writers of Senghor’s generation found themselves.” For Anyidoho, Senghor, the most successful of them all, was also the most disillusioned since despite his professional and political successes, he was still not accepted as a true Frenchman. For Anyidoho, the crisis of self-identity that ensued from this situation led Senghor to attempt to find “therapeutic treatment in the “quiet rhythms of his imagined African world,” the Kingdom of Childhood. Josiane Nespoulous-Neuville develops a similar reading of the Kingdom of Childhood in Léopold Sédar Senghor: De la tradition à l’universalisme, as she presents the “Royaume d’enfance, alpha and omega of the Senghorian trajectory: prodigious wealth, cultural heritage, precisely inherited in the Sereer country.” It is also from the same perspective that Adotevi and Towa present Negritude as the myth of a pre-colonial Eden.

Yet, even if it is arguable that the Kingdom of Childhood can be situated within the mythical imagination of a “pre-colonial” African space, a hermeneutics of Senghor’s texts shows that it is more an idea than an actual place. The Kingdom of Childhood is a place-marker, a trope, pointing to origins, beginnings, almost without presuppositions but never really presuppositionless, that enables the theorist to chart a journey that cannot really be cited/understood as beginning in a particular place but which must have some beginning that is always evoked when talk turns to journeys. That is why Senghor imagines it to be in different “places.” It refers sometimes to Joal and Djilor, the maternal or rather matrilineal shelter. As Senghor states,

I frequently speak, in my poems, of the Kingdom of Childhood. It was a Kingdom of innocence and happiness . . . I left my mother while saying farewell to the Kingdom of Childhood.

This kingdom can nonetheless be situated in Ngazobile (Ngas-o-bil, as Senghor likes to spell it), the seminary where the young Sédar and his classmates, as opposed to their nawles (people of the same age group) who stayed in Joal, awaited the stories that Rev. Joseph Cosson told them every night. But their stories, unlike the ones they received in the traditional setting, were culturally French even if they were told in the midst of a Sereer land, the Sine—a Sine that does not only rhyme with the Seine in Senghor’s poetry, but which is consubstantial to, and inseparable from, it.
The Kingdom of Childhood is also at the center of Paris and Western “discursive rationality” (*raison discursive*). It is situated at the Lycée Louis le Grand, the place where the crème de la crème, the major representatives of Western discursive reason, are educated. “Culturally,” Senghor tells us, “The Lycée Louis le Grand was also a Kingdom of Childhood, where liberty and imagination ruled.”

Despite the multiple places where the Kingdom of Childhood can be situated, there is no contradiction in Senghor’s conception of this place of primordial rootedness. Its fluidity denotes, rather, that there is, for him, a relation of continuity between the years of formation in Joal and the ones in France, the *Royaume d’enfance* and the *Royaume d’enfance*. That is why he affirms, “I don’t situate this Kingdom only in the beginning of my life. I also place it at the end. In general, I would say that it is the ultimate goal of mankind to create the Kingdom of Childhood.” The place and representation of the *Royaume d’enfance* in his conceptualization of Negritude denotes the experience of a subject immersed in different cultures. This experience allows him to go beyond the traditional opposition between Negritude and *Métissage*, Africa and Europe, Assimilation and Association, in order to propose a theory of *Métissage culturel* as the ultimate purpose of all cultures.

Reading Negritude as a theory of *Métissage* calls, however, for an important question: Is the commonly accepted representation of Negritude as an essentialist philosophy tenable? Or, does the Senegalese scholar’s understanding of *Métissage* as the essence of all human races and the ultimate level of human development free him from essentialism? As will be shown, it is undeniable that Senghor was an essentialist scholar. The theoretician of Negritude’s essentialist discourse is, however, not as simplistic as the critical tradition of his work, especially the second generation of critics, has presented his philosophy.

**An Essentialist of a Different Kind**

If, by racial essentialism, one refers to the understanding of race as a group of common decent, the shared history and cultural practices of which distinguish from other groups, then we must acknowledge that Senghor is an essentialist scholar. As shown in the precedent chapter, his entire theory is based on the conception of Negritude as “the sum total of Negro cultural values.” Even though these values are the products of Negro cultures’ constant meetings and mixtures with other cultures,
Senghor conceives them as specific to Negroes and constitutive of their epistemic relations to the world.

Senghor’s conception of the existence of a sum total of values exclusive to Negro cultures is criticized by Stanislas Adotevi for whom Senghor:

[C]onceives of a rigid Negro essence that time does not affect. To this permanence he enjoins a specificity that neither sociological determinations nor historical variations, or geographical realities can alter; it transforms Negroes into similar beings no matter their place and time.45

And Marcien Towa accuses him of awaiting the vanishing and dilution of the Negro’s biological specificity in a raceless humanity, through Métissage.46

For both authors, this essentialist understanding of race is a consequence of the Negritude scholar’s indebtedness to Gobineau’s racialism and Lévy-Bruhl’s conception of the “primitive mentality.” This interpretation of Negritude is reiterated by contemporary scholars such as Gary Wilder and Janvier Amela. For these critics, an analysis of what seems to be Césaire’s own confession is enough to show the intrinsic essentialism representative of the philosophy of Negritude. Both authors recall Césaire’s recollection that “Senghor liked [Gobineau] a lot. [. . .] Gobineau pleased him for having said: ‘art is Negro.’[. . .] As a result, [Senghor’s] attitude toward Gobineau was very ambivalent.”47 Accordingly, Wilder and Amela present Senghor’s understanding of Negritude as a repetition of modern racial essentialism à la Gobineau, which defines races as static and originally pure. They argue, in turn, that Senghor’s repetition of modern scholars’ invention of race precludes Negritude from going beyond what recent developments in genetics have shown to be the very problem of racism: the invented idea of race itself.

Despite Césaire’s acknowledgment of the Negritude scholar’s interest in the work of Bergson, these authors’ omission of an important part of Césaire’s citation, their not quite faithful translation of his assertion, and their failure to take into consideration the importance, in Senghor’s oeuvre, of the concept of Métissage, give the illusion that he is a Gobinean scholar. To be more faithful to Césaire’s affirmation, one should note, as he clearly states, that if he and Senghor had to read the philosophy of Gobineau, it is because the French theorist was the most influential scholar of racism in the first half of the twentieth century and not because
they found his work particularly enlightening. Any serious intellectual critique of racism had, in fact, to engage him seriously. As for Senghor’s alleged fondness of Gobineau’s philosophy, Césaire states that the Senegalese thinker “Lui [Gobineau] savait gré d’avoir dit ‘L’art est nègre.’” This statement, which the above-mentioned critiques translate as: “Senghor liked him because he said art is Negro” should rather be translated by: Senghor “was appreciative of him [Gobineau] for saying that ‘art is negro.’” If we add to this translation the omitted part of Césaire’s citation, his assertion that “ . . . Si dans la civilisation occidentale il y a des artistes, c’est parce qu’il y a quand même quelques gouttes de sang noir en eux” (“If there are artists in Western civilization, it is because some of them have drops of black blood”), it becomes arguable that Senghor was more interested in Gobineau’s understanding of races as de facto mixed than in the fundamentally essentialist racialism he proposes.

In addition to Césaire’s recollection of the Senegalese scholar’s reading of Gobineau, Léopold Senghor’s understanding of races as fundamentally mixed along with his conception of cultures as constantly becoming and mixing with other cultures show that even if he is an essentialist scholar, he is one of a different kind. His conception of Negritude, based on the existence of attributes that are essential to black cultures is inseparable from his theory of the constant mixture of all races. This seemingly paradoxical situation constitutes the “essence” of his life and his philosophy. Senghor is, at the same time, the principal theoretician of Negritude and a founding father of francophonie; he is a pioneer of African thought and occupied the 16th seat of the French Academy; he wrote one of the most celebratory poems of black women and married a white woman he calls his nègresse blonde (blonde negress). . . . These seeming paradoxes constitutive of his life and work are the reasons why most of the critics of Negritude cannot agree on how to perceive his oeuvre and define his identity. While Marcien Towa and Stanislas Adotevi, for instance, refer to him as a “black Frenchman,” Hubert de Lcusse calls him “L’Africain,” and Janet Vaillant portrays him as “Black, French, and African.” In fact, Senghor was all that at the same time. He has always had the intuition that cultures, the very foundations of racial identities, are constantly mixing and changing even though he was sometimes trapped in the essentialist discourse of his time. As Souleymane Diagne agrees:

There never existed, particularly in Senghor’s work, a pure, unified essentialism. Negritude is not a theory of separate identities as interpreted by Senghor’s critics despite his protests. He constantly uses the concept of
hybridity to deconstruct essentialist affirmations. Senghor’s obsession with Métissage is another version of Penelope’s tireless attempts to defeat fixed difference: “A humanism of hybridity,” such could have been one of the poet’s formulas.49

One just needs to read the titles of Senghor’s three major books on race and culture (Liberté 1, Negritude and Humanism, Liberté 2, Negritude and the Civilization of the Universal, and Liberté 5, The Dialogue of Cultures) to be convinced, as he argues throughout, that his definition of Negritude, be it sometimes essentialist, is fundamentally a philosophy of dialogue between cultures and a representation of races as constantly becoming and mixing with each other. This conception of race is materialized by one of his most famous poems, Femme Noire.50

First published in 1944 in L’Étudiant Noir and republished a year later in “Chants d’Ombre,” “Femme Noire,”51 is a celebration of Métissage and one of the most relevant examples of Senghor’s philosophy. In “Femme Noire,” the Negritude scholar shows that the values of the African continent are perceptible primarily in their relations with other cultures. Yet, the history of the commentary on this poem has too frequently focused on the celebration of the beauty of the African woman, while undermining, if not ignoring, the subtle eulogy of Métissage that he develops in this polysemic praise of Africa, the Black women, and mixture.

In this famous poem, Senghor uses the concept of Mother Africa, a common trope in African literature, to present the African woman as the metaphor of the African continent. This superposition of the African woman and the African continent makes Said Ben Slimane declare that in Senghor’s “Femme Noire,” it is “as if the evocation of the woman and that of Africa are one. A fusion of the two elements occurs, which causes them to embrace each other, to get into a sensual union of love.”52 “Femme Noire” constitutes, in effect, a narration of the genesis of Senghor’s relation with Africa and an account on the development of his conception of Negritude and Métissage.

For Senghor, as he shows in this poem, Negritude, the sum total of African cultural values, blossoms only when it is in direct contact with other cultures. “Femme Noire,” a pre-figuration of Senghor’s theory of cultures as essentially mixed, starts with a temporal indication: “Femme Noire . . . I grew up in your shadow.” This temporal indication installs the reader/listener in the first years of Senghor’s childhood in Joal, under the “shadow” of the “black woman,” his mother, Africa. Yet, seemingly isolated from the rest of the world, the innocence of his happy childhood
is also the cause of his blindness, as Senghor adds, “the sweetness of your hands bandaged my eyes.” Before he discovers his Negritude in Europe, the young child’s sense of racial identity functions like a burgeoning nut that needs to be nurtured. However, the restraining love of the “Mother Land” prevents the fecund elements of the exterior from reaching the developing potentials of the seed.

Fortunately, Senghor finds his salvation when his first encounters with the West enable him to discover the real meanings of the sum total of his cultural values. Thus, he closes the first strophe of “Femme Noire” with a spatial indication showing the first manifestations of Negritude as a product of the poet’s meeting with Europe: “And here, he declares, in the heart of the summer and midi / I discover you, Promised Land.” For Senghor, France can function as the place where he discovers “the Promised Land,” the values of his Negritude. The exile from the “sweetness of the hands which bandaged his eyes” accelerates his process of self-discovery, of transformation, as the poet and the reader/listener leave the Sine to experience a revelation on the banks of the Seine.

From Babylon, Senghor, like Moses, can see the bright future of Zion. “I discover you, he says, Promised Land from the height of a burnt mount.” But, unlike the Israelites, or later, the disciples of rastafarianism, Senghor knows perfectly how to sing “King Alpha’s Song” in a land that is, in reality, not as strange as it seems to be. This exile is, for the Senegalese poet, even necessary. The West is the only place where he can see/has seen Africa, suddenly, in all its beauty. This discovery leads him to add, “And your beauty strikes my heart, like the lightning of an eagle.” In other words, for a culture to appreciate itself adequately, it has to interact with other cultures and be able to look at its own reality from a distance. Cultures, like individuals whose self-consciousness is frequently developed by the keen sharpening of eyes that exile seems to offer, need to be enriched by the fecundating contact with the other.

Moreover, Senghor imagines a perfect motherland, the new place that he discovers from the other side of the Atlantic, in a future that is never attained although it is always to be looked for. He inscribes the entire definition of the Promised Land, the different manifestations of Negritude, in a dynamic movement, as the closing verse attests: “I sing your passing beauty, fixing your form in eternity”—An eternity that promises the possibilities of dialogue. As this famous poem illustrates, Senghor’s entire oeuvre can be presented as a theory of a particular Negro identity that emerges from Negroes’ contact, and therefore their Métissage, with other racial groups.
Conclusion

When, in the colonial and early postcolonial periods Léopold Sédar Senghor theorized Métissage, his philosophy was not well received for ideological and epistemological reasons, despite its progressive particularities and its philosophical sophistication. Ideologically, in a period when the Negro’s humanity is denied, when, in countries such as the U.S.A., the Negro counts for three-fifths of a human, and when French colonizers strive to rid Africans of their supposed “bestiality” in order to transform them into black Frenchmen, the radical claim of a Negro essence, if not a Negro superiority, seems to be the only strategically sound political stand. In this political atmosphere, occupying, like Senghor, the place between the radical denial of Negroes’ humanity and the claim of its superior essence, seemingly betrays the Black Nationalist project to vindicate the Negro Race. The colonial world, as Franz Fanon argues, in The Wretched of the Earth, is a World divided in two.53 In such a world, there seems to be no in-between; either you are on one side or the other. It is precisely in light of this paradigm that Marcus Garvey, one of the most influential icons in the history of Black Nationalism, cooperates with the Ku Klux Klan and declares, in regard to W. E. B. Du Bois, he is “a little Dutch, a little French, a little Negro. Why, in fact, he is a monstrosity.”54 It is for the same reasons that the early Malcolm X theorizes the essentiality of the Negro race and calls Martin Luther King a “house Nigger” and an “Uncle Tom.” It is not surprising, thus, that Senghor, the theoretician of Métissage, is so frequently referred to as a black Frenchman even though his theory of Métissage was in no way similar to the whitening project celebrated by modern theoreticians of hybridity.

The second reason for the rejection of Senghor’s theory of Métissage is epistemological. While in the early twentieth century thinkers such as José Vasconcelos develop the theory of “la raza cosmica,”55 the French imperialist system attempts to assimilate Negroes into the Western human condition. For Vasconcelos, the different races, in the Mexican context for instance, tend to mix ever more, until they form a new superior human type. In this cosmic race, he assumes, Negroes and Indians will be uplifted by Western Christian ideals and, thereby, relieved from the impurity of their biological and cultural backgrounds. On the basis of the same logic, the French politics of assimilation made it clear that the burden of the Frenchman was, literally, to civilize, that is, to expunge Negroes of their particularities in order to assimilate them. The ultimate aim of this doctrine was to be able to declare, in the same vein as Louis XIV,
“the only difference between you and [us] is the difference between black and white.”

Or, as Senghor himself interprets Louis XIV’s affirmation: “after the education that we have provided to you at our court, you have become a Frenchman with a black skin.” It is these ideological and epistemological contexts that led to the traditional understanding of Métissage as a process destined to purge the Negro, and which, in turn, allowed critics to reject Senghor’s theory. Read in the context of this dichotomist colonial structure and through the lens of early theories of mixture such as Vasconcelos, Senghor’s understanding of Métissage appears, at best, as a call for the whitening of the Negro-African.

The Senegalese thinker, however, neither calls for a new mixed race to be assimilated into French culture, nor does he envision Métissage as a project to be realized at a definite point in history. His understanding of mixture is based on the conception that human beings have throughout history engaged in a natural tendency to join and inter-fecundate each other. As he repeats, along with the Reverend Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

A world of energy was still buried in them [humans]. It is, I believe, this still latent potential, within each natural human unit in Europe, Asia, and everywhere, that wants to come to life today; not at all, because they [humans] ultimately want to oppose and destroy each other, but because they want to join and fertilize each other. We need fully conscious human nations to make a whole world.

Senghor goes even further than Teilhard de Chardin. For the Senegalese thinker, these raw energies have been joining and fecundating each other since pre-history. It is, for him, the fundamental nature of human cultures to mix. That is exactly how they developed from prehistory to the present time. Moreover, his conception of assimilation opposes the colonial conception of the politics of assimilation as a will to assimilate divergent and diverging non-white bodies. The Negritude thinker conceives the assimilation of the Negro as a way of assimilating the West into Negro-African cultures rather than an attempt to assimilate the Negro into Western civilization. As he frequently stipulates, one needs “to assimilate, not to be assimilated.”

Senghor illustrates this philosophy of Métissage before the Society of Franco-Senegalese Friendship, on September 4, 1937, in a “lecture” entitled “Le problème culturel en A. O. F.” (The Cultural Problem in F. W. A., French West Africa). In this text, he presents a series of discussions between Demba Ndiaye, the young évolué, a representative of the Senegalese educated elite, and Silmang Faye, the Sereer peasant, a symbol
of traditional African cultures. Using these two supposedly opposed archetypes as an example, he enlivens the cross-“cultural” dialogue constitutive of his conception of Negritude as a form of Métissage by showing the cultural similitudes between his “uneducated” Sereer neighbor and the icons of French intelligentsia, by using French with a Wolof structure, and by comparing Kocé Barma, the father of Wolof rhetoricians, to Socrates. While the listeners, primarily colonial elites and African évolutés, were more likely to remind Senghor that he should speak as a French agrégé, the Senegalese thinker deceives the expectations of the audience, as he declares, in obviously ironic terms:

I would confess, should I deceive you, that the importance and the distinctiveness of my listeners remind me that it is as a peasant of the Sine that I intended to speak this evening.

Senghor’s simultaneous reference to Senegalese and Western cultures shows that he strays away from the essentialism of Western colonial elites and calls for the reinvention of imposed colonial cultures although he does not deny their influences on the definition and the formation of the Negro subject. To speak as a Sereer peasant is, for him, to speak in the language of the Negro rather than transform local languages into a pale copy of French. The language of his texts, like the discussions between the agrégé, the évoluté, and the peasant, enables him to set a discourse which, although it uses Western languages, can free itself from the colonial grip and perform its difference at the same time that it theorizes the otherness of the Negro.

To speak as a Sereer peasant, however, as opposed to African évolutés’ understanding of Senghor’s message, is not to return to the exclusive use of local languages, that is, to return to the native land. It is, through the use of French with a Sereer grammar, a means to illustrate the postcolonial Negro’s situation as a subject who, even if he or she is educated in the best Western institutions, cannot separate the lessons of the Sorbonne from the veillées nocturnes when poets such as Marone Ndiaye introduce young pupils to traditional African cultures.

Senghor’s discourse reaffirms the major assumption of Negritude that cultures are neither fixed in a definite past nor definable in a limited geographical sphere. For Senghor, Negroes have been in contact with the West since prehistory and this contact has participated in shaping their cultures and their relations to the world, that is, their Negritude. This conception of the Negro may seem paradoxical for scholars constrained within the Western conception of time, which assumes that being is the
contrary of becoming and that Negro cultures have started becoming corruped after their contact with the West. For Senghor, however, the present is inseparable from the past and Negroes are unable to escape Western influences although these influences have been, in some instances, imposed on them.

Beyond the racial theory of the first half of the twentieth century, one can argue that the father of Negritude gives us a method of conceiving our contemporary global world. While it is often assumed that globalization is a moment of mixture between the diverse cultures that compose the so called “global village,” one can argue, as members of the alter-globalization movement unrelentingly claim, that it functions as a commodification of the world through a Euro-Americanization of its constituents. Founded on the principles of Christianity and Democracy, the economic, political, and ethical underpinnings of our global world are based on an essentialist understanding of humanness. This essentialist paradigm assumes that all human beings want a democratic government based on Christian principles and economic wealth attainable only through the market. It also implies a universalist definition of the human, its basic nature, and its fundamental purpose. It is in the name of these principles that “uncivilized” discordant voices are boycotted, every year, by the Euro-American delegations (who, it is important to note, dominate the Security Council) during the UN annual assembly, supposedly a yearly moment of exchange between all members of the globe. It is also in the name of these same universalist principles that dissenting voices are routinely brutalized at Davos during the time when “our” common economic policy is adopted. It is in the name of these principles that the war in Iraq, based on President George W. Bush’s proposed destruction of the Axis of Evil, has been orchestrated and Moammar Khadafi’s regime has been brought down after France signed a contract with the rebel groups to exploit 35 percent of Libya’s oil. From this globalized model, a fundamentally modern phenomenon, we should learn what Léopold Sédar Senghor could have called a “universal diversity” based on a mixture of the sum total of human cultural values that would acknowledge and celebrate the particularity of each participant in the global enterprise. In this sense, Senghor’s philosophy announces what Glissant calls the “Tout Monde,” a world that we will all discover together, that would not be based on the dichotomy between the dominated and those who dominate, yet in which every culture would keep its “lieux,” while being intrinsically open to all other lieux: a truly global and diffracted village.
Since the 1940s the historiography of African studies has been obsessed with the death of Negritude. From Sartre’s first systematic critique of the movement to the theory of post-negritude, through the famous conference of Algiers, scholars of African studies such as Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa, Ahmed Sékou Touré, Franz Fanon, and Aliko Songolo have, in one way or another, repeated what Souleymane Diagne calls Sartre’s “deadly kiss”: the French philosopher’s prediction of the death of Negritude at the dawn of the postcolonial era. It was therefore not surprising that major scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Abiola Irele politely declined Denis Ekpo and Rasheed Araeen’s recent invitation to participate in a special issue on Léopold Sédar Senghor’s relevance in today’s scholarship because, they maintained, everything had already been said about Negritude. It was time to move forward. Yet, more than six decades after Sartre’s predictions, can we affirm, without a doubt, that Negritude is dead? Regardless of critics’ traditional dismissal of the movement, reading Senghor’s philosophy beyond the anti-colonial dialectic shows that it is in constant dialogue with major voices in Africana scholarship, namely, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy, and Edouard Glissant. In fact, one can even

CHAPTER 4

Negritude Is not Dead!

Of the African thinkers of this century, [Senghor] will probably have been the most honored and the most complimented, yet probably also the most disparaged and the most insulted, particularly by the present generation of African intellectuals.
claim that Negritude remains one of the most important intellectual movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as it continues early African descended scholars’ theories, such as those of W. E. B. Du Bois, while constantly questioning and expanding contemporary discourses such as Glissant’s *Antillanité*, and Gilroy’s Black Atlantic.³

Reading Du Bois’ philosophy, specifically his race theory, from a Senghorian perspective is a good way to illustrate that Senghor’s oeuvre is still relevant as it enables contemporary scholars to better understand one of the most important icons of Africana scholarship. A Senghorian reading of Du Bois’ philosophy shows, in effect, that the American thinker foreshadows twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ social constructivist conceptions of race, although, as a product of his time, he was unable to escape the very scientific definitions of race that he was attempting to question. Du Bois’ inability to go beyond the modern paradigm is due to the fact that he was tangled up in the Hegelian *telos*. Senghor, however, a self-described advocate of Du Bois’ philosophy, continues the latter’s logic while offering him a way out of the Hegelian *telos*. He proposes a different conception of time that challenges the teleological understanding of the history of races and allows one to read Du Bois’ theory beyond the ontological mistake that postulates the necessity to separate the past from the present and therefore pre-colonial identity from postcolonial hybridity, that is, in Du Bois’ particular case, Negroeness and American-ness. The paradigmatic shift that Senghor proposes makes possible a representation of race that does not necessarily oppose particular ethnic groups’ characteristics to the diversity of humanity. Such a reading of Negritude not only shows that Senghor’s philosophy is rooted within the black intellectual tradition as it continues the theory of the father of pan-African thought, it also shows that Du Bois is the prophet of the social constructivist paradigm in race theory.

The relevance of Senghor’s philosophy is not attested only by the ways in which his texts clarify early African descended scholars’ representations of race. Placing his oeuvre beyond the anti-colonial paradigm reveals also that his postcolonial mode of thinking of race and Negroeness inscribes the philosophy of Negritude in contemporary conversations on continental and Diasporic black identities. Reading Glissant’s *Antillanité* and Gilroy’s Black Atlantic in light of Senghor’s philosophy, for instance, confirms that Negritude needs to be taken into account by contemporary Africanist theoreticians.

Senghor’s perspective allows one to grasp the importance of Glissant’s and Gilroy’s discourses, to decipher their epistemological limits, and to
go beyond them. The Antillean and Black Atlantic thinkers, two of the major contemporary scholars in Africana studies, conceive of contemporary African and African-descended cultures as either mixed in the Atlantic or fixed in Africa. They develop, from this perspective, a theory of a new essentialist hybrid culture rooted in the Middle Passage. Reading these authors in light of Senghor’s philosophy shows, however, that they are still locked within the modern paradigm, which postulates that one is either mixed or essentially African. It is this paradigm that allows Gilroy and Glissant to conceive and argue that black cultures’ becoming Caribbean, Afro-American, or Afro-European implies a denial of their Africanness. As opposed to the theoreticians of Antillanité and the Black Atlantic, however, Senghor questions the modern paradigm. He neither limits contemporary African-descended people to a product of the Middle Passage, nor does he attach Africanness to pure rootedness. Rather, the Senegalese scholar acknowledges the importance of the Middle Passage, that is, the modernity and diversity of contemporary African and Diasporic black cultures, while claiming, nonetheless, that they remain fundamentally African. In this sense, his proposed definition of postcolonial blackness expands contemporary theories in Africana studies and shows that he is still an important voice in contemporary Africana studies and should be read accordingly.

From Du Bois’ “Double Consciousness” to the Theory of Negritude and Back

At a pre-conference on black civilization and culture, organized in Dakar in 1974, Senghor defines the political and philosophical conditions that led to the birth of Negritude in these terms:

From a situation of alienation, and therefore, of depersonalization, that leads to mimicry, Blacks have been searching for their identity: for their values of civilization, as we say nowadays. They wanted to claim their own beings, and from consumers become producers of culture, as they were in their classical civilizations. However, he adds, we lacked the “profound vision,” the philosophical explanations.4

The epistemic tools the young black students needed to defend the philosophical understanding of the world that they had already experienced in Africa and that they were unable to illustrate will be provided to them by
the works of their African-American counterparts. The American intellectualists and activists, many of whom were members of the New Negro Movement, had been waging a similar war in the “New World.” As Senghor claims:

They [American Negroes] taught us [ . . . ] to organize socially if not politically, and above all to produce art . . . they established the foundations of the movement by moving ahead. They showed the possibility of the renaissance of African civilization and the possibility to make people respect it by, first, creating art. Influence, I declare, of American Negroes on African Negroes. (my emphasis)

The influence of the New Negro movement was such that Senghor used, until 1939 and even sometimes beyond, the term Néo-Nègre (Neo-Negro) or Nègre-Nouveau (New-Negro) to refer to the Negritude movement. Of all these influences, however, W. E. B. Du Bois, the man he refers to as “the outstanding figure in Negro intellectual life in the USA during this period,” was the most important. Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness had all the means to prepare and inspire Negritude, and so it did. Like the first proponents of Negritude, Du Bois’ intellectual production sprang, among other sources, from the necessity to defend and illustrate Negro cultural values denied by nineteenth-century “scientific racism”—which had organized the world’s doxa through the de-humanization of the Negro. He reclaimed the particularity of the social, cultural, and political condition of the Negro, theorized the idea of a black worldview, and, finally, called for racial reconciliation. Thus, Senghor states, in Liberté 3:

One has to always start with W. E. B. Du Bois, who was really “the father of the Negritude movement,” as shows Kesteloot, because he was the first scholar to conceptualize it in its specificity, its particular aspects, and its final goal, its objectives and its means.

If, however, I insist on Du Bois’ influence on Negritude it is not, as opposed to Senghor’s advice, because I want to use his work as a point of entry to the philosophy of Negritude. Rather, I intend to show how the Philosophy of Negritude continues, corrects, and expands the American scholar’s oeuvre.

Du Bois’ race theory was innovative and prepared the ground for the theory of Negritude. However, the crux of the American scholar’s phi-
losophy, his concept of race, was weakened by his own ambiguity. A man of his time, Du Bois questioned the scientific representations of race even though, he follows the paradigm that led to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ scientific conceptions of race, that is, the idea of pure original racial stocks. While this attitude has been presented by scholars such as Anthony Appiah as a contradiction inherent to Du Bois’ philosophy, reading the latter along with Senghor will show that Du Bois was a product of his time and could not therefore escape the epistemic limits of his era. He had nonetheless prepared the ground for a social constructivist understanding of race that was later developed by thinkers such as the father of Negritude.

It is a truism to state that Du Bois’ oeuvre is one of the most important works in Africana studies. This oeuvre, the sum total of which can be presented as a long reflection on the meaning and manifestation of race, is most known through his postulation that the Negro is a subject “born with a veil.” This veil, for Du Bois, placed before the Negro’s gaze by a white supremacist intelligentsia solely sympathetic to the values of whiteness, leads them to define the world and the human from an epistemic paradigm that does not respect or acknowledge particular manifestations of humanities such as theirs.

It is, Du Bois states, a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.10

From this postulation, Du Bois argues for the necessity to develop a theory that unveils the hidden history of glory that belongs to Africa and African descended people in order to reverse the Negro’s lack of self-pride and delegitimize his or her subaltern condition. This revolutionary epistemic stand is, for him, the condition for the “re-humanization” of the Negro as it enables the latter to see his soul rise “before him and [see] in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He [will then] have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself and not another.”11

Du Bois’ understanding of the place of Negroes in American society is sustained by his radical and groundbreaking race theory. In early works, such as the “Conservation of Races,”12 he follows the modern scientific paradigm and presents races as “a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions,
and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.”\textsuperscript{13} This understanding of race, characteristic of his early works, is, however, quickly replaced by a less essentialist understanding of race. In fact, a careful reading of both Souls and his later works shows that he goes beyond his former biological perspective to propose a more flexible theory that announces Senghor’s representation of Negroeness. In effect, Du Bois understood, as early as 1903, that:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife [. . . ] he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America. . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism [. . . ]. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1915, he questions more systematically the scientific existence of races. He writes, in a short book entitled The Negro:

It is generally acknowledged today that no scientific definition of race is possible. There are between men and groups of men, differences, even striking differences, but they all fade into each other so insensibly that we can only indicate the main divisions of men in broad outlines [. . . ] The question of the number of human races has lost its \textit{raison d'être}.\textsuperscript{15}

He then proceeds to argue that most individual members of particular racial entities, nine-tenths of the black race, for instance, is mixed and there is nothing as vague as the concept of white or yellow man.\textsuperscript{16} Du Bois goes even further as he argues that even physical particularities such as color and hair are nothing but effects of history. “Today,” he declares, “we realize that there are no hard and fast racial types among men. Race is a dynamic and not a static conception and the typical races are continually changing and developing, amalgamating and differentiating.”\textsuperscript{17} He concludes, in the same text, that one cannot call for the particularity of the Negro without taking in consideration their constant mixture with Asians, Semites, and the Greeks.\textsuperscript{18}

In this vein, Du Bois’ theory can be said to question the very possibility of double consciousness, that is, the possibility for the Negro subject to face a choice between his or her cultural particularities and his or her Americanness. For Du Bois, the Negro’s confusion, such as it is, arises from the refusal of her fellow citizens to extend to her the courtesy of
keeping her cultural particularities within the context of a single indivisible American citizenship. In other words, the author of the *Souls of Black Folks* invites us to beware of the essentialist modern paradigm, which constantly truncates the issue by postulating racial purity.

Du Bois’ critique of the concept of “double consciousness” and his conception of race are, however, constantly misread and presented as an acknowledgement of the Negro’s actual condition of loss between two selves. This interpretation of Du Bois’ critique, exacerbated by Anthony Appiah’s famous article, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” presents the American scholar as incapable of going beyond the scientific definition of Race. “For the purpose that concerns him most,” Appiah argues, “Du Bois was thrown back on scientific definitions of race, which he officially rejected.” However, despite Appiah’s obviously anachronistic critique (his argument is based on a social constructivist paradigm that was not yet available to Du Bois at that time), it is undeniable that the African American scholar is quite ambiguous. Paradoxically, his critique of the modern essentialization of races is underscored by the implicit postulation of the existence of original racial stocks. Although it is true that the theories of race he develops in *The Souls* and later in *Black Reconstruction* and *The Dusk of Dawn*, present races as a manifestation of class, he also constantly uses a dialectical opposition of whiteness to blackness. This is precisely why, despite their differences, the understandings of race that he develops in *The Conservation of Races* and in *The Souls* follow the same paradigm. In both instances, he asks the same questions: “What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?” While, in *Conservation*, he answers that even if he is American by birth and citizenship, his Americanism does not go further than that, and while in *Souls* he claims the possibility of being both, as long as the very meaning of Americanness is re-defined, Du Bois contends, in both instances, that Negro-American identity is materialized by a certain “two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Moreover, even when he conceives of contemporary races as mixed, Du Bois insists that this racial mixture is the consequence of limited historical events. His claim, for example, that it is only ninety percent of Negroes that have been mixed, shows that he conceives of the existence of a moment of purity that precedes the beginning of racial mixture.

This epistemic stand is a consequence of the fact that Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness is as, Shamoon Zamir has outlined, based on the
Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.*\(^{23}\) Beyond the particularity of the Hegelian dialectic and the possibility of the synthesis it promises, this dialectic is based on the opposition of two fundamentally different “subjects.” In Du Bois’ case, these antithetical positions are occupied by blacks and whites. Thus, even when he argues for the limits of the veil, Du Bois calls nonetheless for the possibility of merging the Negro’s double self into a better and truer self. He thereby acknowledges, implicitly, the possibility of having fundamentally different selves as postulated by nineteenth-century scientific racist theorists such as Gobineau and Bluemenbach.

For all the reasons mentioned above, one can argue that Du Bois’ radical critique of the essentialist understanding of race legitimized by modern Western modes of production of knowledge is limited by his implicit reiteration of the traditional imperialist and anti-imperialist topos that either presupposes the irreconcilability of Negro and Western cultures or imagines Métissage as a state to be reached at a certain historical point of the Hegelian telos. Such an understanding of the limits of the concept of double consciousness is essentially ambiguous. It is ambiguous because it is a critique of essentialism based on an understanding of races as originally pure. It is precisely the ambiguity suggested by this dichotomous and potentially essentialist understanding of race, even when Du Bois proposes a critique of racial essentialism and announces a racial constructivist paradigm, that has led Anthony Appiah to see, in the author of the *Souls’* theory, “an uncompleted argument.”\(^{24}\)

Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy can, however, be read as a means to complete Du Bois’ radical critique of race. In the same vein as Du Bois, the struggle of Negritude scholars was twofold. They had to question the essentialist paradigm that threatened their cultural particularities and to reverse the traditional pathologizing representations of blackness. That is precisely why Senghor finds in Du Bois’ philosophy the very roots of Negritude as the American scholar develops a similar theory of blackness based on the refutation of the actual modes of legitimating Negroes’ subjugation: Eurocentric modes of production of knowledge and their essentialist understandings of race. While Du Bois’ theory is problematized by his repetition of the Hegelian telos, which made him conceive an original moment of racial purity, Senghor offers a concept of time that allows one to go beyond the Hegelian telos and makes possible an understanding of mixture as fundamental to the very being of races. Reading Senghor’s oeuvre as a continuation of Du Bois’ argument shows that even if the epistemic conditions in which Du Bois developed his theory did not allow for a less rigid conception of time, he had the intuition for a conception
of races as mixed and announced, thereby, the contemporary social constructivist paradigm. Thinking of Du Bois’ theory along with Senghor expands the epistemic limits of the African American scholar’s theory of racial particularity and shows that he announces contemporary postcolonial theories of otherness.

While the Hegelian *telos* presupposes an original purity and an ultimate moment of mixture towards which all processes strive, Senghor’s conception of time as a perpetual movement of becoming prepares for the understanding of races as originally mixed. Senghor does not, thus, fall in the trap of the dialectics of twoness. Rather, he uses the American scholar as a stepping stone to claim that the very basis of nineteenth-century race theories, that is, the essentialization of races, is flawed. He argues, thus, that the seemingly necessary choice between blackness and Americanness, in du Bois’ case, and African-ness and mixture, in Francophone scholarship, should be replaced by a more inclusive paradigm: assimilation and association. This logic, for Senghor, is based on the understanding that *Métissage* does not result in a feeling of “doubleness” ultimately leading to a psychological conflict because it is the essence of “living-cultures” to transform each other constantly and permanently. The mythical pre-colonial era of separate destinies, he advances, has not just run its course; it has never existed. The colonial experience of African cultures cannot, as a matter of fact, be considered an extra-ordinary moment of acculturation, the solution of which would be a return to an imagined pristine past. It is constitutive of the ongoing transformation of African cultures. Thus, rather than wage a war between his two selves, Senghor invites us to repeat Samba Diallo’s assertion:

I am not a distinct country of the Diallobe facing a distinct Occident, and appreciating with a cool head what I must take from it and what I must leave with it by way of counterbalance. I have become the two.25

Unlike Samba Diallo, however, Senghor conceives that there is nothing strange about being mixed because cultures and races are fundamentally nomadic, constantly in contact with other cultures and other modes of defining the world, and permanently changing. Senghor’s theory announces a conception of the human as essentially hybrid. Yet, hybridity is not just a synonym of in-between-ness; it entails, for him, a perpetual becoming.

It is important to note that it is the conception of time as movement and its most logical consequence, the challenge of the concept of origin that make Senghor’s philosophy possible and logical. This paradigm pro-
poses a way out of the Hegelian dialectic, which limits any possibility to go beyond the concept of an original manifestation of races. It is for this reason that reading Du Bois’ philosophy from a Senghorian perspective completes the former’s argument. Developed in the same socio-political situation as Negritude, Du Bois’ representation of the Negro through the metaphor of the veil and the concept of double consciousness prefigured the Senegalese scholar’s defense and illustration of Negro cultural values and his race theory. Like Du Bois’ challenge of the Eurocentric paradigm, Senghor questions the epistemological foundation of colonization and the traditional tendency to view the world and the Negro self through the colonial veil. Yet, while for Du Bois the American Negro is condemned to face the aporetic choice between his two selves precisely because of the refusal of her fellow citizens to extend to her the courtesy of leaving her free to be whatever she elects to be within the context of a single indivisible American citizenship, Senghor presents “plurality,” or rather, Métissage, as the fundamental essence of being. For the Du Boisian theoretician of Negritude, the postulation of a Negro self fundamentally separated from an American self is based on an ontological mistake: the imagined possibility of separating the past from the present and therefore precolonial identity from postcolonial hybridity. He proposes, accordingly, a theory of a mixed postcolonial Negro identity. This postcolonial perspective has the potential to inscribe Du Bois’ philosophy in contemporary discourses on continental and Diasporic black identities by offering the latter the means to go beyond the Hegelian telos. Another reason to claim that despite the celebration of its death by the second generation of critics, Negritude is still a major intellectual movement in Africana Studies as it helps understand earlier representations of Negroeness such as Du Bois’. It also can be read along with contemporary discourses such as Gilory’s Black Atlantic and Glissant’s Antillanité as it questions, critiques, and expands their epistemic limits.

Senghor and Contemporary Africana Scholarship

It is a truism to state that Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy are two of the most important postcolonial scholars. While the former pioneers Antillanité and inspires Créolité, the two major contemporary intellectual movements in the Francophone Caribbean world, Gilroy has single-handedly established Black Atlantic studies, an equally important intellectual movement in Africana Studies in the U.S. and the U.K. Both
these scholars attempt to go beyond the Eurocentric modes of ordering the world in order to re-define, in a re-centered, or a de-centered, perspective, the particular identities of postcolonial black subjects, while avoiding the traditional pan-African essentialist understanding of blackness that had governed Africana studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In place of essentialist conceptions of blackness that dominated the discipline of Africana studies, Glissant and Gilroy theorize postcolonial black identities, which, they claim, originate from the mixture of African, American, and European cultures. This mixture, stimulated by the Middle Passage, develops through the slaves’ and ex-slaves’ experiences in the Americas and in Europe.

Given the centrality and the timeliness of these scholars’ works in contemporary Africana studies, showing that they are consciously, or not, in constant dialogue with the theory of Negritude is a good reason to argue the continuing relevance of the latter’s philosophy. To show how much Senghor’s philosophy engages Glissant’s and Gilroy’s, one needs to go no further than the theory of Métissage. Based on this theory, Senghor acknowledges the importance of the Middle Passage and the subsequent European influences on the formation of contemporary African cultures fifty years before Gilroy and Glissant. At the same time, however, the father of Negritude maintains the importance of African “roots” and argues that postcolonial African cultures are, effectively, modern manifestations of Africanness. While Glissant’s and Gilroy’s theories are fundamentally dichotomist, as the theoreticians of Antillanité and the Black Atlantic assume that one is either mixed or African, Senghor’s perspective shows their epistemic limits by refusing to limit “postcolonial blackness” to an effect of the Middle Passage. For the Senegalese scholar, even though contemporary African descended cultures are mixed products of the Middle Passage and Western influences, they remain fundamentally African. In this sense, his philosophy leads contemporary readers to acknowledge the importance of theories of Antillanité and the Black Atlantic while noting their potential limits. It is therefore arguable that to pronounce the death Negritude, a philosophy that challenges these major postcolonial scholarship on blackness, is grossly premature.

Glissant and Gilroy’s theories of Antillanité and the Black Atlantic, respectively, overlap on many levels. It is important, however, to look at them individually to better understand their unique relationship to Negritude. The major difference between the two postcolonial theories may be their Francophone and Anglophone influences. Until the 1960s, Franco-
phone Caribbean scholarship had followed two main developments. On the one hand, as a result of the politics of assimilation, Caribbean scholars emulated and mimicked French ideals and tried, as much as possible, to obliterate the African aspects of their cultures. Early Antillean intellectuals such as Léon Laleau and Ida Faubert, for example, glorified Frenchness and attempted to reach the ideals of assimilation. On the other hand, at least seemingly, Negritude thinkers, along the same line as *Indigenist* scholars, attempted to dig up the old Amadou deposited by Africa in the depths of the Caribbean self. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, Edouard Glissant announced a new dawn in the historiography of Francophone Caribbean thought as he declared: “neither French, nor African, or Asian, we proclaim ourselves to be Antillean.” He adds:

> Today, the French Caribbean individual does not deny the African part of himself; he does not have, in reaction, to go to the extreme of celebrating it exclusively. He must recognize it. He understands that from all this history (even if we lived it like a nonhistory) another reality has come about. He is no longer forced to reject strategically the European elements in his composition, although they continue to be a source of alienation, since he knows that he cannot choose between them. He can see that alienation first and foremost resides in the impossibility of choice, in the arbitrary imposition of values, and, perhaps, in the concept of value itself. He can conceive that synthesis is not a process of bastardization as he used to be told, but a productive activity through which each element is enriched. He has become Caribbean.

And how does he determine the particularity of Antillanité? Glissant presents the Antillean culture as a product of the Middle Passage. He locates it in:

> [The submarine roots of] all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence. And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence of the sublime, has come to light.

This understanding of the Antillean identity allows Glissant to develop an implicit critique of both Negritude and traditional Western historiography. For Glissant, the traditional representation of culture, which Negritude thinkers follow, is based on a linear understanding of time, history,
territory, and being. This linear and teleological conception of time and space leads to a totalizing vision of history, which, in turn, gives to definite groups the illusion of sharing a unitary subconscious that binds together their nature and their culture. Yet, in the Antilles, Glissant claims, history is not the history of a people that finds its consciousness in a totalizing teleology. It is the histories of all the ruptures that have affected Caribbean communities since the Middle Passage. This history, made of ruptures and cultural displacements, is, for the Caribbean scholar, fundamentally diverse.

Glissant goes even further as he argues that the brutality of the Middle Passage, the point of departure of Antillean history, makes the transborded subject question all that which, in the ancient order, was permanent, that is, ritual, the supposed fifth essence of his or her being. Because of their new condition, in the new world, transborded people question any idea of fixed universalisms. Antillanité is therefore not determined by an original culture or history that evolves into the contemporary present; it is the product of relations that Antillean cultures have with the different ruptures, continuities, and discontinuities that constitute its fragmented history. For all these reasons, Glissant claims, the return to the native land is an unachievable figment of imagination and the French politics of assimilation is an impossible utopia. Exit Negritude, Africa, and any idea of a return to the source. Enter the Atlantic subject as the thread that weaves together the Caribbean historical framework. He says:

What makes this difference between a people that survives elsewhere, that maintains its original nature, and a population that is transformed elsewhere into another people (without, however, succumbing to the reductive pressures of the Other) and that thus enters the constantly shifting and variable process of creolization (of relationship, of relativity), is that the latter has not brought with it, not collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted.29

For Glissant, despite the fact that Negritude thinkers have theorized the necessity to go back to some African roots, it is no coincidence that the idea of the return to the native land has been better adopted in Senegal than in Martinique. Yet, he insists, generalizations perpetrated by Negritude scholars need to be considered as a strategic essentialism in that they led, through a detour to Africa, to the original point of “entanglement (the Atlantic), from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where
we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.” We are back to Sartre’s death sentence. Negritude has run its course, Glissant implies, even if, as the theoreticians of Créolité agree, “It was Césaire’s Negritude that opened to us the path for the actuality of a Caribbean-ness which from then on could be postulated, and which itself is leading to another yet unlabeled degree of authenticity. Césairian Negritude is a baptism, the primal act of our restored dignity. We are forever Césaire’s sons.” The new point of “origin,” the fluid point of irradiation of a dynamic but real Antillean culture is, nevertheless, from that point forward, the Middle Passage.

In place of Negritude, which he presents as an enterprise of return to an original African land, Glissant proposes, thus, Antillanité, the praise of an Antillean culture that does not attempt to recover the “lost” African roots, or assimilate into French culture. Glissant’s Antilles is determined by its relations with its various brutal discontinuities. The point of relation of all Antillean cultures is the submarine unity of all their transversal histories. In other words, for Glissant, in the beginning there was the Atlantic. And the Atlantic was the sum of all derived identities, experiences, and brutal displacements that gave birth to the Antillean.

Along the same line as Glissant, Paul Gilroy attempts to define people of African descent, who have been transborded to European and American shores, beyond the traditional racial and cultural paradigm that had dominated pan-African discourses in the Anglophone world. He starts from the postulation that the totalizing discourses of modernity, and their effects, the postmodern paradigm, along with contemporary post-colonial representations of blackness such as Afrocentricity, have locked the Black Atlantic subject in “antagonistic relationships marked out by the symbolism of colors which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic—black and white.” From cultural nationalist perspectives, he argues, these discourses present seemingly essential ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories, experiences, and intellectual traditions of blacks and whites.

As opposed to this essentialist paradigm, Gilroy proposes to analyze “the stereophonic, bilingual or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering, that [he has] heuristically called the Black Atlantic world.” This perspective enables him to develop, beyond the lure of “ethnic insiderism,” which leads to “an absolute sense of ethnic difference,” a theory of the primacy of a “syncretic pattern” particular to an ethnic identity developed by Black Britons,
African Americans, and Caribbeans. Using the metaphor of a ship, Gilroy proposes to “focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for a redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs,” as a point of formation of what can be called a Black Atlantic identity.

What about Africa? Using Martin Delany’s biography and his novel *Blake* as an example, Gilroy argues that despite Delany’s racial essentialist melancholia, his experience and *Blake’s* plot illustrates the impossibility of going back to “some African essence” that would cure the discontinuities constitutive of the new Black Atlantic culture. “Delany’s African tour, Gilroy writes, confirmed the dissimilarities between African-American ideologues and the Africans with whom they treated. Thus, it is not surprising that though at the end of his account of his adventures in Africa Delany promised to return to Africa with his family, he never did so.” As the British scholar postulates, there is no way of going back in time, let alone to an African past. Rather than the search for lost roots, he proposes, along with Glissant, a rhizomatic relation to the past, which enables the Black Atlantic subject to claim the diverse histories of which he or she is the product. While Glissant calls for “a gaping and irreversible rupture (with the original land of Africa),” Gilroy scolds Modern black intellectual traditions for being more “interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.”

Gilroy and Glissant present the Antillean and the Black Atlantic subject as fundamentally mixed, the product of new cultures emerging from the continuing mixtures taking root in the Atlantic. As opposed to the traditional pan-African perspective, they minimize the importance of Africa and African cultural values in the formation of the Black Atlantic and situate the latter’s main source in the Western enlightenment project. Gilroy goes even so far as to define the traditional pan-African representation of Africa as the root of postcolonial black Diasporic identities as nothing but reactions to modern Western philosophy and one of its avatars, slavery. The Black Atlantic, he argues, is fundamentally different from Africa since:

The intellectual and cultural achievements of the Black Atlantic population exist partly and inside and not always against the grand narrative of enlightenment and its operational principles. *Their stems have grown*
strong, supported by a lattice of western politics and letters. Though African linguistic tropes and political and philosophical themes are still visible for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World locations to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning.⁴⁰

For Gilroy, the Black Atlantic is not just a part of modern Western intellectual production and political organization. Western modernity functions as its main foundation. As he argues, all the seemingly African aspects of new “black identities” have been transformed in such a way that they have become fundamentally different. According to the British scholar, the “African” ethea of Black Atlantic identities have, during the Middle Passage, been purged of all their African characteristics. He goes even as far as to present all those who try to decipher the African aspects of Black Atlantic identities as essentialist theoreticians in quest of purified essences and simple origins.

Despite Gilroy’s theories of hybridity and movement through a metaphor of the ship as representative of postcolonial black identities in the new world, however, and notwithstanding their explicit critique of the idea of the return to the native land, one can infer, from their Black Atlantic perspective, a fundamental longing for a common root. For Gilroy, the Atlantic, precisely the Middle Passage, functions “as one single complex unit of analysis in discussions of the modern world and [can be] use[d] to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.”⁴¹ For Glissant, “the French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.”⁴² Their seemingly transnational and fluid understanding of culture, Caribbeanness, or the Black Atlantic, is based on the postulations of an essentialist understanding of a common origin rooted in the Atlantic, the original point, the common past that one has to go to in order to rethink Caribbean and Black Atlantic presents.

Gilroy and Glissant’s conception of the Middle Passage as the point of origin of Diasporic African cultures, implies an understanding of Africans as lacking any forms of agency. This perspective presupposes that repressive elements such as slave masters and the modern modes of definition of the world have succeeded in stripping African descended peoples of all their original cultural and political particularities. As critics such as Adélékè Adéèkò and Joan Doyan show, the problem with Gilroy’s perspective, which can also be adapted to the theories of Antillanité, is precisely his representation of Africans as passive participants to whom dance and
music have been “offered as a substitute to the formal political freedom they were denied by the plantation system.” As Doyan shows, “Gilroy’s world of double speak is . . . ultimately categorizable in terms of those who know how to theorize and those who do not; those who seek solidarity in practical struggles along ethnic lines and those who play “the games.” From the postulation that African slaves had no say in their own destinies, “Gilroy creates a theory of dispersion that totally discounts the influence of origin.” As Adéèkò says, with a pinch of irony, Gilroy “asks theorists of black identities not to trace the functionality of black aesthetic production in the New World to similar practices in Africa. That a black slave would kill her children rather than let them return to slavery has, as it were, no bearing with the Yoruba adage that says “iku yá Jessing” (death is preferable to indignity).” Obviously, Adéèkò implies, such a gesture is rooted in African traditions.

Léopold Sédar Senghor’s theory of Negritude gives contemporary readers the means to continue Adéèkò’s and Doyan’s critiques, while acknowledging the validity of Gilroy and Glissant’s theories. Like Gilroy and Glissant, Senghor opens the limits in which black cultural particularities can be imagined by presenting modern black cultures as fundamentally mixed. In the same vein as the theoreticians of Créolité, namely, Jean Bernabé, Raphael Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau, for whom “there are Caribbean Creoleness, a Guyanese Creoleness, an African Creoleness, an Asian Creoleness, and a Polynesian Creoleness, which, despite their differences, emerge from the Matrix of the same historical maelstrom,” Senghor thinks that there are African Negroes, American Negroes, European Negroes, and Caribbean Negroes, who, despite their differences, spring from the same cultural, historical, and socio-political maelstrom. He says, prefiguring the theoreticians of the Black Atlantic and Antillanité, “Colonization is a fact. It is from this point that the question [of postcolonial black identities] needs to be asked.” He had already stated, as soon as his first public speech, half a century before Gilroy and Glissant’s major philosophical productions: “our world is not West African anymore, it is also French, it is international.” The acknowledgment of the fundamental mixture of African descendants does not, however, keep Senghor from reclaiming the importance of traditional African cultures in their modern developments. Thus, along the same lines as Adéèkò and Doyan, his Afri-centered reading of African-descended peoples’ history gives him the possibility to reclaim black subjects’ agency despite the modern paradigm’s constant attempt to silence them. He shows, in fact, that despite the traditional representation of
slaves as passive commodities, they have, in many ways, actively participated in the formation of African cultural modernities. He writes:

[Negro cultures constitute] A culture that was born from the reciprocal action of race, tradition, and milieu; this culture, taken to America, has remained intact in its style, or in its fundamental elements. ⁵⁰

Despite Senghor’s acknowledgment of the importance of the new developments in African-descended cultures, the theory of Negritude is based on the postulation of the shared existence of a Negro African culture. As shown, for Senghor, it is precisely because of this common cultural foundation that African-descended people have developed specific relations to the world and particular discursive practices that differentiate them from other major cultures.

Senghor proposes, consequently, a theory of blackness that goes beyond Gilroy’s and Glissant’s philosophies as he concedes the importance of modern developments in African descendants’ experiences while refusing to discount their African particularities. For the Negritude scholar, people of African descent have consciously and unconsciously kept their cultural, religious, and epistemological particularities even though they have been changed by their diverse historical experiences. This conception of postcolonial blackness is made possible by his understanding that the idea of mixture does not imply a new project to invent a new homogeneous mixed race. He argues, “in order to be métis, we have to ‘be’ separately. That is why we frequently say that each one of us has to be mixed in his or her way.” ⁵¹ In other words, while, in the Caribbean context, Métissage, as a means of nation building, calls for a definite hybrid race that detaches itself from the manifestations of African cultures that preceed the Middle Passage, Senghor proposes the realization of the “symbiosis” of cultures, which entails the survival of “pre-colonial” African cultures. That is why he says, in relation to Western influences on Africa: “You [the West] have imposed on us your civilization, let us take the most fecund parts of it and accept that we return the rest.” ⁵² To recall a point I made in the preceding chapter, Métissage is, for the Senegalese scholar, the promise of a forum of dialogue, where all races participate in shaping one another and which threatens the Westernization of other parts of the world characteristic of movements such as the contemporary Americanization of the world often referred to as globalization. Métissage is a permanent movement that precedes the Middle Passage and is inseparable from the existence of cultures.
Senghor’s theory can, thus, be read as a critique of the essentialization of races that supports the invention of a new fixed Caribbean and Black Atlantic root. For Senghor, Western influences “add to” the existing African cultures; they change former African cultures, which become fundamentally new but distinctly African. This understanding of post-colonial African identities is a denial of homogeneity and a call for difference. Unlike theories of hybridity such as Glissant’s and Gilroy’s, Senghor’s philosophy of Métissage does not fall into the theorization of another sort of homogeneity. There is always, in Senghor’s text, a tension between the heterogeneous subject and the Western homogeneous definition of culture, civilization, and race. Senghor’s Métissage does not celebrate a homogenizing sense of the hybrid. It is not similar to the theory of mixture of many into one, which can be deciphered from Glissant’s and Gilroy’s philosophies. Rather, it functions as a movement of exchange between diverse cultures, even though, in the same vein as Molefi Asante and the Afrocentric School, he claims that these cultures keep their fundamentally African foundations.

Reading the theories of Antillanité and the Black Atlantic in light of Senghor’s philosophy illustrates, thus, that while Glissant’s and Gilroy’s theories are commendable for reclaiming the importance of the Middle Passage and post-slavery experiences in the development of modern African cultures, they are weakened by their underestimation of the resilience of transborded African cultures. Senghor’s philosophy shows the very problem of these innovative, yet flawed, reflections on African cultures: they are unable to depart from the modern paradigm. Postulating that one is either mixed, and therefore not African, or fundamentally African, and consequently not mixed, Gilroy and Glissant propose new essentialist understandings of blackness under the veil of hybridity. Thinking about races and Africanness from a Senghorian perspective shows, however, that the idea of mixture does not imply a new project to invent, as stated, a mixed race or to deny the survival of African cultures in our contemporary world. For all the reasons cited above, one can argue that Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy is as complex, if not even more complex than, some of the major race theories of our time. Despite the fact that he published his first theories of Negritude half a century before Glissant’s and Gilroy’s major philosophical productions, and notwithstanding the predictions of Negritude’s death at the dawn of the postcolonial era, no serious discourse on identity in Africana studies should ignore it.

I do not mean, however, that Senghor’s theory does not have any flaws. Like any discourse, it has significant shortcomings that need to
be addressed. His philosophy fails, for example, to take into consider-
ation the importance of class and social position in the representation of Africa and Africanness. His silence on the role, function, and manifesta-
tion of gender in the representation of Africa are of concern to any seri-
ous scholar. And, after reading Senghor, one is left with the impression that Negroeness has the same meaning whether you are a graduate of the most prestigious French schools, a peasant struggling to make ends meet, an unemployed single mother from Harlem, or the president of Senegal. This patriarchal and arguably bourgeois paradigm alters the quality of his work and has led to the presentation of his philosophy as a mystifica-
tion. Despite the validity of these critiques, however, I have attempted to illustrate all along in this book, that reading Negritude beyond the limits of its reaction to colonization shows that it is, primarily, a philosophical perspective that is still of interest for contemporary Africana scholarship. This approach prefigures new meanings of Senghor’s conception of Negri-
tude to emerge beyond the “black” vs. “white” dichotomy which led Sar-
tre to blow his infamous “deadly kiss” in what was supposed to be the celebration of the birth of Negritude: “Black Orpheus,” the first and most influential critique of the movement.
C O N C L U S I O N

Yes, Lord, forgive France who preaches the straight path but takes the crooked one herself. . . .

Yes, Lord, forgive France who hates occupiers yet imposes occupation so heavily on me.

Who opens the triumphal gate to heroes and treats her Senegalese people as mercenaries, making them the black watchdogs of the Empire.

These verses, from Léopold Sédar Senghor’s poem, “A Prayer for Peace,” denote the epistemic stand from which he develops the philosophy of Negritude. Beside the conciliatory tone of the excerpt, “A Prayer for Peace” indicates that Negritude is an attempt to unveil the inconsistency of the modern narrative of subjectivity, rationality, and individual freedom. It is a nuanced critique of the darker side of the enlightenment, that of colonization, subjugation, and exploitation.

As shown, the narrative of modernity, which attempts to legitimize the colonial project and rationalize the idea of modern universalism, led to the invention of the idea of the native as the negative manifestation of humanity or, as Emmanuel Kant suggests, the materialization of Rousseau’s not-quite human, that is, not quite “enlightened,” “man of nature.” The invention of the subhuman non-white native was all the more feasible that, as Homi Bhabha argues in “Race and Time and the Revision of Modernity,” a reading of Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness,” it is the very nature of modernity to overlook (“in the double sense of social surveillance
and psychic disavowal”) and over-determine (“psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic”) the black subject. As Bhabha demonstrates, the analysis of the temporality of modernity shows that “man” is a fundamentally historical figure. The ethnocentric and marginal figure of “man,” he claims, denotes “the signifying subjectifying category of Western culture, as a unifying referent of ethical value” because the idea of humanity is founded on Western cultural supremacy and racial typology. That is precisely why Franz Fanon acknowledges that there is an imperative that “the black man must be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man.” In reality, as Bhabha and Fanon stipulate, the Black man is not even a man; he is he who does not have the means to take part in the temporality of modern humanity.

This provincial understanding of the concept of “man” facilitated modern scholars such as Gobineau, Hume, Kant, and Hegel’s theorizations of the black subject’s inhumanity. Arthur Gobineau’s Essay on the Inequality of Races, the most influential account on the concept of race of the time, for example, defines Negroes as the missing link between humans and animals and presents the white European as fundamentally rational and, therefore, as the highest point of human development. Along the same line, Georg W. Hegel and Immanuel Kant, two of the fathers of modern Western philosophy, imagine the “Negro” as the negative opposite of a subliminal white subject. While Kant, citing Hume, claims that “Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling [ . . . since] not a single one [Negro] was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality,” Hegel states that “Africa is the land of childhood, which, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.” This racist paradigm laid the ground for early twentieth-century ethnologists such as Lévy-Bruhl, who, in his earlier texts, saw in “primitive African societies,” the manifestation of a “pre-logical mentality.” For all these reasons, Jean-Paul Sartre cynically notes, in his preface to Fanon’s magnum opus, The Wretched of the Earth: “Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives.” The former, Fanon argues in the same text, were colonizers; the latters were colonized. This system was explained and legitimized by the very definitions of humanness developed by the above-mentioned scholars and which, de facto, conceive “others,” as non-human.

This universalization of the modern European conception of humanity and its corollary, the dehumanization of “the native” Negro, con-
stituted the tipping point that led to the birth of Negritude. Since the modern universalization of man set the conditions of possibility of modern colonization, Negritude thinkers understood very quickly that their anti-colonial project had to engage directly the historicity of modern modes of definition of the human. As Senghor asserts in one of his first published articles, the philosophical impetus of the Negritude movement was based on the realization of the necessity to question the universalist and ethnocentric foundations of the modern narrative and to unveil its darker side. And what better way to engage the historicity of ethnocentric modern definitions of the human than to revisit one of the foundations of Western modern thought: Western colonial reason?

Negritude is, thus, a critique of modern rationality and a singular way of defining the human through a radically anti-colonial ontology and epistemology. The Senegalese thinker’s critique of modern reason questions the colonial paradigm, which is based on the premise that since the definition of Homo sapiens is fundamentally inseparable from a particular understanding of sapiens (wise, rational), subjects are determined by their ability (or inability) to have a “rational” relation to the world. On the basis of this principle, modern thinkers such as Gobineau, Kant, and Hegel argue that Africans are not quite human since, as the European scholars postulate, they are not rational. In other words, they are not quite human because they fail to think and to know properly. It is also this fundamental principle that allowed colonization to present itself as a humanist endeavor intended to save subhuman natives by introducing them to rationality. Given that this Euro-centric paradigm constitutes the philosophical foundation of colonization, one needs to acknowledge that any serious critique of colonization needs to point out the epistemic limits of “European rationality” and the provincial peculiarity of the modern subject. Such an endeavor is precisely what Léopold Sédar Senghor takes on in his entire philosophical production. Although he agrees that the socio-historical experiences of particular human beings conditions their relations to the world, he nonetheless presents the definition of the modern rational subject as one among many other forms of rationality, that is, one of multiple forms of humanities, such as that of Negroes.

Accordingly, the theory of a Negro intuitive epistemology, based on a particular vitalist ontology that ensues from Senghor’s critique of the modern subject constitutes one of the foundations of the philosophy of Negritude. Yet, this aspect of Senghor’s philosophy is too frequently ignored. As shown, except for rare cases such as Donna Jones’ *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s *African Art as
Philosophy, and Messay Kebede’s article, “Negritude and Bergsonism,” there is a surprising silence on Senghor’s epistemology and his ontology as a critique of modernity. Rather, Senghor’s philosophy has been studied since the 1940s as an anti-colonial political movement limited to France and the Francophone world between 1932 and 1960. It is read in relation to how well it represents the aspirations of colonized Negro subjects. Placing Negritude beyond its anti-colonial manifestations allows the exploration of an important, yet neglected, aspect of his oeuvre: Negritude as a philosophical system that functions simultaneously as an epistemology and an ontology. This epistemology and ontology enabled the Senegalese scholar to question Western imperialist definitions of the rational human, to re-define the category of the Negro, and to announce what he calls “métissage, a humanism of the twentieth century.”

On the Limits of Negritude

My attempt to rescue and validate Senghor’s thought as genuine philosophy in its having proposed a theory of being and knowledge that uniquely shows the existence of a Negro epistemology and underwrites a distinct Negro character cannot be accomplished without taking into consideration certain important questions: How can Senghor’s philosophy, developed in conjunction with Western philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Leo Frobenius, escape the temporal and spatial constraints of universalist modern modes of understanding the world, given the hegemony of Eurocentrism? Doesn’t his approach lead him to occupy the space of the subject of the West and thereby re-instate the West as the central subject of history? As opposed to Deleuze’s “pro-nouncement, that a theory is just a box of tools that has nothing to do with the signifier,” doesn’t Senghor’s companionship with the above-mentioned modern Western thinkers risk transforming Negritude into a blackening of the latter’s experiences? Moreover, as Spivak poses in “Can the Subalternal Speak,” “what happens when the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political appeal of [the subalternal] is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme,” especially in the case of Senghor, a Western educated elite trained in the best French schools, a member of the French government and the French academy, and the first president of the Republic of Senegal? In other words, how Western is Senghor’s idea of Africa and how African is his ontology and his epistemology?
These questions show the complexity of the issue at stake and point out some of the limits of anti-colonial discourses in general, and Senghor’s theory in particular. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Senghor frequently fails to go beyond the dichotomous structures that led to the invention of races, that is, the idea of the emotional Negro, fundamentally different from the rational white subject. His famous phrase, “l’émotion est nègre, la raison Hellene” (“emotion is Negro, while Reason is Hellenic)” is a good example that illustrates the effects of the binary modern paradigm on his theory. He uses a perfect Alexandrin, with a caesura right at the sixth syllable, as if he wanted to claim that the Negro is quintessentially opposed to the white subject. In many other instances, the structure of his discourse tends to similarly oppose the category of the Negro to that of the European and to substitute the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” for a supposed Negro-African relation to the world materialized by an “I feel therefore I am.”14 In 1937, for instance, Senghor affirmed the impossibility for the Negro to excel in the sciences unless they are particularly gifted. Moreover, his definition of “ethnic characteriology,” which stipulates that the human character is determined by racial particularities, and which leads to the proliferation, in his theory, of assertions such as, “the white European is foremost discursive; the Negro-African foremost intuitive,”15 participates in the same essentialist paradigm inherited from Western racialist philosophers.16

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the effect, on Senghor’s philosophy, of the dangers of speaking of the African and the Negro from the prism of a modern intellectual tradition, even if he attempted to question the provincial modern center of irradiation of knowledge. Unfortunately, such a mode of representation frequently leads to a re-presentation of the other, and therefore, his or her mis-presentation as, precisely, the other of the modern Western subject. It is this particular perspective that led Anglophone African critics of the Ibadan school to associate Negritude with the colonial question of assimilation. These critics argue that Negritude cannot escape the filter of Western domination, which is the reason for its being; that the poets and theoreticians of Negritude are Eurocentric thinkers who respond to the concerns of Europe more than they re-think the concept of Africa from an African perspective; that the history of Negritude is inseparable from that of racism and Negro oppression; and that it functions as a Francophone African re-articulation of Western philosophy. Assuming that Negritude follows the Eurocentric paradigm put forth by modern Western philosophy, these critics, namely, the early Wole Soyinka and Eziekel Mphahlele, consider it to be a francophone African
nationalist movement. Mphahlele was one of the harshest critics. Arguing that “Negritude tells only half of the story of Africa,” he comments, with an allusion to Senghor, that it is “the assimilated African who has absorbed French culture, who is now passionately waiting to recapture his past.” On these grounds, Mphahlele questions Negritude’s pertinence as an Afri-centered discourse.

As Mphahlele implies, it is true that colonization attempted, in many ways, to transform the colonial elite into a pale copy of a Western subject in order to better serve their own interests. It has, thus, undoubtedly produced scholars who were nothing short of echoes of European voices. Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Indian education” is a good example of this colonial policy and its effects on the colonized mind. He declares:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

Macaulay’s proposed education system is, in many ways, similar to the logic that led to the politics of assimilation in Francophone Africa. As a result, Soyinka and Mphahlele would agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s claim that:

Insofar as the academic discourse of history . . . is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.

These scholars have all the rights to consider elites such as Senghor to be “non-authentic internal informants” whose interest, and therefore relations to the world, are fundamentally different from the ones of the subaltern groups they claim to represent. It is along these lines that major African scholars organized the funeral services of Negritude at the 1969 Pan-African Festival. At the first plenary session, for example,
Ahmed Sékou Touré claimed, in a direct attack on Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Negritude is a false concept, an irrational weapon encouraging the irrationality based on racial discrimination arbitrarily exercised upon the peoples of Africa, Asia, and upon men of color in America and Europe.” Two days later, Mamadi Keita added, “Negritude is actually a good mystifying anesthetic for Negroes who have been whipped too long and too severely to a point where they have lost all reason and become purely emotional.” This celebration of the death of Negritude, repeated by most participants (among them Henri Lopes and Wabu Baker Osman), culminated at the closing ceremony, when Stanislas Adotevi declared:

There was a time when Negritude served a useful though limited purpose: it shook a few consciences and brought a few Negroes together, and this was a good thing. . . . In consequence, we should consider it as a primitive period necessary to the African renaissance. But today it is no more than a “political mysticism” which impedes progress by perpetuating the myth of Negro irrationality and neglecting to provide practical solutions to Africa’s most pressing problems. As an ideology it is “shallow, vague, inefficient” and dangerously misleading. Negritude was born dead; it was going to die and it died.

As Adotevi was finishing his speech to a sympathetic cheering crowd, one had the impression of assisting at the final burial of Negritude. It was not long before a new generation of African scholars, such as Marcien Towa, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and Yambo Ouologuem, started speaking of what can be called, today, “post-negritude.” This critique of Negritude’s essentialist anti-colonial discourse and its theorists’ claim to be the voices of the voiceless is developed from the same intellectual perspective as Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of Foucault and Deleuze’s conception of the transparent intellectual subject in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” A quick demonstration of the limits of Spivak’s conclusions will therefore enable me to show the limits of the “post-negritude” tradition.

While Foucault and Deleuze agree that the intellectual has the tools to represent true reality through a transparent objective position, Spivak contends that despite the complexity and validity of Foucault and Deleuze’s understandings of the heterogeneous network of power/desire/interest, the method that they propose is unfit to embody the voice of the silenced and disenfranchised subaltern subject. For Spivak, these scholars’ conception of the “transparency” of their subjective positions, the ideo-
logical limits of their disciplinary locations, and their ignorance of the epistemic violence of imperialism is intrinsically detrimental to the subaltern subject, whose subjectivity is constantly denied in favor of a universal European subjective position that limits the necessary disclosure of the discourse of the other and the discourse of otherness. The solution, she proposes is, thus, to abandon Foucault and Deleuze for a more inclusive and differing deconstructive method.

Yet, beyond the relevance of Spivak’s revolutionary article in the field of postcolonial studies and despite the limits of Foucault and Deleuze’s subjective positions, can one deny that the French scholars have both produced interesting and groundbreaking philosophical methods that may not necessarily lead us to hear the subaltern, but which have nonetheless enabled the development of new ways of showing the epistemic limits of modern Western Eurocentric and universalist modes of definition of the world? How can one question, for instance, the usefulness of Foucault’s analysis of Western discursive orders, which led to some of the most complex, timely, and important reflections on our postcolonial situation such as Mudimbe’s two canonical books, The Idea of Africa and The Invention of Africa?

As stated, Spivak’s critique of Foucault and Deleuze’s methods and positions as a means to represent the subaltern is similar to that of the above-mentioned critics of Senghor’s philosophy. The latter present the Senegalese scholar as unable to represent the being of the Negro, given his particular political and intellectual location. As in the case of Spivak’s reading of Foucault and Deleuze, however, the acknowledgment of the limits of Senghor’s theory should not lead specialists of African studies to silence other even more complex and more interesting developments of the philosophy of Negritude. Although it is arguable that Negritude is not, as Senghor claims, the materialization of Negro-African cultural values and a mise en discours of a Neger Sein, its manifestation as the Afri-centered philosophy of one man, versed in the Serer culture, who proposes not only one of the pioneering but also one of the most complex and timely critiques of colonial reason through an alternative ontology and epistemology, is still relevant. We should, thus, beware of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

In light of this argument, I have attempted, throughout this book, to trace the meaning and relevance of Senghor’s philosophy instead of repeating the age-old question of his ability or inability to represent silenced African voices. This perspective shows, almost a century after the first texts published by Senghor, that Negritude is not merely a failed ethnophilsophy but a philosophy of one man, whose knowledge of Afri-
can cultures allowed to develop, from an “African” perspective, one of the most important philosophical critiques of colonial reason and a ground-breaking ontology and epistemology. In order to understand Senghor’s project, it is, thus, important to bear in mind Anthony Appiah’s explanation of Wole Soyinka’s intention in writing *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

The novel, Soyinka declares, is more individualist and atomic than the self of precapitalist societies; it is a creature of modern economic relations. I do not know that this new conception of the self was inevitable, but it is no longer something that we in Africa could escape even if we wanted to. And if we cannot escape it, let us celebrate it [. . . ] and celebrate it in the work of Wole Soyinka, who has provided in his plays a literary experience whose individuality is an endless source of insight and pleasure.25

Along the same lines, it is important to note that the philosophical essay and even the poetry produced by postcolonial African scholars are fundamentally individualistic accounts. Senghor, for that matter, is a modern subject who authored his own books and reaped the benefits of his copyright returns. His oeuvre needs, therefore, to be read accordingly. Reading Senghor’s philosophy as a subjective reflection on particular issues does not, however, invalidate his representation of African particularities. In fact, despite his subjective position, the Sereer scholar is speaking from what Molefi Ashante calls an African *djed*, that is, an Afri-centered standpoint.26

Although Senghor’s oeuvre cannot be read as a means to disclose the voice-consciousness of Negro cultures that are so often not heard, it is nonetheless clear that it is from a particular African cultural background that he develops his theory of Negritude. It is important to keep in mind, as has been shown, that the theory of Negritude was inspired by the literary works of Marone Ndiaye, the poetess of Joal, who provided him with his first encounters with the ideas of Negritude, when, during his childhood, she used to sing the praise of *Kiim o’baal, dyaaq fo nut, dyag fo ngel*27 (“The black skinned man, handsome with his eyes closed, handsome in the arena”). As Senghor declares, it is “true that it [Negritude] springs forth, directly, from African sources, even if, sometimes, it takes a detour through the Negro-Americans.”28 He adds, in 1988, “[Marone Ndiaye’s] *kim njom* [poems . . . ] would remain carved in my memory [. . . . ] They were one of the major reasons for my pride to be black. And as early as my years at the seminary.”29 It is precisely this cultural
standpoint that enables him, at eight years old, to question one of his
grade school teachers, Father Lallousse, who claimed the uncivilized
nature of African cultures. As Senghor recalls:

[Father Lallousse], A particularly strict holy man [ . . . ] insisted on our
weaknesses and denounced our backwardness especially in terms of civi-
lization. Since I had received a bourgeois and even aristocratic educa-
tion, I often reacted by telling him that we too had a civilization.30

It is the same African intellectual background that allows the young
student to agree with Bergson’s revolutionary critique of Western epis-
temology. When, in the early 1940s, the theoretician of Negritude reads
Time and Free Will: Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness,31
he proclaimed: Eureka! Bergson has proven that “facts and matter,
which are the objects of discursive reason, were only the outer surface
that needed to be transcended by intuition in order to achieve an in-
depth vision of reality.”32 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Messay Kebede,
and Donna Jones have interpreted this intellectual acquaintance with
Bergson as a reiteration of the latter’s philosophy. One needs, however,
to see in Senghor’s use of the Bergsonian paradigm a strategic act that
enables him to steal the modern miraculous weapons. These epistemic
tools validate his philosophy and allow him to participate in the modern
and postmodern evaluation of “Western rationality,” one of the foun-
dations of colonization. Yet, the Senegalese philosopher’s vitalist theory
of knowledge is, in many ways, based on the lessons he learned in Joal
and Djiloor from his maternal uncle, Waly Bakhoum, and the traditional-
ists of his father’s compound. As he frequently reminds his readers, it is
his uncle Waly who taught him to reach towards the totality of the uni-
verse because “the Negro-African ontology is unitary: the unity of the
universe realizes itself, in God, through the convergence of complemen-
tary forces that come from God and that are coordinated toward God.”33

It is worth noting, thus, that Senghor’s most complex explanations of the
concept of Negritude are always developed through ethnological reflec-
tions on Negro African cultures’ representations of ontology. For all
these reasons, one can argue that when Senghor reads Bergson’s essay
and presents it as an intellectual revolution, it is not, as Jones, Kebede,
and Diagne claim, because he discovers in the modern philosopher’s text
something new that will inform his entire theory; his reaction is rather
prompted by his conviction that Bergson’s understanding of the limits
of modern Western philosophy provides him with the conceptual means
to formulate what he had already known: the primacy of emotion as a means to reach the immediate data of consciousness, and, therefore, the limits of colonial reason. Western modern philosophical tradition is, in Senghor’s oeuvre, a means to legitimize his Afri-centered theory, in the same way that Sartre’s preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* legitimizes the work of an undoubtedly Afri-centered scholar such as Franz Fanon. Rather than the place of Western subjectivity, the space occupied by Senghor can be presented as a manifestation of his own agency.

From this perspective, one can argue that, as opposed to the traditional limitation of Negritude to a blackened version of European modernity, the modern paradigm the father of Negritude adopts, at times, has a less defining effect on his philosophy than it is assumed. The instances when he repeats the modern dichotomous structure are, in fact, quickly complicated by his more complex Afri-centered theory of knowledge and subjectivity, which, ultimately, differs from the Western modern paradigm and even questions it. Notwithstanding the pervasive effect of power, African scholars such as Senghor are agents that can sustain their subjectivities while being in dialogue with the West. After decades of celebration of the death of Negritude, looking at Senghor’s oeuvre in these terms will place Negritude beyond the anti-colonial dialectic and beyond the ethnosophical perspective of the post-colonial era, while enabling contemporary readers to discover new developments in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy. One can therefore say: No, Negritude is not dead. It is more relevant now than ever.
NOTES

Introduction

2. Césaire, Nègre je suis, Nègre, je resterai (A Negro, I am. A Negro, I will remain), 23.
10. West, Race Matters.

Chapter 1

2. Towa, Négritude ou Servitude.
4. Senghor, Anthologie, 1. All translations of Senghor’s texts are mine.
5. Ibid.
6. Senghor, Liberté 1, 316; Liberté 3, 69; Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 112–113.
10. Ibid., 15.
11. Ibid., 16.
12. Ibid., 23.

13. “Minor literature” is used here in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari give to the term at the page 6 of Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, that is, a literature founded on the deterritorialization of a major language through a literature written in the major language from a marginalized perspective.
18. Diagne, L’art africain comme philosophie, 25.
19. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 133–134.

My translation.
26. Diagne, L’art africain comme philosophie, 20. All translations of Diagne are mine.
27. Williams, Capitalisme et esclavage, 7.
32. Ibid.
33. Senghor, On African Socialism, 82.
34. Irele, The African Experience, 70.
35. Ibid., 68–69.
36. Ibid., 73.
40. Irele, African Experience, 81.
41. Diagne, L’art africain comme philosophie, 5. All translations of Diagne’s text are mine.
42. Ibid., 9.
43. Ibid., 9–10.
45. Ibid., 134.
46. Ibid., 136.
49. Senghor, Liberté 5, 96. Italics mine.
50. Sartre, “Orphée Noir,” 18
Chapter 2

7. As implies Senghor’s paper entitled “The Revolution of 1889 and Leo Frobenius,” delivered in 1982 at a conference in Frankfurt, the Senegalese thinker was sympathetic to what D. A. Masolo calls “[t]he pre-World War II European philosophical movements of neo-Marxism, phenomenology, existentialism, and surrealism, with their general revolt against Hegelian transcendental objectivism and ‘system’ [which] turned toward a type of irrationalism emphasizing the spontaneity of man’s bare existence as constituting the search for meanings or essences.” Senghor also frequently praises thinkers such as Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and Frobenius, who question the primacy of intellectual reason and theorize the importance of emotion.

Nietzsche, for the Negritude thinker, challenges Descartes’ interpretation of Aristotle’s “esprit” (*noûs*), in *l’Ethique à Nicomaque*. While for Descartes the *noûs* is similar to discursive reason, Nietzsche interprets it as composed of discursive reason (*dianoïa*) and intuitive reason (*pro-aïsthésis ou théôria*), Senghor states, before he concludes: (“Nietzsche attempted to bury the old and decadent values [. . . ] to reclaim new values based on free will. The latter are rooted in the symbiosis of sensibility and intuition, discursion and will.”) *Ethiopiques. Revue socialiste de culture négro-africaine, n°30*, 1982

Senghor also praises Rimbaud’s reasoned derangement of all senses and agrees with Leo Frobenius, who shows him the way to reach emotion. He declares:

> It is only this sensibility, this faculty to be emotional, and therefore, to be a visionary, which Frobenius calls *Gemüt*, that can lead us to intuition, that is, an in-depth vision of true reality: à la Tiefenschaup.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 27
20. Ibid., 28.
21. Ibid., 29.
22. Ibid., 30.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 31.
25. Ibid., 146.
26. Senghor, La poésie de l’action, 149.
28. Ibid., 219.
29. Henri Bergson, Duration and Simultaneity, 30.
30. Senghor, Liberté 1, 23.
31. Ibid.
32. Senghor, Liberté 2, 32.
33. Diagne, L’art africain comme philosophie, 41.
34. Senghor, Liberté 3, 69–70.
35. Senghor Liberté 1, 24.
36. D’Arboussier, “Une dangereuse mystification, la théorie de la négritude,” 44.
37. Towa, Tagne, “A l’écoute de Marcien Towa. Un entretien avec Marcien Towa, professeur et philosophe.”
39. Senghor, Liberté 1, 43.
40. Senghor, Liberté 3, 69.
42. Foucault and Faubion, Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 3.
43. Paul Grieger, La Caractériologie éthnique, 10 as quoted in Senghor, Liberté 3, 24.
45. Ibid., 180.
47. Senghor, Liberté 3, 70.
49. Ibid., ix.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., x–xi.
53. Ibid., 7.
54. It is important to note, however, that Senghor’s critique of colonial reason is only one aspect of his theory. His philosophy is also, and most importantly, a positive rather than a reactionary illustration of Negro-cultural values. As such, it differs from Bergson’s despite the resemblances between their philosophies.
55. This reading of Negritude is limited to Senghor’s critique of colonial reason. As will be shown, the ontology and the epistemology proposed by the Senegalese scholar, is equally indebted to African cultural practices and differ, in many ways, from Bergson’s Lebenphilosophie.
56. As quoted in Diagne, L’art africain comme philosophie, 84.
57. Senghor, Liberté 3, 92.
58. Ibid.
59. Senghor, Liberté 3, 72.
60. Senghor, œuvres poétiques, 372.
61. Senghor, Liberté 1, 141.
62. Creative Evolution, xi.
64. Senghor, *Pour une relecture africaine de Marx et d’Engels.*
66. Ibid., 147.
67. Ibid., 139.
68. Ibid., 138.
69. Ibid., 144.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 129.
72. Ibid., 138–139.
73. Ibid., 142.
74. Ibid., 141.
75. Ibid., 132–133.
76. Ibid., 133.
80. Ibid., 69–70.
81. The *kim njoms* are, at the same time, poems, songs, treaties of ethics, and history lessons.
82. Senghor, *Ce Que Je Crois,* 123.
83. Ibid., 18.
86. Senghor, *Liberté* 3, 90.
87. Ibid., 92.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 25.
93. For the Ham people, for example, the sun is the manifestation of God if not God Himself (Kato 1975, 30–34); the Galla people of Ethiopia believe the sun to be God’s eye, the Balese people of Congo consider it His right eye, while, for the Ila people of Zambia, it represents His eternity (Mbiti 47, 52).
96. Ibid., 92.
98. Ibid., 23.
99. Ibid.
100. Bergson, *Time and Free Will,* 231.
Chapter 3

1. Senghor, Liberté 1, 17.
2. Liberté 3, 69.
3. Ibid.
6. Senghor, Liberté 1, 239.
7. Liberté 1, 1–21.
8. In his famous book, Poétique IV: Traité du tout-monde, Glissant defines “le Tout-Monde” as the constantly evolving world in which we live. This world, as opposed to the traditional understanding of globalization, does not have any center and includes every human culture in its constantly mixing and becoming present.
10. Carolus Linnaeus, for example, the father of modern taxonomy and the pioneer of the subdivision of mankind into races, determines a “physico-biological notion of race foundationalist status in the classification of the human species.” He claims, as early as 1735, that racial particularity is based on innate physical difference, temperaments, and geographical origins, presents races as ontologically immutable, and divides humanity from this perspective. For Linnaeus, mankind can be divided into four different groups: Africanus, Americanus, Asiaticus, Europeanus. Americans, he argues, are red, stubborn, and short-tempered, while Africans are black, peaceful, and careless; Asians are yellow, rapacious, and easily distracted, and Europeans white, reasonable, and imaginative. Although he does not explicitly present the white European as the ideal of humanity, his descriptive representation of their temperament and his later understanding of their beauty, as opposed to the relative ugliness of all other races, speaks of itself. Race, for Linnaeus, is a biological concept that has a determinant impact on human groups’ particular intellectual, moral, and spiritual natures.

Following Linnaeus’ footsteps, Johann Blumenbach claims, in his doctoral dissertation, entitled “De generis humani varietate nativa liber” (On the Natural Variety of Mankind), that there are four different human races, namely, the Caucasian, the Mongolian, the American, and the Negroid. Six years later, in the revised version of his dissertation, he adds a fifth race to his subdivision of humanity: the Malayan. The difference between human races, for Blumenbach is, as for Linnaeus, based on biological particularities. Yet, while the latter insists on color, geographical origins, temperament, and spiritual and moral particularities, Blumenbach focuses on craniometry even though he acknowledges the importance of color in the manifestation of race. Yet, the essentialization of the biological manifestations of race does not entail, in Blumenbach’s text, a theory of the immutability of races. On the contrary, races, for him, are naturally perfect-
ible even if some of them may be less developed than others. He declares, for example, in regard to the Negro:

God’s image he too. . . . Although made out of Ebony . . . I am acquainted with no single distinctive bodily character which is at once peculiar to the negro, and which cannot be found to exist in many other and distant nations. . . .

Despite his seemingly egalitarian conception of race, however, Blumenbach’s claim that even “savage” races ought to develop to the level of Western “civilized” ones, denotes his hierarchical understanding of race, understood as a group of human beings with distinct physical and intellectual particularities. Although Blumenbach and Linnaeus have radically opposed interpretations of its manifestations and possible developments, they both have a biological and hierarchical understanding of race.

In the same vein as Carolus Linnaeus and Johann Blumenbach, Arthur Gobineau published in 1853 an equally central book in race theory: The Essay on the Inequality of Races. In this book, he argues that biology—specifically skeletal formation, physical beauty, muscular strength, and intellectual ability—determines the particularity of races and sets the condition for racial differences. Inferior races, he claims, are unable to thrive to the cultural level of superior races because races define culture, but not the contrary. Gobineau considers the “Aryan race,” symbol of beauty, intelligence, and culture, to be a center of purity, rationality, and perfection. From this postulation, he develops a theory of race and a definition of the “other” races according to their resemblances and differences with the white race. Although he believes that races become mostly mixed in history, Gobineau, like the major theoreticians of race in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, conceives races as originally pure. For the father of modern racial demography, racial mixture, the consequence of the meetings of different races, resulted in the degeneration of the white race and would ultimately cause the collapse of humanity, because purity is the essence of races and mixture is a step towards death.

15. Edward W. Blyden, the prominent pioneer of pan-Negrism, for example, refutes the theory of the inferiority of the Negro, claims the necessity to vindicate the Negro race, and yet, reiterates the traditional paradigm. Like the Du Bois of “the conservation of races,” Blyden, the first theoretician of “African personality,” founds his philosophy on the idea that each race has its own distinctive character (African Life and Customs, 136–37). Thisessentialization of races leads him to despise miscegenation and to present Africans who live on the coast and who, therefore, had extensive contacts with other cultures as weak and corrupt, while those from the interior who have supposedly kept their purity,

[A]re growing up gradually and normally to take their place in the great family of nations—a distinct but integral part of the great human body, who will neither be spurious Europeans, bastard Americans, nor savage Africans, but men developed upon the base of their own idiosyncrasies. . . . (Blyden, West Africa Before Europe, 131–134)

Blyden’s Pan-Negrist theory was all the more essentialist in that he gives a spiritual explanation of the “essence of races.” He declares:
Every race . . . has a soul, and the soul of a race finds expression in its institutions, and to kill those institutions is to kill the soul—a terrible homicide . . . in the great types of man, in the various races of the world, as distinct in character as in work, in the great divisions of character, we see the will and character and consciousness of God disclosed to us. . . . (Blyden, *West Africa Before Europe*, 140)

Edward Wilmot Blyden, is a good example of major African thinkers who, despite a radical and energetic critique of Western scientific racism, repeat the paradigm set by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racialist thinkers. And he is not alone. The specter of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ paradigmatic relation to race hangs over the entire history of race theory. Pan-African thinkers such as Marcus Garvey, for example, repeat Gobineau’s hierarchical definition of race even though they present Africa as superior to the West. For the Jamaican thinker, for instance, the “pure black race . . . should now set out to create a race type and standard of [its] own, which could not . . . be stigmatized as bastardly” (Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, 37).

The dichotomous imperialist and anti-imperialist conceptions of race have resulted in the above-mentioned thinkers of African descent’s imagination and invention of a “new” Negro race, opposed to the European and rooted in a mythical Africa that existed before the imperialist era.


25. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 39.
31. Ibid., 92.
34. Senghor, *Liberté*, 1, 139.
35. Anyidoho, “Kingdom of Childhood,” 763.
36. Ibid., 764.
37. Ibid.
39. This section was radically improved after a thought provoking discussion with Professor Olefumi Taiwo from Seattle University.
42. The Sine is both the name of the Sereer country and the river that crosses it. The Seine is the Sine of Paris.
43. Senghor, *Liberté* 3, 63.
49. Diagne, *L’art africain comme philosophie*, 152. Diagne adds in the footnote of this citation: “Senghor says, in a letter to Janet Vaillant [. . . ] ‘Négritude is not an essence but rather a phenomenon,’ in the sense, he adds, that Teilhard de Chardin uses the term, or, he insists, if you prefer, in the sense that Sartre uses the word, that of an existence.”
50. Nude woman, black woman
   Clothed in your color which is life, your form which is beauty
   I grew in your shadow, the sweetness of your hands bandaged my eyes
   And here in the heart of summer and of Midi,
   I discover you, Promised Land, from the height of a burnt mount
   And your beauty strikes my heart, like the lightning of an eagle

   Nude woman, dark woman
   Ripe fruit of the dark flesh, somber ecstasies of black wine, mouth that
   makes my mouth lyrical
   Savanna of pure horizons, savanna trembling under the fervent caresses of
   the East wind
   Carved tom-tom, tense tom-tom, grumbling under the fingers of the con-queror
   Your low contralto voice is the spiritual song of the loved woman

   Nude woman, dark woman
   Oil unwrinkled by winds, smooth oil on the athlete’s flanks, on the flanks of
   the princes of Mali
   Gazelle with celestial bridles, pearls become stars on the night of your skin
   Delight of spiritual games, the glints of red gold eat your flaming skin away
   In the shadow of your hair, my anguish is enlightened by the nearby suns of
   your eyes

   Nude woman, black woman
   I sing your passing beauty, fixing your form in eternity
   Before the jealous fate turns you to ashes to feed the roots of life.
51. Senghor, *Chants d’Ombre*.
52. Ben Slimane, “‘Femme Noire’ De L. S. Senghor.”
53. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.
56. Senghor, *Liberté* 1, 41.
57. Ibid.
59. *Evolué*: colonized subject who “succeeds” in assimilating French culture and, in consequence, evolves from a situation of despicable Negro to the one of “refined” “respected” French citizen.
60. *Agrégation*: One of the most prestigious degrees in the French education system.
62. Senghor, “Le français langue de culture,” 837. Senghor declares, in relation to this 1937 text: “It was a successful scandal, more, by the way, for Africans than for Europeans. “Now that he has learnt Latin and Greek, the former whispered, he wants to take us back to Wolof.”
64. Glissant, *Traité*, 30, 78.

Chapter 4

3. It is important to note however, that even though Negritude is taught in one day or two in most intro level courses, one barely ever encounters a graduate level course on the Negritude movement.
5. Ibid., 278. My emphasis.

It is important to note that these American scholars succeeded in bringing together Negro intellectuals of the world at the five Pan-African congresses organized between 1919 and 1945 in Paris, London, Brussels, Lisbon, New York, and Manchester. Moreover, when Senghor arrived in France, in 1928, Paris was witnessing the golden age of the Neo-Negro movement, rightly referred to as the Negro Revolution. In addition to the importance of African art, praised by eminent cubist and fauvist artists such as Picasso, Derain, and Blamick, Paris danced to the rhythm of Josephine Baker’s high-pitched voice and unwinded to Johnny Hudgins’ witty Vaudeville, while French women adopted the *Bak-air Fise*. During this stimulating time, black intellectuals from Africa and the Caribbean were inspired by the poems of Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Countee Cullen, Claude Mc Kay, and Jean Toomer, etc. Senghor says:

At the Latin Quarter, in the 1930s, we were touched, more importantly, by the ideas and actions of the Negro Renaissance, the most dynamic representatives of which we met in Paris. As for me, I regularly read the Crisis [. . .]. But also the Journal of Negro History, which had numerous articles on Africa. But The New Negro was my bedside book. [. . .] Claude Mac Kay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Stirling Brown and Frank Marschall Davis, were the Negro renaissance poets that influenced us most.

6. Irele, “Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism.”
7. Negritude is, at times, a reaction to scientific racism as illustrates Senghor’s famous essay: “Ce Que l’homme Noir apporte,” *Liberté* 1, 22.
11. Ibid., *Souls*, 8.
13. Ibid., 7.
15. Ibid., The Negro, 15.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 19.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 29.
22. Ibid., Souls, 45.
25. Kane, The Ambiguous Adventure, 140.
26. Césaire, Notebook of a Return to the Native Land.
27. Glissant, Caribbean discourse, 8. My emphasis.
28. Ibid., 66. My emphasis.
29. Ibid., 15. My emphasis.
30. Ibid., 26.
31. Bernabé et al., Eloge de la Créolité, 80.
33. Ibid., 2.
34. Ibid., 3.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 4.
37. Ibid., 24.
39. Ibid., 41–43.
40. Ibid., 48. My emphasis.
41. Ibid., 15. My emphasis.
42. Glissant, Antillean discourse, 61. My emphasis.
44. Ibid., 203; Doyan, “Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes,” 9.
45. Ibid., 8.
46. Adéékó, “Bi okó BA RE ’OKUN, TO RE OSA YOO FABO SI EBUTE”: Négritude, Afrocentrism, and Black Atlanticism.”
49. Ibid., 14.
50. Senghor, Liberté 1, 23.
51. Ibid., 40.
52. As opposed to Gilroy and Glissant and in the same tradition as Cheikh Anta Diop’s theory of the pre-colonial unity of African cultures, Molefi Kete Asante claims that the common denominator of Africanness needs to be found in Egypt. Egypt, for the Afrocentric theoretician, is to the African world what Greece is to Europe. This understanding of Africanness denotes, for Asante, that African societies, no matter their locations, have succeeded in keeping their traditions. Contemporary African cultures of the Diaspora are nothing but modern developments of pre-fifteenth century African cultures. Molefi Kete Asante, The Afrocentric Manifesto, 11–15.
Conclusion

4. Ibid.
5. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90.
8. Lévi-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures; La mentalité pré-logicue*.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 69.
22. Ibid.
23. Adotevi, “Nègritude is Dead,” 74–75.
27. Sereer popular songs.
33. Ibid., 92.
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