Return to the Kingdom of Childhood

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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?” 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.” 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.

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. This
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 understood, 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 championed by scholars such David Goldberg, Rey Chow, Benedict Anderson, and Cornel West. All these authors agree on the fundamentally racialist nature of the state and the necessity to acknowledge the permanence of race in all our present social lives. This perspective has caused a renewed interest in racial discourses that goes beyond the tiresome cultural 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 Senghor’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, Souleymane 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 independence of most African countries, it is time to break down the ideological 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 Negroses’ conception of being, is the effect of the particularity of their cultures. In other words, Negroses’ 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 Edouard 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 anti-colonial ethnosophical 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.