Return to the Kingdom of Childhood

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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.

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.’” 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-Frenchifize 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:

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.”

In effect, the author of No Exit had already claimed, the same year as the publication of “Black Orpheus,” that “Hell is the Other that shatters my own consciousness by looking at me.” He theorized that the only way to recover one’s selfhood is to return the other’s gaze by transforming him or her (the other) into an object, thereby becoming the subject. Curiously, as soon as the first paragraph of “Black Orpheus,” he states, repeating exactly the theory of consciousness he developed in No Exit,

Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen. [. . .] The white man—white because he was man, white like virtue—lighted up the creation like a torch and unveiled the secret white essence of beings. Today, these black men are looking at us, and our gaze comes back to our own eyes; in their turn black torches light up the world and our white heads are no more than Chinese lanterns swinging in the wind.”

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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 \textit{being} a waiter in a café. There is nothing there to surprise us.\textsuperscript{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,” legitimates 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
manifestations and silences different aspects of his oeuvre. This confinement of Senghor’s entire philosophy within its anti-colonial manifestations denotes that they take one aspect of Negritude as its whole and fail to carefully examine its complexity.

I do not mean that the political agenda of Negritude is negligible, nor do I overlook Senghor’s sometimes essentialist and reactionary representations of the Negro. Yet, a hermeneutics of his oeuvre shows that Negritude is at the same time an anti-colonial discourse and a postcolonial reflection on otherness, an essentialist representation of Negroes and a theory of Métissage, a critique of Western rationality and an illustration of alternative modes of understanding the world. The second generation of critics fails to acknowledge that, beyond its political manifestations, the philosophy of Negritude can also be presented as a “culturalist” conception of being and understanding of knowledge. Senghor’s philosophy can thus be considered an ontology and an epistemology since his entire work is a theory of the particularity of Negroes’ cultural values, which determine their relations to knowledge. A less rigid and less ideological relation to Senghor’s text shows that he proposes, be it confusedly, a revolutionary philosophy. It is this philosophy that Abiola Irele invites us to explore in the early 1980s. Yet, it is only by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century that systematic studies of Senghor’s philosophy start being developed.

**Beyond Ideology: Negritude as Philosophy**

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 Afri-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 colonization 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 [colonization], for in its most immediate aspect, this awareness is born of a revolt against the practical implications of the colonial relationship.

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 immediate 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 contention 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 Negritude 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.”

It is noteworthy that Abiola Irele’s analysis of Negritude as an ideology 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, sociological 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.”

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.” 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).  

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.”

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, 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”: 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?

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.

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.”

This perspective leads her to argue that Senghor’s oeuvre reveals a subtle “vitalist epistemology and a theory of culture.”

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.”6 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 *kim 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 oeuvre 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 vira’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.