Return to the Kingdom of Childhood

Thiam, Cheikh

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Thiam, Cheikh. Return to the Kingdom of Childhood: Re-envisioning the Legacy and Philosophical Relevance of Negritude. The Ohio State University Press, 2014.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/29387.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29387

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1085389
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

CHAPTER 2

Negritude, Epistemology, and African Vitalism

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. 

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.”

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. 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.” 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 “ob-jectivity” 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”).16 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.”)17 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?”),18 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”)19 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”).20 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 necessity 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 kingdoms—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 Sîra-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 definable. 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.” 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 duration, and which inscribes the subject in a constant dimension of “becoming-in-time.” Senghor reiterates Bergson’s idea that,

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.

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.” 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 positivity have ideas been able to appear, sciences been established, experiences been reflected in philosophies, rationalities formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve 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 dijed 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.” 53 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.” 55

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? 57

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-œil (reason-eye), raison-toucher (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.”

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.

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.

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-
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 “suprational 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-fined (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 declaimed the young Sédar’s favorite verses:

Lang Saar a lipwa pay’baal;  
O fes a gennox, nan fo soorom.⁸²

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.”⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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.\footnote{65}

Although this description of his uncle, like his experience in Joal, is not sufficient to claim that Senghor founds his ontology and his epistemology 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 \textit{assimilé}; he was profoundly immersed in his traditional culture. 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 comparison 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.

\textbf{An Afri-centered Epistemology}

Despite its similarities with Bergson’s \textit{Lebenphilosophie}, Senghor’s vitalist theory reflects, if not a plain description of the ontology of African cultures such as Sereer, and Dagara, at least an Afri-centered understanding of the world. It is even arguable that Senghor’s most important achievement 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 understood it very well as he declares: “The reality of the word [Negritude] existed much earlier, 40,000 years ago, since the steatopigic Negroide statues of Grimaldi.”\footnote{86}

I do not mean that Senghor was not a vitalist scholar. It is undeniable 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 fundamental reality: the universe as a network of diverse forces, which, in turn, are expressions of virtualities enframed in God, the only real force.\footnote{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 “[w]e, 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 Afri-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. 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. 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.

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.

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.99

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.”100 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,
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.”

“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,” 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.”

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.” 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-étroite” (“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.