I met Léopold Sédar Senghor for the first time in 1987, at my uncle’s wedding. At that time, my family was extremely proud of my brother Edouard. He was the most brilliant student in his class, the best checkers player in our neighborhood, one of the most cultured persons in his high school’s trivial pursuit team, and, to top it all, Edouard could read and write in Latin. It was therefore not a surprise that my granduncle took him to the former Senegalese president’s table in order to parade the family prodigy. I remember watching the scene jealously under my sister’s sarcastic look and the weight of my mother’s gaze, as she was admiring my brother, seemingly immersed in an intense discussion with the other prodigy of her family: the ex-president of Senegal. When Edouard came back to our table, he instantly proceeded to tell, frenetically, the story of his encounter with the theoretician of Negritude.

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

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

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

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

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

For Senghor, however, “[w]e have reacted against ‘our ancestors the Gauls.’ It is a mark of common sense. But the particularity of any reaction is to be unrestrained. It may be time that we reacted against our reaction.” In this vein, he reevaluates the essentialist epistemological paradigm that governs race theories, questions the imperialist homogeneous conception of the human, and sets the conditions for a heterogeneous definition of humanness. Senghor’s critique of the “white/others” dichotomy, constitutive of the history of race theories, leads him to theorize Métissage. Instead of following the definitions of race, which Gobineau, for instance, bases on oppositions between whiteness and “otherness,” the father of Negritude, like major theoreticians of hybridity in the twentieth century such as José Vasconcelos and Fernando Ortiz, challenges the notion of purity characteristic of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries’ definitions of race and presents races as fundamentally mixed. Unlike these major theoreticians of hybridity, however, Senghor does not imagine mixture as the emergence of a new mixed essence realized or to be realized at a definite point in history. He presents the mixture of races as inseparable from the development of humanity. Métis-
sage, for the Senegalese scholar, is always the Métissage of a Métissage. As the archeological discoveries of the 1930s show, he claims, Negroes have been biologically and culturally mixed with Albo-Europeans, in particular, and other races, in general, from prehistory to the present time through ancient Greece and the European imperialist era. Accordingly, for Senghor, defining Negroes implies the acknowledgment of their biological and cultural ties with Europe since it is impossible for the Negro to apply, as Edward W. Blyden advises, “to forget European influences.” This understanding of Métissage announces what he calls “a Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” a Civilisation de l’Universel that re-sets the lines of demarcation separating races and celebrates humanity as consubstantially mixed, yet diverse. The Civilisation de l’Universel, the ultimate point of human civilization, manifests itself at what he calls the “Rendez-Vous du Donner et du Recevoir” (“The Rendez-Vous of Give and Take”). One can therefore argue that even though it is undeniable that Senghor, the man who defines Negritude as “the sum total of Negro cultural values” and a “particular way of relating to the world,” is somewhat an essentialist scholar, he is one of a different kind as he is convinced that cultures, the very foundation of racial identities, are constantly mixing and becoming other. In this sense, Senghor announced contemporary theories of mixture and hybridity such as Edouard Glissant’s Tout-Monde. Like the Martinican poet and philosopher, he dreams of a mixed world that, unlike the monolithic Euro-American universalism disguised under the veil of globalization, is founded on an infinite repetition of otherness, mixture, and multiculturalism. This is precisely how to understand Senghor’s dream of a pluriversal world realized at the unreachable, yet always to come, “Rendez-Vous du Donner et du Recevoir.”

Shifting the Paradigm of Race: A Pragmatic Method

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mark a radical shift in the history of race theory. While up to the eighteenth century “race” referred to lineage or common descent and was employed, occasionally, to identify a population with a common history or origin, as opposed to one with a fixed biological character,” thinkers such as Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Blumenbach, and Arthur Gobineau develop a theory of race based on the scientific observation of the orders of natural beings. Beyond a biblical genealogy of the division of humankind, they proposed a “scientific” taxonomy of races based on human groups’ supposed biological, spiritual,
and ethical particularities. Although their conclusions and representations of race were different and even sometimes contradictory, they focused on the biological “nature” of race, determined the relation between biology, morality, and spirituality, and investigated the possibility of classifying human beings along predetermined static racial categories.¹⁰

This biological paradigm had informed most of the race theories up to the early twentieth century. Even African-descended scholars engaged in the “Vindication of the Negro Race”¹¹ followed the same logic until the first half of the twentieth century. They either assume that European modernity constitutes the human ideal, and measure “other races” in terms of their inabilities, or abilities, to reach the European level of material development; or they oppose “other races” to white subjects, reverse the imperialist theory of racial essentialism, and end up repeating exactly what they question: the modernist assumption of the universal nature of man. Instead of questioning the possibilities of shifting the pre-defined Western essentialist definitions of the human, major pan-Negrist thinkers, such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, tend to address the racial question in terms of the possibility, for the Negro, to develop an essentialist, original, and authentic humanity. Edward W. Blyden, for example, considers that Negroes have to learn and appropriate Themistocles’ injunction to disregard European influences;¹² Marcus Garvey believes that the “pure black race . . . should now set out to create a race type and standard of [its] own, which could not . . . be stigmatized as bastardly;”¹³ and W. E. B. Du Bois faces the dilemma of being a Negro and an American, which constitute, for him, “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁴ These dichotomous ways of conceiving race, which presuppose the fundamental separation of the so-called original racial stocks, constitute the basic paradigm from which the “idea of the Negro” was framed, even by African descended scholars, when Senghor started to write in the early 1930s.¹⁵

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

The particular conception of race that Senghor suggests can first be inferred from his understanding of the concepts of assimilation and association, which underlined most Francophone racial discourses of his time. By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of the French empire had triggered a serious reflection on the very meaning of citizenship in France. This reflection was framed around the meaning of race. Supporters of assimilation, on the one hand, posited that races are cultural manifestations. Therefore, they assumed that “inferior” races could (should) be civilized, that is, frenchified and included in the French nation. The proponents of association, on the other hand, present races as fundamentally different. Cohabitation through the politics of association was, they thought, the only way to imagine the future of a multi-racial French empire.\footnote{For the Senegalese philosopher, however, the problem of the modes of definition of races needs, first, to be reformulated in less oppositional terms. Assimilation and association, which imply respectively the possibility of erasing racial particularities and the prospect of affirming the particularities of racial categories, do not, he argues, constitute irreconcilable ideals. He contends, “we have to transcend the false antinomy ‘association or assimilation’ and say ‘assimilation and association’”\footnote{precisely because races, like cultures, do not function like instruments that can be extracted from time. It is therefore impossible to utterly expunge the data of their mixed pasts. Placing himself at the crossroads of the essentialist conception of race (which posits the purity of races) and the less rigid theories of hybridity (which imagine an epiphanic reconciliation between races at the end of history), the Senegalese scholar acknowledges the reality of race, yet presents them as fundamentally mixed, each in its own way. Senghor’s understanding of races as essentially mixed is based on his conception of the history of humankind since prehistory. For the Senegalese scholar, the history of human civilizations is the history of mixtures that started in prehistory and were carried out through all stages of our historical development. He affirms,}
It is in Africa . . . that one must place oneself in order to better witness the great wave of people, techniques, and ideas, as they form, expand out of Africa and then back to Africa, until the saturation point of habitable lands.18

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

In addition to the initial prehistoric mixtures, Senghor claims that Métissage pervades all human civilizations, at each stage of their developments. He maintains, for example, that all great antique civilizations were métisses. Greeks, for instance, Senghor reminds us in Liberté 1,

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

He adds, in the first chapter of Ce Que Je Crois (What I Believe) that, together, Albo-Europeans and Ethiopians have always engaged in the
development of humanity precisely because “since the superior Paleolithic, and this is one of the characteristics of the homo sapiens, when two people meet, they often fight, but they always mix.” Rather than situate the moment of the mixture of races in a definite point of the historical time, Senghor presents Métissage as consubstantial to the development of humanity as such, from prehistory to the present time, through ancient Greece. That is why he understands his philosophy of Negritude as a means,

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

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

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

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

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

Rethinking Hybridity

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

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

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

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

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

Being faithful to one’s culture requires a willingness to be deep-rooted and up-rooted. To be deep-rooted in the heart of the native land: in its spiritual heritage. But also to be up-rooted: open to the fecundating influences of foreign civilizations.\(^{32}\)

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

Remembering, not without sadness, the “Kingdom of Childhood,” the Senegalese village where I lived happily until the age of seven, I dared to question, in front of the Father Director, that we did not have a civilization.\(^{33}\)

Or else,

That is [Negritude] the myth of Africa—Kingdom of Childhood, I mean, of found virtues. That is the ultimate moment of the pilgrimage to the roots, all our poets’ nostalgias, the Negritude they must live and preach as if it was the Gospel.\(^{34}\)

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

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

> I frequently speak, in my poems, of the *Kingdom of Childhood*. It was a Kingdom of innocence and happiness . . . I left my mother while saying farewell to the *Kingdom of Childhood*.40

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

Despite the multiple places where the Kingdom of Childhood can be situated, there is no contradiction in Senghor’s conception of this place of primordial rootedness. Its fluidity denotes, rather, that there is, for him, a relation of continuity between the years of formation in Joal and the ones in France, the *Royaume d’enfance* and the *Royaume d’enfance*. That is why he affirms, “I don’t situate this Kingdom only in the beginning of my life. I also place it at the end. In general, I would say that it is the ultimate goal of mankind to create the Kingdom of Childhood.”

The place and representation of the *Royaume d’enfance* in his conceptualization of Negritude denotes the experience of a subject immersed in different cultures. This experience allows him to go beyond the traditional opposition between Negritude and *Métissage*, Africa and Europe, Assimilation and Association, in order to propose a theory of *Métissage culturel* as the ultimate purpose of all cultures.

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

**An Essentialist of a Different Kind**

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

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

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

And Marcien Towa accuses him of

awaiting the vanishing and dilution of the Negro’s biological specificity in a raceless humanity, through \textit{Métissage}.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The second reason for the rejection of Senghor’s theory of Métissage is epistemological. While in the early twentieth century thinkers such as José Vasconcelos develop the theory of “la raza cosmica,” the French imperialist system attempts to assimilate Negros into the Western human condition. For Vasconcelos, the different races, in the Mexican context for instance, tend to mix ever more, until they form a new superior human type. In this cosmic race, he assumes, Negroses and Indians will be uplifted by Western Christian ideals and, thereby, relieved from the impurity of their biological and cultural backgrounds. On the basis of the same logic, the French politics of assimilation made it clear that the burden of the Frenchman was, literally, to civilize, that is, to expunge Negroses of their particularities in order to assimilate them. The ultimate aim of this doctrine was to be able to declare, in the same vein as Louis XIV,
“the only difference between you and [us] is the difference between black and white.”56 Or, as Senghor himself interprets Louis XIV’s affirmation: “after the education that we have provided to you at our court, you have become a Frenchman with a black skin.”57 It is these ideological and epistemological contexts that led to the traditional understanding of Métissage as a process destined to purge the Negro, and which, in turn, allowed critics to reject Senghor’s theory. Read in the context of this dichotomist colonial structure and through the lens of early theories of mixture such as Vasconcelos,’ Senghor’s understanding of Métissage appears, at best, as a call for the whitening of the Negro-African.

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

A world of energy was still buried in them [humans]. It is, I believe, this still latent potential, within each natural human unit in Europe, Asia, and everywhere, that wants to come to life today; not at all, because they [humans] ultimately want to oppose and destroy each other, but because they want to join and fertilize each other. We need fully conscious human nations to make a whole world.58

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

Senghor illustrates this philosophy of Métissage before the Society of Franco-Senegalese Friendship, on September 4, 1937, in a “lecture” entitled “Le problème culturel en A. O. F.” (The Cultural Problem in F. W. A., French West Africa). In this text, he presents a series of discussions between Demba Ndiaye, the young évolué,59 a representative of the Senegalese educated elite, and Silmang Faye, the Sereer peasant, a symbol
of traditional African cultures. Using these two supposedly opposed archetypes as an example, he enlivens the cross-“cultural” dialogue constitutive of his conception of Negritude as a form of *Métissage* by showing the cultural similitudes between his “uneducated” Sereer neighbor and the icons of French intelligentsia, by using French with a Wolof structure, and by comparing Kocc Barma, the father of Wolof rhetoricians, to Socrates. While the listeners, primarily colonial elites and African *évolués*, were more likely to remind Senghor that he should speak as a French *agrégé*, the Senegalese thinker deceives the expectations of the audience, as he declares, in obviously ironic terms:

I would confess, should I deceive you, that the importance and the distinctiveness of my listeners remind me that it is as a peasant of the Sine that I intended to speak this evening.\(^6^1\)

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

To speak as a Sereer peasant, however, as opposed to African *évolués*’ understanding of Senghor’s message,\(^6^2\) is not to return to the exclusive use of local languages, that is, to return to the native land. It is, through the use of French with a Sereer grammar, a means to illustrate the postcolonial Negro’s situation as a subject who, even if he or she is educated in the best Western institutions, cannot separate the lessons of the Sorbonne from the *veillées nocturnes* when poets such as Marone Ndiaye introduce young pupils to traditional African cultures.\(^6^3\)

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

Beyond the racial theory of the first half of the twentieth century, one can argue that the father of Negritude gives us a method of conceiving our contemporary global world. While it is often assumed that globalization is a moment of mixture between the diverse cultures that compose the so called “global village,” one can argue, as members of the alter-globalization movement unrelentingly claim, that it functions as a commodification of the world through a Euro-Americanization of its constituents. Founded on the principles of Christianity and Democracy, the economic, political, and ethical underpinnings of our global world” are based on an essentialist understanding of humanness. This essentialist paradigm assumes that all human beings want a democratic government based on Christian principles and economic wealth attainable only through the market. It also implies a universalist definition of the human, its basic nature, and its fundamental purpose. It is in the name of these principles that “uncivilized” discordant voices are boycotted, every year, by the Euro-American delegations (who, it is important to note, dominate the Security Council) during the UN annual assembly, supposedly a yearly moment of exchange between all members of the globe. It is also in the name of these same universalist principles that dissenting voices are routinely brutalized at Davos during the time when “our” common economic policy is adopted. It is in the name of these principles that the war in Iraq, based on President George W. Bush’s proposed destruction of the Axis of Evil, has been orchestrated and Moammar Khadafi’s regime has been brought down after France signed a contract with the rebel groups to exploit 35 percent of Libya’s oil. From this globalized model, a fundamentally modern phenomenon, we should learn what Léopold Sédar Senghor could have called a “universal diversity” based on a mixture of the sum total of human cultural values that would acknowledge and celebrate the particularity of each participant in the global enterprise. In this sense, Senghor’s philosophy announces what Glissant calls the “Tout Monde,” a world that we will all discover together, that would not be based on the dichotomy between the dominated and those who dominate, yet in which every culture would keep its “lieux,” while being intrinsically open to all other lieux: a truly global and diffracted village.