Return to the Kingdom of Childhood
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CHAPTER 4

Negritude Is not Dead!

Of the African thinkers of this century, [Senghor] will probably have been the most honored and the most complimented, yet probably also the most disparaged and the most insulted, particularly by the present generation of African intellectuals.

Since the 1940s the historiography of African studies has been obsessed with the death of Negritude. From Sartre’s first systematic critique of the movement to the theory of post-negritude, through the famous conference of Algiers, scholars of African studies such as Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa, Ahmed Sékou Touré, Franz Fanon, and Aliko Songolo have, in one way or another, repeated what Souleymane Diagne calls Sartre’s “deadly kiss:” the French philosopher’s prediction of the death of Negritude at the dawn of the postcolonial era. It was therefore not surprising that major scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Abiola Irele politely declined Denis Ekpo and Rasheed Araeen’s recent invitation to participate in a special issue on Léopold Sédar Senghor’s relevance in today’s scholarship because, they maintained, everything had already been said about Negritude. It was time to move forward. Yet, more than six decades after Sartre’s predictions, can we affirm, without a doubt, that Negritude is dead? Regardless of critics’ traditional dismissal of the movement, reading Senghor’s philosophy beyond the anti-colonial dialectic shows that it is in constant dialogue with major voices in Africana scholarship, namely, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy, and Edouard Glissant. In fact, one can even
claim that Negritude remains one of the most important intellectual movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as it continues early African descended scholars’ theories, such as those of W. E. B. Du Bois, while constantly questioning and expanding contemporary discourses such as Glissant’s *Antillanité*, and Gilroy’s Black Atlantic.³

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They [American Negroes] taught us [ . . . ] to organize socially if not politically, and above all to produce art . . . they established the foundations of the movement by moving ahead. They showed the possibility of the renaissance of African civilization and the possibility to make people respect it by, first, creating art. Influence, I declare, of American Negroes on African Negroes.⁵ (my emphasis)

The influence of the New Negro movement was such that Senghor used, until 1939 and even sometimes beyond, the term Néo-Nègre (Neo-Negro) or Nègre-Nouveau (New-Negro) to refer to the Negritude movement. Of all these influences, however, W. E. B. Du Bois, the man he refers to as “the outstanding figure in Negro intellectual life in the USA during this period,”⁶ was the most important. Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness had all the means to prepare and inspire Negritude, and so it did. Like the first proponents of Negritude, Du Bois’ intellectual production sprang, among other sources, from the necessity to defend and illustrate Negro cultural values denied by nineteenth-century “scientific racism”—which had organized the world’s doxa through the de-humanization of the Negro.⁷ He reclaimed the particularity of the social, cultural, and political condition of the Negro, theorized the idea of a black worldview, and, finally, called for racial reconciliation.⁸ Thus, Senghor states, in Liberté 3:

One has to always start with W. E. B. Du Bois, who was really “the father of the Negritude movement,” as shows Kesteloot, because he was the first scholar to conceptualize it in its specificity, its particular aspects, and its final goal, its objectives and its means.⁹

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

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

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

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

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

Du Bois’ understanding of the place of Negroes in American society is sustained by his radical and groundbreaking race theory. In early works, such as the “Conservation of Races,”12 he follows the modern scientific paradigm and presents races as “a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions,
and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.”

This understanding of race, characteristic of his early works, is, however, quickly replaced by a less essentialist understanding of race. In fact, a careful reading of both *Souls* and his later works shows that he goes beyond his former biological perspective to propose a more flexible theory that announces Senghor’s representation of Negroeness. In effect, Du Bois understood, as early as 1903, that:

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

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

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

He then proceeds to argue that most individual members of particular racial entities, nine-tenths of the black race, for instance, is mixed and there is nothing as vague as the concept of white or yellow man.

Du Bois goes even further as he argues that even physical particularities such as color and hair are nothing but effects of history. “Today,” he declares, “we realize that there are no hard and fast racial types among men. Race is a dynamic and not a static conception and the typical races are continually changing and developing, amalgamating and differentiating.”

He concludes, in the same text, that one cannot call for the particularity of the Negro without taking in consideration their constant mixture with Asians, Semites, and the Greeks.

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

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

This epistemic stand is a consequence of the fact that Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness is as, Shamoon Zamir has outlined, based on the
Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Beyond the particularity of the Hegelian dialectic and the possibility of the synthesis it promises, this dialectic is based on the opposition of two fundamentally different “subjects.” In Du Bois’ case, these antithetical positions are occupied by blacks and whites. Thus, even when he argues for the limits of the veil, Du Bois calls nonetheless for the possibility of merging the Negro’s double self into a better and truer self. He thereby acknowledges, implicitly, the possibility of having fundamentally different selves as postulated by nineteenth-century scientific racist theorists such as Gobineau and Bluemenbach.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Senghor and Contemporary Africana Scholarship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Glissant, despite the fact that Negritude thinkers have theorized the necessity to go back to some African roots, it is no coincidence that the idea of the return to the native land has been better adopted in Senegal than in Martinique. Yet, he insists, generalizations perpetrated by Negritude scholars need to be considered as a strategic essentialism in that they led, through a detour to Africa, to the original point of “entanglement (the Atlantic), from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where
we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.”

We are back to Sartre’s death sentence. Negritude has run its course, Glissant implies, even if, as the theoreticians of Créolité agree, “It was Césaire’s Negritude that opened to us the path for the actuality of a Caribbean-ness which from then on could be postulated, and which itself is leading to another yet unlabeled degree of authenticity. Césairian Negritude is a baptism, the primal act of our restored dignity. We are forever Césaire’s sons.” The new point of “origin,” the fluid point of irradiation of a dynamic but real Antillean culture is, nevertheless, from that point forward, the Middle Passage.

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

Along the same line as Glissant, Paul Gilroy attempts to define people of African descent, who have been transborded to European and American shores, beyond the traditional racial and cultural paradigm that had dominated pan-African discourses in the Anglophone world. He starts from the postulation that the totalizing discourses of modernity, and their effects, the postmodern paradigm, along with contemporary postcolonial representations of blackness such as Afrocentricity, have locked the Black Atlantic subject in “antagonistic relationships marked out by the symbolism of colors which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic—black and white.”

From cultural nationalist perspectives, he argues, these discourses present seemingly essential ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories, experiences, and intellectual traditions of blacks and whites.

As opposed to this essentialist paradigm, Gilroy proposes to analyze “the stereophonic, bilingual or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering, that [he has] heuristically called the Black Atlantic world.” This perspective enables him to develop, beyond the lure of “ethnic insiderism,” which leads to “an absolute sense of ethnic difference,” a theory of the primacy of a “syncretic pattern” particular to an ethnic identity developed by Black Britons,
African Americans, and Caribbeans.\textsuperscript{35} Using the metaphor of a ship, Gilroy proposes to “focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for a redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs,” as a point of formation of what can be called a Black Atlantic identity.\textsuperscript{36}

What about Africa? Using Martin Delany’s biography and his novel \textit{Blake} as an example, Gilroy argues that despite Delany’s racial essentialist melancholia, his experience and \textit{Blake}’s plot illustrates the impossibility of going back to “some African essence” that would cure the discontinuities constitutive of the new Black Atlantic culture. “Delany’s African tour, Gilroy writes, confirmed the dissimilarities between African-American ideologues and the Africans with whom they treated. Thus, it is not surprising that though at the end of his account of his adventures in Africa Delany promised to return to Africa with his family, he never did so.”\textsuperscript{37} As the British scholar postulates, there is no way of going back in time, let alone to an African past. Rather than the search for lost roots, he proposes, along with Glissant, a rhizomatic relation to the past, which enables the Black Atlantic subject to claim the diverse histories of which he or she is the product. While Glissant calls for “a gaping and irreversible rupture (with the original land of Africa),”\textsuperscript{38} Gilroy scolds Modern black intellectual traditions for being more “interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.”\textsuperscript{39}

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

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

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

Despite Gilroy’s theories of hybridity and movement through a metaphor of the ship as representative of postcolonial black identities in the new world, however, and notwithstanding their explicit critique of the idea of the return to the native land, one can infer, from their Black Atlantic perspective, a fundamental longing for a common root. For Gilroy, the Atlantic, precisely the Middle Passage, functions “as one single complex unit of analysis in discussions of the modern world and [can be] used to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.”41

For Glissant, “the French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.”42 Their seemingly transnational and fluid understanding of culture, Caribbeanness, or the Black Atlantic, is based on the postulations of an essentialist understanding of a common origin rooted in the Atlantic, the original point, the common past that one has to go to in order to rethink Caribbean and Black Atlantic presents.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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