

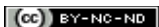
Review Essay

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Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XIX, No 2 (2011) pp 180-188

Vol XIX, No 2 (2011)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2011.511
www.jffp.org



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Review Essay

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Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 217 pp.

It is surely nothing exceptional to say that the Negritude movement was one of the most important political and cultural moments in the history of the black Atlantic. The poetics and politics of the mid-twentieth century francophone world were transformed by the writings and personalities of thinkers Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Léon Damas, and others. A good bit of writing has been done documenting this moment, its players, and the mixed meaning of its aftermath. It is, however, quite another thing to say that that movement has been appreciated for its complexity and variety of intellectual sources, resources, and methodologies. Indeed, Negritude, if I may speak in generalities for a moment, is largely remembered in its conceptual moment for trafficking in essentialism and, more sympathetically, remembered historically for the enormous personalities at the center of the movement. Césaire, after all, was not only the poet-founder of the term Negritude, coining it in his epic rewriting of the Caribbean future in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, but also *the* political actor and personality of postcolonial Martinique. Senghor was not only the poet of the new black erotic and the memory of civilization, but also the first president of Senegal. The epic and the erotic both turned on essentialist concepts of blackness, and the political presence of Césaire and Senghor on the postcolonial scene grounded Negritude in a certain political reality: excess of essence, potency of action.

This has largely been the memory of the Negritude movement. The glory of the postcolonial interval, transition to a new imaginary landscape, and the intensity of thinking and acting in that moment – this is the Negritude moment, as it were. Such memories are further framed, nearly always more critically, by the aftermath of the movement, which was first dominated by Frantz Fanon's repudiation of the movement and his deep critique of essentialism, switching out fixed notions of blackness for a kind of reformed Sartreanism and its companion cultural imagination of the future, and then followed by the quasi-postmodern innovations of the creolist movement in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Negritude becomes at

best what *In Praise of Creoleness* calls an “ante-creolism,” at worst an excess best left behind.

Too often, our memory of the Negritude movement lacks an appreciation of the complexity of the movement, in terms of both the subtle and nuanced differences between figures (for example, the very different appropriations of Surrealism in Césaire’s and Senghor’s work, or the different incarnations of the duties of black cultural workers in Suzanne Césaire, Paulette and Jane Nardal, and so on) and the complicated theoretical sources and resources on which the movement drew from the beginning. This is where Donna V. Jones’ *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Negritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*, with its rigorous textual work and provocative intervention in the history of ideas, emerges as an absolutely crucial book. Jones’ book has a few important peers. For those of us interested in the complexity of the Negritude movement, Tracy Sharpley-Whiting’s *Negritude Women* provides an important counter-narrative to the masculinist prerogative of both the movement and our memory of it, and Abiola Irele’s *The Negritude Moment*, a collection of essays, engages historical and contemporary political sensibilities in order to remind us of Negritude’s enduring significance. But the urgency of Jones’ contribution lies in the detailed treatment of Negritude’s intellectual genealogy, most specifically, as the title states, the relation of the movement to various philosophies of life in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century. These philosophies of life cross anthropology, cultural theory, and philosophy – often with mixed political content and consequences. Nearly always with troubling relationships to nationalism and racial identity questions. Indeed, in reconstructing a portrait of the intellectual inspiration of the Negritude movement as a variation of European vitalism and philosophy of life, Jones is able to simultaneously show both how complicated the origins of the movement are (the conceptual roots) and how conflicted those origins *ought* to make our appreciation of Negritude’s ideas (the cultural and political content). No matter the motivations of Césaire and Senghor, we might add. Negritude is self-evidently and self-consciously a version of racial nationalism, committed as it is to an essential African civilization that animates the varieties of cultural expression in the diaspora. How are we to reckon with this connection between vitalism and Negritude? How ought it frame our reading of key texts? And how ought it inform our memory of the Negritude movement?

The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy begins with a long introductory reflection, which introduces not only the ideas and players in the chapters that follow, but also the problem of *life* itself. What we mean by “life” is perhaps intractably opaque, and yet such a notion is crucial for any thinking whatsoever, especially for those consigned for so many centuries to the category of *infrahuman*. The Introduction has an odd rhythm to it at times (and this is true of the following chapters as well), pausing in a number of

different places in order to restart and recast the project. But this stylistic quirk does not get in the way of the very real and critical theoretical content in the Introduction, which is perhaps the most important, clearly and directly articulated, and urgent in the whole book. In her Introduction, we see precisely the stakes of Jones' re-reading of the Negritude movement: to understand how "[t]he power that vitalism drew from and gave to racial and anti-Semitic discourses should make us...wary of its contemporary forms and of the assumptions underlying postcolonial understandings of civilizational difference." (23) Given, say, the prominence of the distinction between culture and civilization in Césaire's "Culture and Colonization," his address to the 1956 Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, exposing the assumptions of theories of civilizational difference is certainly urgent and crucial.

The chapters that follow make a long argument toward this ethics of suspicion, but *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* is (thankfully) far from a polemical piece. Instead, Jones offers meticulous readings of moments in the vitalist and life philosophy traditions, with immediate connection to the adaptation of those moments in the Negritude movement. The first chapter locates the problematic of *life* in the context of the modern mechanical rendering of the world in post-Cartesian, post-Newtonian physical science. This account of mechanism is quite familiar to those working in the European tradition – it is, in many ways, a recast of Edmund Husserl's account of the mathematization of the lifeworld – and yet, no matter the originality of the analysis, Jones is able to create an important, dramatic stage for the appearance of vitalism and life philosophy. Jones' second chapter is short and offers a nice primer on certain critiques of vitalism. The opening two chapters, then, really prepare the reader, rather than offer original or incisive readings (as Jones herself notes in the book's introduction).

Jones' third chapter is where the book gains real traction and originality. Through a careful reading of Bergson, which nicely situates her interpretation in relation to other major commentators, Jones' shifts the picture of Bergson away from that of a generalized philosopher of life and toward a much more disconcerting intersection of Bergson's work with nationalism and racialism. This chapter offers a new and important reading of Bergson, which is then put to work in a reading of Césaire and Senghor that draws Negritude into the racialized dynamics of memory and duration – a debt to Bergson that *might* commit Negritude to something quite troubling, viz., the very race theory that was deployed in the last gasps of racial colonialism. Jones concedes that her reading might overemphasize (24) the importance of Bergson to Césaire and Senghor, and that is an important, difficult concession. For, in so conceding, Jones qualifies what is most radical about her rereading of Negritude's intellectual origins and fate. The implication of Negritude in the racial theory of colonial violence is

provocative stuff. Still, whatever the pause and hesitation in her Introduction about this framing of Césaire and Senghor, Jones' own account in the fourth and final chapter is fairly uncompromising. After a careful and nicely documented reading of *Notebook*, Jones concludes that Césaire is led to "an ahistoric naturalism of racial biologism" that runs "against his own predispositions" and that such a biologism "reveal[s] race to be the tragedy that it is." (174) Not race as a political condition, of course, but race as the "affirmation of dubious ancestral myths about a metaphysically vitalist inheritance" – the sort of myths that lead Césaire to famously link blood and life in his introduction to a collection of Leo Frobenius' writings.

Jones' final take on Césaire therefore pushes her reading of Negritude as a vitalist racial discourse to its logical conclusion. There is real critique across the pages of *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* and it raises many questions about the place of Negritude in the memory and imagination of black Atlantic critical theory. Yet, critical conclusions aside for the moment, it is interesting to consider what Jones does as also adding real conceptual complexity to the Negritude movement. She contributes enormously to our historical and intellectual understanding of Negritude by attending to some of the more obvious sources of Negritude thinking, such as Frobenius and Teilhard de Chardin, both of whom figure prominently in Senghor's theoretical writings, as well as Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, neither of whom appear in name with much frequency, but who can be seen, through a proper theoretical frame, as central to the very ideas of vitalism and life that drive the Negritude movement from the 1930s onward. This is a very different intellectual genealogy, but such an important one. Negritude did not fall from the sky in a moment of anti-colonial resistance. Césaire and Senghor were readers and thinkers, and that means that we always have to raise the question of influence. Even when, as with Jones' book, that question raises so many difficult issues.

Jones' restoration of complexity to the Negritude movement exacts a very real price from the movement. For, as Jones demonstrates across the project and particularly in her long Introduction entitled "The Resilience of Life," vitalism and life philosophy were deeply connected to, perhaps even inextricably bound, to the racial and racist discourses of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. What does it mean that an anti-racist movement draws on sources that arguably underpin its own conditions of possibility: subjugation and racial degradation? This is no easy question, of course. It is an all but universal truth: scratch a bit at an important thinker in the European tradition, especially one from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and you find someone who not only held grotesquely hateful, racist views, but also worked feverishly to provide intellectual foundations to colonialism and white supremacy. Work by Robert Bernasconi, Emmanuel Eze, and others on Immanuel Kant's role in articulating the modern conception of race, for example, is exemplary of just this sort of

“discovery.” It is a discovery only to those for whom Kant (or any other thinker) is imagined to operate in rarified, abstract philosophical air alone, rather than, as Kant understood himself, an agent of humanity and cultural formation, reformation, and, ultimately, imperialism. Jones shows us how vitalism and life philosophy proved so appealing to thinkers and actors on the anti-racist stage, despite –and maybe even because of – the implication of those philosophers in the racial discourse of European or white supremacy and nationalism. What gives? How are we to reckon with this strange convergence?

I think Jones makes a strong argument for suspicion and even outright rejection of the Negritude movement on the basis of these connections to the racist vitalist and life philosophy traditions. Her final reflections on Césaire show us how the poet is at deep tension with himself, and how, perhaps, we would have to jettison some of his best, most moving rhetoric if we want to keep his critical theory alive. At the same time, the argument for this suspicion is less visible in the unfolding chapters than in the Introduction; rigorous self-conscious theorizing begins the book and frames the readings that follow, but Jones loses sight of her explicit thread of critique at key moments. Part of this, I suspect, is Jones’ own ambivalence about Césaire, whom she seems to want to keep afloat as a viable thinker – for example, when she defends Césaire against Nick Nesbitt’s identification of the rhetoric of *Notebook* with certain forms of European fascism. Part of this, perhaps, is also the undecidable character of any genealogical approach to thinking: we can show connections between vitalism, life philosophy, and Negritude, but the meaning of those connections is not itself uncomplicated.

As well, there are some very real theoretical questions that warrant asking in this context and I want to ask them here, less as critique and more as a form of critical conversation. *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* ought to provoke such discussion, I think, as it really wants to (and should) alter our understanding of this formative moment in black Atlantic critical theory.

First, there is the question of essentialism. Jones’ book makes a strong argument for the link between Negritude’s traffic in essentialism and the vitalist and life philosophy movements. However, one can also ask about the precise meaning of essentialism in this context and how it functions in a theoretical discourse. There are multiple forms of essentialism worth thinking about in this context and any shift from one form to another fundamentally transforms the critique of Negritude. Are Césaire and Senghor strong essentialists, modeling essential claims on a certain naturalism that mimics, in a philosophical register, the biologism of the natural sciences and particular variations on the social sciences? Jones would seem to subscribe to this reading. Or are they weaker essentialists, basing their claims not on a fixed and invariant nature, but instead on a sort of optimalism in which black subjects are “at their best” or “in their most

unique vocation" when embodying the Negritude ideal? Or are they historicists in their essentialism, understanding the project of cultural formation in terms of the establishment (or first articulation) of a unique voice, in this historical moment (mid-twentieth century) and under these material conditions (colonial domination), from which a new future can be envisioned and realized? Or, further, is essentialism merely a *strategy for resistance*, a strategy which would embed claims about the black Self and the project of a black culture in the very discourse of colonialism in order to render Negritude a deconstructive, immanent critique, rather than a trans-historical, atemporal claim about group belonging? Deciding what sort of essentialism is at work in Negritude alters our critical understanding of its relation to vitalism and life philosophy – and so how we assess the force of Jones' critique – and, in particular, how we understand Negritude as part of a larger tradition of discourse about life. To wit: if strategic, Negritude is already a kind of deconstructive postcolonialism, employing both tricksterism and subversive critique in the very same moment it seeks to forge a positive vision of culture and politics after colonialism. Vitalism and life philosophy would therein function as occasions for reversal and disruption, rather than positions in and of themselves.

Second, there is the question of how we are to understand the relation between racist discourse and the theoretical insights clustered to that discourse. That is, I am willing to grant that the racist dimension of a given philosophical or broadly theoretical discourse is neither an asterisk to nor marginal for that discourse. But what it means to place that racist (or perhaps just racial) dimension at the center of the dispersal of a discourse across national borders, racial experience, languages, and so on needs real attention in its own right. This is not to say that Jones does not make her own position on this clear, and I find it to be measured in its rhetoric and scope. Jones wants us to be *wary*, not simply dismissive, of the implication of Negritude in the racial discourses of vitalism and life philosophy. For anyone working on these issues in the future, Jones has staked out a very specific and very reasonable position, rooted in textual analysis and creative theoretical conversation about traditions, figures, and the deeply complex intellectual heritage of Negritude. One way back into this issue, for the sake of critical debate, is posing the larger question of the place of racist sentiment and theoretical content in discourses that cross racial and national boundaries. Colonialism builds itself into the colonized, so the de- or anti-colonial intellectual has the first task of purging racism (or perhaps just racialism) from thinking in order to emerge as a postcolonial intellectual in the strongest sense. Is it possible to retrieve insights from the racist-racialist traditions without the stain of racism? This is an incredibly fraught question, but one worth asking in the conversation that should follow *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, for sure.

Third, there is the question of the other milieu of Negritude and the anti-colonial moment. The afro-francophone world was transformed by Negritude, to be sure, and Jones importantly links the movement to all those vitalist and life philosophy notions, but Negritude was also deeply entwined with another set of concepts and practices: Surrealism. In particular, I have in mind René Ménéil's appropriation of André Breton's work on the senses and the subconscious. The resulting notion of *the marvelous* provides so many of the same motifs, concepts, and aesthetic practices one finds in vitalism and life philosophy, but with a very different genealogy – another historical genealogy and another set of origins for the practice of cultural creation and production. How is the story of Negritude's troubling debt to the racial discourses of vitalism and life philosophy altered by a robust and thorough appreciation of Surrealist methods? That appreciation is embedded in the historical narrative of Negritude, of course – we see the presence of Breton in the francophone Caribbean imagination in so many of the early documents of Negritude, and he famously wrote an introduction (strange as it might be) to *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* – and I think it suggests a different account of what *seem* like (and perhaps *are*, in the end) vitalist notions in the rhetoric of cultural renaissance and the like. For Ménéil, as well as for Suzanne Césaire, Surrealism engages the senses and the subconscious, which, when blended with the idea of race or racialized experience (Ménéil and Suzanne Césaire do not provide us with much of an account of race), provides many of the same conceptual tools for Negritude that one finds in vitalism and life philosophy. Now, we very well might find that Surrealism's infusion of the marvelous with race runs into the same genealogical problems as does Negritude's engagement with vitalist and life philosophy traditions, although, as a preliminary claim, I think the Surrealist path is not only much more promising for Negritude's future (breaking as it does with the very idea of tradition), such as it is, but is also quite well-attuned to the original milieu of Negritude's formative intellectual years.

Fourth, and the last I will mention here, there is the question of Negritude's own understanding of its appropriation of the European tradition. This is not an easy question, and Jones does not pose it as an autonomous consideration. Yet, I think it absolutely *must* be posed as an independent question, because it just might be the case that Césaire and Senghor have complex thoughts on this complex operation – and perhaps not even consistent thoughts. These complex thoughts, I suspect, will only deepen the ambivalence we find in Jones' reading of Césaire at the close of her book. On the question of appropriation, let us consider, for example, two texts: Césaire's "Culture and Colonization" (1956) and Senghor's "Assimilation and Association" (1945). In Césaire's essay, he writes that

For our part, and with regard to what is particular to our societies, I believe that in the African culture yet to be born, or in the para-African culture yet to be born, there will be many new elements,

modern elements – even elements borrowed from Europe. But I also believe that many traditional elements will subsist in these cultures. I refuse to yield to the temptation of the *tabula rasa*.¹

We can pair this with a remark Senghor makes a decade prior:

[P]artners may have ideas and temperaments different at least, if not actually opposed. In the meantime, they have no alternative, since they have to work together in a community of outlook and interests, but to assimilate each other's ideas, each one having at the same time to adapt himself to the nature and habits of his associate.²

Both of these passages suggest an emerging – or perhaps nascent across the decades – theory of influence and interpretation, wherein the process of cross-cultural contact produces, not continuity or discontinuity, but something *new*. Indeed, the problem of the new animates Surrealism, Negritude, and the existentialist and postmodernist movements that follow, always asking the same question: if the past is brutal, cruel, and decimating, then what can we imagine as another future? For all the rhetoric of racial essentialism and militant solidarity across the diaspora, Césaire and Senghor also negotiated a difficult relation to the French language, nation, and culture. In that difficult negotiation, we can catch sight of an epistemology of cultural difference and cross-cultural contact, a fully articulated version of which is crucial for our understanding of the terms of Jones' book: what does it mean for Negritude to engage the racial discourses of life philosophy? The paradox, of course, is that borrowing and adaptation proceed from a rooted sense of who one is as an individual and as a group. That individual and group identity is what Negritude seeks to articulate for the first time – indeed, that is what they mean by liberation – and yet the articulation of that identity already employs the ante-chamber work of borrowing and adaptation – both of which presuppose the roots of blackness set deep in the soil of African civilization. The root is mixed, but can only be mixed if it is rooted in a sense of the singular root, which we find to be already borrowing and adapting. I am not sure Negritude can think itself out of this loop or doubling of origins, but figuring out the dynamics of the loop or doubling is crucial for appreciating the past and future of the movement. And, if this paradox is solved (or at least articulated in explicit terms), then we might actually depart from some of the terms of Jones' critique of Negritude's origins in vitalism and life philosophy. *Might*.

In the end, Jones' book fundamentally changes our understanding of the Negritude movement. Her project may cast deep suspicions on the movement's origins and intellectual heritage, and in that way might largely discredit the present and future relevance of Negritude, but anyone who disagrees with that discrediting and who might want to defend elements of the movement has to address the problematic on more serious ground after

Jones' book. To be plain, this book changes all the terms of discussion. All for the better, without question. When one pairs Jones' critical work with the recent release of Irele's *The Negritude Moment*, an important moment in the history of theorizing the black Atlantic emerges: what is Negritude to us? Irele gives us an historical and political account of why Negritude matters and still should. What does it mean to pair that argument for relevance with the complex intellectual heritage described in *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*? What sorts of conflicts and disagreements come into relief? That is a discussion worth having, to be sure, for in it the history of ideas meets with the very real, never yet accomplished urgency of black liberation.

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¹ Aimé Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," trans. Brent Edwards, *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 141. What is interesting, too, about this passage is that it is embedded in so many of the evocations of anthropology and cultural theory that Jones makes central to her project. A complex state of affairs, to be sure.

² Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Association and Assimilation," in *Senghor: Prose & Poetry*, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 51-52. Senghor is here discussing the relation between colonies and the metropole, but the discussion is as much an epistemology of cross-cultural contact as it is a political suggestion.