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# Interruptive discourses: Léopold Senghor, African Emotion and the poetry of politics

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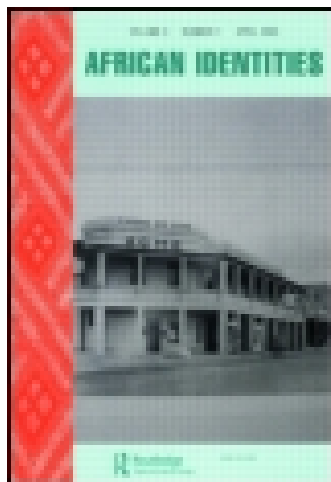
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## Interruptive discourses: Léopold Senghor, *African Emotion* and the poetry of politics

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This paper suggests that Senghor's political and poetic work can be understood as connected to his position as a sophisticated critical thinker. In order to move past a hasty rejection of his work, one might analyse Senghor's work as part of the more serious anti-colonial, epistemological activism that emerges in the mid-twentieth century. I argue that, for Senghor, politics is an art of interrupting discursive closures. I characterize Senghor's thinking as focused on epistemological questions, a recognition of the embeddedness of these questions in everyday political decision-making, and an awareness of the way his own thinking develops over time. I examine Senghor's *On African Socialism* in order to unpack the nuances in his approach. In thinking about international politics and the legacy of colonialism, I suggest that Senghor was successful in keeping open discursive closures and that from him we can learn how to prioritize the critical analysis that the development of critical questions entails.

**Keywords:** Negritude; epistemic closure; African anti-colonialism; discourse

### Introduction

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) traces the discourse of power (that he calls 'Orientalism') in European politics and art in order to illustrate the pervasiveness of its violent epistemology and its form of reason or the logic that underpins it. In the Afterword to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*, he laments the divided and essentialist nature of the response: westerners thought he was anti-western and Islamists thought he was pro-Muslim:

Let me begin with the one aspect of the book's reception that I most regret and find myself trying hardest now (in 1994) to overcome. That is the book's alleged anti-Westernism, as it has been misleadingly and rather too sonorously called by commentators both hostile and sympathetic. This notion has two parts to it, sometimes argued together, sometimes separately. The first is the claim imputed to me that the phenomenon of Orientalism is a synecdoche, or a miniature symbol, of the entire West, and indeed ought to be taken to represent the West as a whole. Since this is so, the argument continues, therefore *the entire West is an enemy of the Arab and Islamic or for that matter the Iranian, Chinese, Indian, and many other non-European peoples who suffered Western colonialism and prejudice*.

The second part of the argument ascribed to me is no less far-reaching. It is that a predatory West and Orientalism have violated Islam and the Arabs (...) Since that is so, the very existence of Orientalism and Orientalists is seized upon as a pretext for arguing the exact opposite, namely that Islam is perfect, that it is the only way, and so on and so on. *To criticize Orientalism, as I did in my book, is in effect to be a supporter of Islamism or Muslim fundamentalism*. (Said, 1994, pp. 330–331, emphasis added)

Here, I placed in italics the two accusations with which Said found himself confronted. Both responses belie a basic misunderstanding of Said's 'Foucauldian' argument which

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relies on the notion of discourses of power which make intelligible certain forms of meaning. For Said, Orientalism is a discourse of power that permeates the structure of knowledge production and ironically is the condition of possibility for this dichotomous misreading of *Orientalism*. Considering Said's argument within the broader political context of the 1970s, such as war in Vietnam, the 1973 Oil Crisis, and the Camp David Accords, yields an understanding of Orientalism as a form of knowledge that has a long historical trajectory, the imprint of which is intelligible in politics contemporaneous to a world in which Said wrote the book. From this angle, then, it is the very discourse of Orientalism itself that Said endeavours to make visible, which renders both of these argumentative positions possible and Said misunderstood.

In what follows, I suggest that Léopold Sédar Senghor (b. 1906–d. 2001) suffered from similar epistemological trappings. This essay examines Senghor's book *On African Socialism* (1968) in order to study his approach to questions of the twentieth-century decolonial moment. Senghor was the first president of an independent Senegal and he was president for 20 years (1960–1980). He was a scholar and poet who led Senegal to independence and whose approach registers most clearly in his analyses of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and Marx. In these areas, Senghor's eclecticism emerges, but it is not a wild eclecticism. His theoretical approach was clearly grounded in the very specific context of decolonizing Africa in general and Senegal in particular. It is a philosophical and ethical approach to political questions that prefigured the post-structuralist focus on challenging discursive power and on theorizing the embedded subject (see, for example, Mitchell, 1991; Mudimbe, 1988). At the centre of his project lay recognition of the inherent and messy mixing of structures of knowledge such that 'epistemological miscengenation' is inevitable. He aimed to show that heretofore subjugated knowledges are fundamental components of dominant forms of knowledge (that Said examines) *whether or not this looks to be the case*.

For example, Senghor presented an example of how to push the boundaries of what is thinkable that belies an understanding of discourse that comes a couple of decades later to be known as Foucauldian. He pushed one to think more critically about how to approach these questions and to value a theoretical approach that might be considered eclectic. Senghor's juxtaposition of European reason and African emotion appeared to work in the service of colonial and anti-colonial binaries. Indeed, one might argue that like Said's *Orientalism*, this juxtaposition provoked a bifurcated response. Yet, it is possible to come to terms with a more critical reading of Senghor's work as it is to do so with Said's. In short, one might contemplate seriously Senghor's uneasy marriage between epistemological concerns and practical exigencies. He refused the notion of Africa 'writing back' to Empire; yet, he sat betwixt and outside of anti-colonial debates that fetishized both European-ness and an anti-European nativism. His approach was characterized by a focus on epistemological questions, a recognition of the embeddedness of these questions in everyday political decision-making, and an awareness of and a courage to develop his thinking and politically put into practice over time. I consider Senghor's comments on African emotion in this light and I conclude that for Senghor, politics is an art and in many ways an art of interrupting discursive closures.

### **Senghor and African Emotion**

The most controversial aspect of Senghor's (1968) thinking is his distinction between the *reasoning-eye* of Europe from the *reasoning-embrace* of Africa (pp. 73–74). Some have taken this to mean that the European uses mind and the African uses emotion in order to

make sense of the world (Sartre & MacCombie, 1965). In fact, Senghor notes, ‘Young people have criticized me for reducing Negro-African knowledge to pure emotion, for denying that there is an African “reason” or African techniques’ (1968, p. 73). In comparing rational European subjects with emotional African subjects, Senghor alienated an entire generation or two of African youth. On the face of it, this distinction fed directly into discourses of rationality that supported colonial rule. Thus,

While Senghor’s famous assertion that ‘Emotion is completely Negro as reason is Greek’ and Aimé Césaire’s exaltations to those ‘who had invented nothing built nothing, conquered nothing’ may have initially seemed confrontational and even revolutionary, they were mistakenly conceived and expressed within the bosom of the European epistemological milieu. As such, they served to perpetuate, rather than undermine, Western regimes of power. (Harney, 2004, p. 101)

Yet, this idea that Senghor supported western regimes of power misses the point of Senghor’s approach. Rather than emotionalizing African knowledge in a Cartesian manner, Senghor thinks, ‘Negro-African reason is traditionally dialectical, transcending the principles of identity, non contradiction, and the “excluded middle”’ (Senghor, 1968, p. 75). The issue is, at least in part, one of conflation between a particular reason and a reason that is a general set of guiding principles or logics. After all, Senghor acknowledges that every society has a reason – a logic – that gives form to the knowledge that structures it. The question is: what is Senghor attempting to accomplish with this distinction?

Senghor devised a practice of governance that relied on a ‘decolonising of the mind’ – an idea that emerged out of anti-colonial struggles – using surrealism and critical intellectualism. His political arguments emerged in print with *On African Socialism* (1968) when he was already the president of Senegal and already a mature scholar. Yet, a contradiction seems to exist in his having made anti-colonial thought a form of governance in that anti-colonial critique of a central authority faced severe limitations in practice after independence, and yet he is enacting it from the position of president. This contradiction can best be examined if one finds some distance from general anti-colonial arguments for or against European or nativist forms of social order. With his comment that ‘our young people should not repudiate the Negro-African method of knowledge since, once again, it is the latest form of the European method. Participation and communion ... are the very words that ethnologists specializing in the study of Negro-African civilizations have used for decades’ (p. 74), Senghor presented political thought as a conversation that transcends location, despite its geographic and racial naming. Here, what he called a Negro-African method of knowledge was the most up-to-date contribution to human knowledge at that time, and in fact *was the European method*. This approach ironically repudiated the very boundaries to which its naming appears to have conceded.

With similar refusals and concessions, Senghor’s surrealist poetry evoked a poignant in-between-ness of colonial subjectivity and controversial responses regarding how he represented that subjectivity-seeking synthesis at odds with a contemporaneous nationalism (Reed & Wake, 1965, p. 13). These changed over time as his ‘practice’ of theorizing incorporated a fluidity that enables him to revise his claims and arguments. This flexibility is apparent in his reflections on Negritude, for example. In the following quote, cited at length, Senghor moves from a broad definition of Negritude to a commentary on how young people developed and articulated their visceral and socio-political response to their experiences in/to metropolitan spaces over time.

Negritude is the whole complex of civilized values – cultural, economic, social, and political – which characterize the black peoples or more precisely, the Negro-African world. All these values are essentially informed by intuitive reason. Because this sentient reason, the reason

which comes to grips, expresses itself emotionally, through that self-surrender, that coalescence of subject and object; through myths, by which I mean the archetypal images of the collective Soul, above all through primordial rhythms, synchronized with those of the Cosmos. In other words, the sense of communion, the gift of myth-making, the gift of rhythm, such are the essential elements of Negritude, which you will find indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man.

... when we were discussing our Revelation, we were as harshly uncompromising as neophytes, and our attitude was reinforced by all the resentment stirred in us by the colonial regime. We refused to co-operate; we took pleasure in a root and branch opposition to Western civilization. 'But', notes Cheikh Anta Diop, 'the word *Negritude* has a whole history of its own. The historical circumstances which attended its birth seem to fully justify it. Nevertheless, we must draw attention to the fact that its content has been enriched with the passing of time, and has been renewed as circumstances have altered'. Like life, the concept of Negritude has become historical and *dialectical*. It has evolved. (1968, p. 6, emphasis in original)

Negritude came out of this recognition of other ways of being and of the discovery that assimilation was a failure. The students, in Paris, in between the two World Wars, far from their comfort zone, sought solace in that which offered them a positive view of that which was to blame for their exclusion: their blackness. Senghor depicts their frustration and shame (Markovitz, 1969, p. 51) at having achieved success academically, institutionally, and in terms of their impeccable French only to find themselves marked by DuBois' colour line. But, 'the very excesses of Naziism, and the catastrophes it engendered, were soon to bring us to our senses' (Senghor, 1968, p. 6).

In the wake of Hitler's violence and along with the anthropological claim that 'there is no such thing as pure race' (Senghor, 1961, p. 6), Negritude became deracialized and took on humanist contours. Its underlying premise resettled on the anthropological claim that 'racial mixing', such as it is given that purity is a myth, is the dynamic feature of human societies. This 'mixing' or pastiche was also evident in areas of intellectual and discursive patterns of knowledge production. For Senghor, education and knowledge get passed on and come to create new subjects, which is an inevitable outcome of the cultural, political, and biological miscegenation that is colonialism. The implication is that culture transcends biology. Senghor and his cohort concluded that black culture (as subordinated) would disappear. Given their reading of European culture as 'discursive reason, technical skill, and a trading economy' (p. 6), they saw their role as contributing to the 'mainstream of cultural miscengenation' (p. 6). Thus, Negritude evolved as the vessel by which African contributions to humankind can enter a public imagination.

The next task then was to locate Europe in a broad set of relations which he does with the statement that

we still disagree with Europe: not with its values any longer, with the exception of Capitalism, but with its theory of the Civilisation of the Universal, as formulated by the *Society for European Culture* ... In the eyes of the Europeans, the 'exotic civilisations' are static in character, being content to live by means of archetypal images, which they repeat indefinitely. (Senghor, 1961, p. 8)

With this move, he contextualized the European contribution as one among many and he sets aside space for different types of contributions to human knowledge production. This is an important distinction.

Senghor did not find the French conviction that they could teach Africa how to live an intolerable arrogance. He merely thought that there were perhaps ways in which Africa could teach France how to live. African culture is not then an end in itself. Its ultimate justification is the contribution it can make, what it can give to the rest of the world ... (Reed & Wake, 1965, p. 11)

In other words, then, interconnectivity (here *colonialism*) can recreate the subject out of the best of European and Black African provincialisms.

For Senghor, the idea that Black African society is too 'stagnant' or 'primitive' to have guiding myths – or myths that act as guiding principals for society – is ludicrous. '... what are Free Enterprise, Democracy, Communism but *myths* around which hundreds of millions of men and women organize their lives? Negritude itself is a myth ... but a living dynamic one which evolves with its circumstances into a form of humanism' (Senghor, 1961, p. 10). In contrast, European civilization is not humanistic, in fact it is anti-humanistic given the use of force in colonial domination and control. Senghor's post-Second World War version of a revised and matured, evolved 'Negritude is humanistic. ... it welcomes the complementary values of Europe and the white man, and indeed, of all other races and continents. But it welcomes them in order to fertilise and re-invigorate its own values, which it then offers for the construction of a civilization which shall embrace all Mankind' (p. 10). On the face of it, these sentiments appear idealistic, but statements made at one of the academic centres of the British Commonwealth carry weight. They are part of a political platform towing the line – or occupying that space of maintaining allies, while pushing against their boundaries.

It is with this lens that one might examine this controversial aspect of Senghor's thinking: the distinction between *reasoning-eye* of Europe from the *reasoning-embrace* of Africa. I suggest that Senghor located a particular reason, Enlightenment reason, the form of reason that distinguishes the viewer from the viewed, the reason that places meaning in an object rather than in the dynamics within which objects are constituted as meaningful. This distinction between European and African forms of reason cannot be placed within the dichotomous dynamics of Enlightenment rationality. He was not mimicking the notion that Man is intellect and woman is emotion, for example. Nor was he saying that *the European is the intellect and the African is the emotion*. Instead, Senghor argued that European rationality divides the intellect from the emotion, while African rationality has not systematically adopted that discursive knowledge formation. Despite colonialism, or perhaps because colonial domination was inconsistent and shallow in places, an African rationality still exists that privileges a reason that is both intellectual and emotional, based on participation and observation. This rationality is, according to Senghor, a superior form of knowledge because it can collect higher quantity of data, a higher quality of data, and more variable data. It also has the capacity to absorb and make a more complex sense of a broader swathe of data because the epistemological frameworks are not so starkly, rigidly, and violently categorized. In other words, African rationality has a flexibility that European rationality does not have, and that arguably makes it potentially a more creative science if we listen to Einstein. 'The most beautiful emotion that we can experience ... is mystic emotion. It is the germ of all art and all true science' (Einstein cited in Senghor, 1968, p. 74; Vaillant, 1990, p. 253). Senghor's choice of Einstein's words upholds the view that knowledge has characteristics that transcend territorial boundaries. With this, he was able to make the case that socialism is not only European.

### Reason and African Socialism

In *On African Socialism* (1968; originally published in 1961), Senghor built the case for a system of governance that would respond to disparities of wealth and education (including questions of access to both and interest in both) and the legacy of colonialism. Senghor faced a Senegal that was a new state with a weakly consolidated geographical territory and an historical legacy of colonialism that was uneven at best. His version of African



socialism comprised a response to both an economy that was only partially incorporated into the capitalist mode of production and a population diverse in terms of religion, language, and tribal affiliation. Significantly, *On African Socialism* was also a response to a population diverse in terms of their experiences of colonial authority, their incorporation into capitalist labour practices, and consequently their relationship with notions of blackness and Africanness.

For Senghor, the main prerequisite for independence and for building a 'new political unit' was what he called 'cultural independence'.

Independence is not a refusal, it is a choice: a choice of goal and of means, as a function of our present situation. We are not in the same position as our ancestors ... It is now a matter of selecting, among European methods, the most effective ones for an exact analysis of our situation. It is a question of borrowing those of its institutions, values, and techniques that are most likely to fecundate our traditional civilization. I say 'our civilization', for we shall not be building from scratch. To do so would surely be to head for failure, for there is no *tabula rasa*. We shall retain whatever should be retained of our institutions, our techniques, our values, even our methods. From all this – African acquisitions and European contributions – we shall make a dynamic symbiosis to fit Africa and the twentieth century, but first of all to fit Man. (Senghor, 1968, p. 9)

Here, cultural independence was neither a rejection of the colonizer nor an embrace of a myth of origins. Rather, cultural independence encompassed the ability to evaluate different ways of being that were grounded in historical specificity as well as to articulate a reflective response to those ways of being in concrete terms. For Senghor, this type of (what we might call) critical engagement was a necessary precursor to the development of a guiding work ethic that would make the new state as fair and efficient a political unit as possible.

Two elements undergirded cultural independence. The first was reason: *independence* requires a logic of order and *cultural independence* requires a specific and grounded logic of order (Senghor, 1968, p. 69). This argument implied that the 'reason' of a society is a logic grounded in the historical specificity of its conditions. With this move, Senghor used the colonial language of reason and rationality that dominates colonial experiences generally and French colonial experiences in Africa and Senegal specifically. He rooted this colonial language of reason and rationality and normalized it as part of a necessary process for social functioning and reproduction. In this way, he used the same concept as the colonizers, but he placed it on the ground, so one can see how it is connected to other socio-political processes. The second and related element is the relationship between politics and religion (p. 83). Challenges to colonial authority had to negotiate the legacy of Marxian thought which emerged as an early and sophisticated critique of exploitative relations of power that places questions of religion on the exploitative side of these relations. For Senghor, religion was both a socio-political reality and a question of faith that requires attention in the post-colonial context. Senghor saw Marx as a sociologist whose work is indispensable in negotiating twentieth-century political aims on African socialism. Insofar as he aimed to articulate an approach to state-building, Senghor had to consider two things: first, how Marx was relevant; and, second, how to synthesize his main points for an audience who did not have a background in European political philosophy.

Senghor began by asking if one can 'integrate Negro-African cultural values especially religious values into socialism' (Senghor, 1968, p. 26). The importance of this question lay in the way Senghor localized social logics. With this question, for example, he asked: can specific logics embedded in different locations be compatible? His answer was yes. Marx's scientific contribution lay in his having explicated complex relationships that can

potentially ‘reveal the economic law of motion in modern society’ (p. 31). Marx studied relationships, he did not explicate economic law. He was motivated by an ethical response to perceived wrongs, in particular the exploitation of industrialized labour. According to Senghor, the Marxian conception of exploitation could be translated into thinking about a much smaller working class and an exploited peasantry (pp. 55–56). In other words, it could be translated into local logics of Senegal, in particular. The challenge arose in applying Marx’s position that religion is unethical when considering an exploited peasantry for whom religion, and spirituality, was embedded in daily life. For Marx, religion supports the triumph of capitalism, which requires the injustice to which he was responding.

In an intricate move, Senghor placed Marx’s critique of religion in the historical personage that is Karl Marx, a man who was a philosopher, an idealist, and atheist Jew converted to Christianity, a person for whom religion was never anything but an intellectual exercise, and a person who saw religion as a primary form of alienation that facilitates the secondary alienation created by the market (Senghor, 1968, pp. 26–48). Senghor suggested that Marx was himself a victim of an Enlightenment-inflected, ‘crisis of faith’ generated by the economic/knowledge system of the mid-nineteenth century. For Senghor, this crisis coincided with a deep arrogance in the capacity of man to overcome his conditions in the very moment when it seemed close to impossible that one could overcome the oppressive structures guiding industrialization. By situating Marx in this context, Senghor developed a complex analysis around Marx’s claim that men are subject to conditions and circumstances beyond their control. The idea that men can make history within certain conditions of possibility can be read as a response to Enlightenment arrogance as well as a plea for critical analyses of social power. Reading Marx in this way, Senghor intuited a human response to bearing witness to the violence of early industrialization.<sup>1</sup> For Senghor, Marx was embedded in a time in which Enlightenment rationality nourished the illusion of (European) man’s sweeping control over the world, and its people. With this move, Senghor effectively claimed a universal Marx who developed an analytical tool that enabled him to examine sets of social relations and acknowledged a particular Marx who navigated a set of social relations specific to a nineteenth-century industrial moment.

This move freed Senghor to address sets of relations specific to a twentieth-century decolonial moment, and make a case for a form of government – Socialism, despite its ‘European roots’ (Senghor, 1968, p. 75). As a result, Senghor could suggest that practices of colonialism imposed a particular form of reason that served to narrate and justify colonial authority, thereby subordinating other forms of reason. He could and did argue that moves for decolonization had to incorporate a critique of colonial reason and a critical analysis of reason more generally. If colonial thought developed a form of reason that divorces rationality from religion or from elements of faith, then anti-colonial thought needed to negotiate the link between reason and faith (or religious faith, in the case of Senghor) in particular because this link complicated the implementation of socialism – or ideas that might be perceived as socialist – in places inhabited by a religious peasantry sceptical of Marx. Yet, Marx’s positive contributions that remained on the table for any contemplative nation-building exercise were: ‘the philosophy of humanism, economic theory, dialectical method. To these we may add trade unionism, planning, and also federalism and cooperation’ (Senghor, 1968, p. 45). Communism excised religion, but for Senghor and others Communism was not a humanistic response to Capitalism – in fact, its structures of production and impact on human dignity were actually very similar to

Capitalism (p. 46).<sup>2</sup> It was within this nexus of materialism on ‘both sides’ of the political spectrum that Senghor argued that Marx’s ethics do have a place.

The discovery of certain early works of Marx, the Economic and Philosophical manuscripts of 1844, which were published in France in 1937 had made it possible to view Marx as a kind of humanist philosopher protesting against the alienation of man in capitalist society. Senghor was able to explain that man’s alienation under early European capitalism was but one historical and geographical form of alienation. The African was also alienated, deprived of his dignity and fullness as a human being. (Reed & Wake, 1965, pp. 17–18)

*On African Socialism* might be read as a critique of capitalism, a critique of the state, and a critique of hasty responses to colonialism. Senghor takes on the governance of Senegal and critically engages available ideational and discursive practices that allow him to build a case and policy for a modern, economically sustaining, multicultural nation state. The process of nation-building in Africa is often considered to have been externally constructed with little by way of lessons for countries outside of Africa. Yet, there are lessons to be drawn from the African experience of nation-building. Nation states emerged in Europe differently than the way they developed in Africa. For example, African states had to negotiate a multicultural population, thereby connecting the state with politics rather than an organically consolidated national identity (at least initially).<sup>3</sup> Senghor pointed to ‘a reaction against capitalistic, and Communistic materialism that will integrate moral, if not religious values with the political and economic contributions previous thinkers’ (1968, p. 48) – it is Senghor’s approach that reflects his nuanced political thinking and that allows him to assuage the concerns of his countrymen. Importantly for the argument at hand, he is able to do this by developing the notion that all sets of relations have a logic or a form of reason that orders them, and that one might find universal and particular elements in any form of reason.

### Logics of order and later intellectual developments

This essay has thus far demonstrated that Senghor’s approach to colonialism and anti-colonialism is involved in an analysis of the reason that gives form to social order. In making the suggestion that Senghor has been misunderstood regarding his statements about European reason and African emotion, I have sought to enscence his claim in the context of his broader argument and to illustrate the careful ways that he forms his arguments. Here, I turn to another substantive quote that situates his claim in a statement about epistemological forms of subjectivity. Senghor says,

The life-surge of the African, his self-abandonment to the *Other*, is thus actuated by reason. But here reason is not eye-reason of the European, it is the *reason-by-embrace* which shares more the nature of the *logos* than *ratio*. *Ratio* is compass, set-square and sextant, measure and weight whereas the *logos*, before its Aristotelian tempering, before it became diamond, was living speech. Speech, which is the most typically human expression of neuro-sensory impression, does not cast the object, untouched, into rigid logical categories. African speech, in raising itself to the *Wordi*?, rubs and polishes things to give them back their original colour, with their grain and their veins, shooting through them rays of light to restore their transparency, penetrating their sur-reality or rather their underlying reality, in its first freshness. *Classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object. African reason is intuitive and participates in the object.* (Senghor, 1965, pp. 33–34; emphasis in original)

In contemporary parlance, one might say that Senghor distinguished between a form of reason that situates the subject outside of that which it observes and a form of reason that implicates the subject as an indivisible part of its object of inquiry.

A more recent analysis of this very issue of reason presents the notion of world-as-exhibition to describe what is unique about European reason. As a concept, world-as-exhibition contextualizes and defines the contours of a world that is presented as an exhibit, as something to observe and consume, to a population who comes to be unified in its patterns of observation and consumption (Mitchell, 1991). Contemporaneously, another analysis suggests that colonial knowledge production is marked by an emphasis on the ideological (Mudimbe, 1988). If the latter suggests that unambiguous meaning or truth is itself the working of an ideological apparatus that bounds which questions can be developed and asked, then, the discourse of power underpinning the notion of the world-as-exhibition has set limits on what can be said about Africa. Senghor prefigures these intellectual developments and, ironically, these developments demonstrate the limitations he faced in terms of staking out claims in clearly accessible ways.

For Mitchell (1991), dichotomies of reality/representation, European/Other, rich/poor (legitimate/illegitimate forms of knowledge) represent real discursive limitations; they effectively facilitated a process of social and political domination. He draws a clear link between knowledge and its political consequences and illustrates how that which appears natural and unquestionable is actually contested, is actually political. Thus, while discourse enframes this political reality, the Enlightenment represents a discursive disjuncture. The illusion of a natural order represents a violent rupture in modes of enframing. This epistemological change is the originary violence of the separation of the body from the mind. Again, this change had practical consequences. Cartesian philosophy, premised on binary divisions, was the profound theoretical development that created a fundamentally new and modern world.<sup>4</sup> In his analysis of colonial Cairo, this change led to the destruction of the physical location and the rebuilding of it with a newly devised structure and order that later appeared to pre-exist any destruction/construction (Mitchell, 1991, p. 177). The naturalness of this form of order obscures the reason that gives it form. The individual subject also appears disconnected from a logic of social order.

The idea of world-as-exhibition is an epistemological construction that served new modes of production and disciplined not just labour, but also the subject as consumer. For example, Mitchell contrasts rote learning from 'silent-until-spoken-to' students in the colonial schools with the 'disorderly' questioning of students at Al-Azhar in Cairo. In the latter, students moved from teacher to teacher. The learning process was a critical and interactive thinking process that yielded a different kind of subject than did the colonial schools. At least theoretically, the colonial schools yielded an obeying, disciplined subject while Al-Azhar yielded a questioning disciplined subject. The communities they form would look different, 'inhabitants of the world-as-exhibition ... ordinarily take for granted as elements of any order – framework, interior, subject, objects, *and an unambiguous meaning or truth*' (Mitchell, 1991, p. 51; emphasis added).

Mudimbe (1988) suggests that the unambiguous meaning or truth is the clear working of ideology that bounds that which we can question. In other words, the very notion of truth is a function of an ideological 'boundary making', or discursive closure. Conversely, the notion of ambiguity yields a discursive opening and Mudimbe was searching for these pathways in the conversation on Africa. In keeping with Mitchell, one might say that the world-as-exhibition has framed the conversation about Africa, even for those who attempted to incorporate Africans into the family of humans by arguing that there is an African reason or African philosophy. Thinkers like E. W. Blyden (1832–1912) and later Placide Tempels (1906–1977), and Senghor opposed the idea that Africans have no rationality. This argument was limited precisely because they took for granted the

ideological underpinnings of the conversation itself: that ‘rationality’ was the crux of the issue. Yet, they did push boundaries of what can be thought, uttered, and understood.

For Mudimbe, European rationality is remarkable in that it supports an ideological apparatus that presents the world *as it really is* – particularly with regard to ideologies of race, gender, and progress. He demonstrated this with his chapter on Blyden. On the one hand, ‘Blyden simply opposed one racist view to another racist view’ (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 130). But Senghor celebrated Blyden as the ‘foremost precursor both of Negritude and of the African Personality’ (p. 98). Mudimbe asked: ‘in what sense should we accept Senghor’s statement that Blyden was the precursor of negritude and African Personality?’ (p. 131). His answer was to ground Blyden in an intellectual trajectory. Blyden ‘should be understood against “the background of a chronic effort to correct socio-psychological disequilibrium”’ (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 131; Geertz in Mudimbe, 1988, p. 131). African responses to European framings of Africa tackle ideological themes, but end up reproducing them because they rely on the same epistemological foundation (the binary world-as-exhibition and in this case ‘the controversial principle of irreconcilable differences between the races’, Mudimbe, 1988, p. 132). Yet, Blyden focused

on the significance of European ethnocentrism and its various expressions. This meant, then as now, that an understanding of African personality or African culture cannot neglect a major dimension – *the epistemological debate*. Because of imperialism and its ideological reflections in moral and social sciences, this approach must call into question all discourses interpreting Africans and their culture. (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 133, emphasis added)

In these pages, I claim that Senghor faced down this epistemological debate. Importantly, however, he developed a unique approach to it. Beginning with the notion that all societies have a logic and often multiple competing logics, his approach to the question of reason reveals depth in Senghor’s thinking and tensions between his role as a poet and philosopher and his role as head of government. This question of reason is more precisely one of logic. What is the logic upon which a society is structured? Two thinkers writing 27 years after Senghor approach the question of colonization from an angle similar to Senghor’s. One study demonstrates that European reason creates a new form of order that places subjects in relational positions, but hides the relationships between them (Mitchell, 1991). And a second study analyses the way that specific ideologies of race and progress rely on and hide their epistemological framework, but make subject positions appear natural (Mudimbe, 1988). Together, these two studies demonstrate what Senghor understands, that awareness of the locatedness of European reason presents the need for anti-colonial platforms to critically contemplate the form of rationality required for a desired political entity. Indeed, ‘The African experience suggests that the key question posed by post-colonial societies is political: what are the boundaries of the political community?’ (Mamdani, 2011, p. 563). A question such as this one requires thinking about the central logic around which to construct a polity. This is a ‘where-do-we-go-from-here?’ question. And, Senghor’s answer to the question negotiated a realpolitik that compromised the theoretical vision, for sure – it could be no other way, processes of institutionalization require it – but this devalues neither his analysis nor his questions. For Senghor, ‘the poet is like the prophet. He foretells the future and in announcing the future he brings the future into existence’ (Senghor, 1966, p. 10). But vision is not only the poet’s. Poets give voice to communal vision.

### Conclusion: politics as art

In his art and in his politics, Senghor protected a Self that can be considered ‘African’ – a positive definition of the Self. He juxtaposed this idea ‘African’ with the idea ‘European’



in terms of what he saw lacking in the colonial interaction: emotion, intellect, politics, colonialism, theorizing, and rationality. Certainly, his language was easy to read in terms of colonial discourse, which framed Africans in certain inferior ways. However, the intellect of Senghor indicates a more radical agenda than might at first appear to be the case. First, his theoretical eclecticism allowed him to declare a Self rather than to occupy a position defined as other. He achieved this by conceptualizing Europe and things/ideas European as local and historically grounded. Second, his description of the kind of relations of mixing that become possible under colonialism actually destabilized the essence of the categories of West, East, African, etc., as people become assimilated. Here, assimilated is defined as becoming similar, sharing rationalities, etc. (Senghor, 1965, p. 50). This is a sort of intersubjectivity that emerges over time and out of contact. Regardless of individual intention, the 'final aim of colonialism [then can be] moral and intellectual cross-fertilization, the kind of assimilation that allows association' (p. 54). Senghor was conceiving of this meeting as potentially radical.

From this angle, African reason could be seen as having its own logic, its own form of discursive reason which was better able to negotiate the forms of inequality that angered that generation of Europeans that came of age after Second World War – the generation concerned precisely with epistemological frameworks that were seen as the foundational source of the logic of capitalism, colonialism, inequality, and abuses of state power. Recognizing Senghor, the scholar, contextualizes his efforts to make accessible complex theoretical ideas in order to support his mode of politics. Crucially, for Senghor, European reason is exclusive to Europe no more than African emotion is exclusive to Africa – these are heuristic devices meant to illustrate the politics of rationality, meant to reveal the epistemological foundations of ideological positions. '[Politics] is an art' ... [It] is an *active humanism*' (Senghor, 1965, p. 56, emphasis in original). This is the only choice for post-colonial Africa because '*every civilization is the expression, with its own peculiar emphasis, of certain characteristics of humanity*' (p. 53, emphasis in original).

One can see evidence of Senghor's success in the 1980s Senegalese popular mural movement, SET SETAL. After Senghor left office in 1980, Senegal was subjected to World Bank structural adjustment programmes. The government reduced state funding for public goods such as health, education, culture, and sanitation. Local authorities were neither prepared nor equipped to provide public infrastructure and goods. Dakar suffered urban decay throughout the 1980s. 'The Set Setalian movement's attempts to reinscribe local perceptions and histories into the cityscape and the national consciousness led to a widespread involvement in imagining a community through artistic means' (Harney, 2004, p. 215).

Importantly, SET SETAL represented a vast 'diversity of forms and the eclecticism of sources and content' that made up their urban output (Harney, 2004, p. 212). For example,

in one section of the city, portraits of and quotations from Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and John f. Kennedy complement a large and provocative image of the French colonial slave fort on the Senegalese island of Gorée in which stands a defiant, muscular figure, struggling to free himself from the weight of thick manacles. In other sites, one can find the bust portraits of Mao Tse-tung and Lenin. In addition, the young muralists honored the legends of sports, music, and other forms of popular culture from Africa and elsewhere, producing portraits of Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Mickey Mouse, Superman, Tintin, Mohammad Ali, Assane Diouf (a famous boxer), and Manga II (a champion wrestler). Some murals addressed serious concerns about the health and welfare of the population with didactic, often graphically disturbing scenes that spoke of the problems of AIDS, diarrhea, dysentery, and malaria. Others were playful, fantastic, and romantic, featuring nostalgic

scenes of the African countryside and rural life, portraits of the lion, emblem of Senegal, and visions of Mammy Wata. (pp. 211–212)

This process is the Senghorian one that this essay has analysed. In this case,

nationalist visions seen in SET SETAL were not based on the recognition of a shared, racially determined identity, like those which preceded them, but rather on the shared experiences of the fractured, uncertain, and contingent realities of life in a large cosmopolitan center, one marked as much by the vicissitudes of a global political and cultural economy as by its relations to its African heritage. (Harney, 2004, p. 216)

In this paper, I suggest that Senghor's political and poetic work can be understood in connection to his position as a sophisticated critical thinker. In order to move past a hasty rejection of his work, which is largely out of print, one must analyse Senghor's work as part of the more serious anti-colonial, epistemological activism that emerges in the mid-twentieth century. While he is often portrayed as being a black Frenchman, i.e. as having already selected his loyalties, a careful reading suggests that Senghor carved a careful balancing act between the practical exigencies Senegal faced, his role as a politician, his faith in a higher power, and his intellect. His work was deeply concerned with decolonization of the mind, which required a refusal to select or reject anything on the basis of preconceived notions or on an uncritical acceptance of pre-existing binary epistemological frameworks. Arguably, Senghor made certain assumptions that underpin his work, particularly it seems as regards gender. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that it contains seeds of an approach that can be useful for analysing contemporary politics. Given his education and intellectual acuity, it is fair to assume that Senghor intended complex analyses of his world and of Africa in the world, and significantly of Europe in the world. Indeed, Senghor's analyses were discursive in a Foucauldian sense. And, it is in this sense that I find continuities between how Senghor analysed the world and how later critical anti-colonial thinkers approach socio-political explanation, specifically Said, Mudimbe, and Mitchell. Ironically, all three use Foucault, but Senghor could not have. All three and Senghor are concerned with epistemologies of coloniality that structure linguistic, temporal, conceptual, and spatial meanings to which political analyses are still subject.

My question is what can critical theorists take from Senghor's work that can be useful for us today. By 'useful' I do not mean where is Senghor uncomplicated, or about what is he correct or how we can make him another male figure that we can turn into an 'approach'. Rather, I mean what does Senghor offer that allows us to push the boundaries of the questions we now ask, to think more critically about how we approach these questions, to wonder about the value of eclecticism, and to query the uneasy marriage between epistemological concerns and practical exigencies. To be sure, the sort of exercise I am proposing here turns up more questions than answers. The questions are precisely the point in this case. If Senghor was trapped in a colonial discourse of power that in part framed 'what could be said' and, in larger part, 'what could be heard', then the way he negotiated these limitations both transcended this colonial discourse of power and set the stage for a deeper conversation which came later out of Edward's Said's analysis of *Orientalism*.

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## Notes

1. See Engels (1978), in which he describes the conditions under which workers lived in Manchester. This short piece gives some indication of what they saw that elicited the critical work they then produced.
2. See also Debord (1983) in which he makes the case that Communism and Capitalism have similar foundations.
3. I recognize of course that national projects cannot achieve completeness.
4. This is a frequently made point and, like in other instances, Mitchell situates the development of colonization in Enlightenment philosophy. For other examples of this, see Young (2004), Gandhi (1998), and Grosz (1994). This accusation has also been countered by arguments that the Enlightenment had positive impact as well. For this, see Bronner (2004).

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