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Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010. 231 pp. Notes and index. \$25.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-231-14548-0.

Review by Jeremy F. Lane, University of Nottingham.

In her introduction, Donna Jones identifies the main argument of her study as involving two central claims. The first of these is that “one cannot understand twentieth-century vitalism separately from its implication in racial and anti-Semitic discourses.” Her second principal claim is that “we cannot understand some of the dominant models of emancipation within black thought except through recourse to the vitalist tradition” (p. 5). After an introduction in which she lays out the general lines of her approach, Jones proceeds to dedicate four chapters to proving those two central claims.

In her first chapter, she examines the emergence of vitalism from the nineteenth century on as a reaction against Cartesian rationalism and mechanical conceptions of the world, before showing how *Lebensphilosophie* achieved dominance in the European intellectual field following the mechanised horrors of the First World War and the crisis in Western values these were held to portend. A second chapter analyses different forms of vitalism, from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georg Simmel right up to that of Gilles Deleuze, before reviewing the various criticisms these have elicited, from the earlier (Max Horkheimer and Georg Lukacs) to the more recent (Peter Hallward and Alain Badiou). In her third chapter, Jones focuses specifically on the work of Henri Bergson, and here she makes some of her boldest and most original claims. Rejecting the current tendency to read Bergson, in the wake of Deleuze, as a “metaphysician of change” (p. 23), she insists on the conservative implications of his conception of temporal duration. Further, Jones claims that Bergsonism was more influential than social Darwinism in encouraging interwar artists and intellectuals to embrace “racialism” and “spiritual nationalism” (pp. 23, 117).

A fourth and final chapter examines the influence of vitalist ideas on the philosophy and poetics of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, identifying the contradictions and pitfalls inherent to this vitalist inheritance. Whilst generally critical of vitalism as a body of thought, Jones insists on its “polysemous” nature (p. 61) and hence rejects any “simple acceptance or rejection” of vitalist ideas (p. 71). Rather, her goal is, given the racialism and anti-Semitism implicit in so much vitalist thought, to highlight its positive as well as its negative characteristics and hence to understand precisely what made it “attractive and the needs to which it spoke” in the interwar years (p. 23). This, in turn, provides the grounds for the distinction she draws in her final chapter between the kinds of vitalism embraced by Senghor and Césaire, respectively, a distinction which leads her to rather different assessments of the value of each thinker’s ideas and output.

Before reaching those differing conclusions about Senghor and Césaire, however, Jones dedicates the majority of her book to the analysis of the merits and demerits of vitalism in general. Indeed, it might be argued that the two aims she identifies in her introduction lead her to follow two rather distinct lines of enquiry, whose relationship, one to the other, is not always immediately clear. This is perhaps most evident in her discussion of the work of Deleuze, a key figure in any discussion of vitalism in general, yet

one whose work post-dates the central texts of negritude and hence exerted no influence on the thought of either Senghor or Césaire. Chapter two, in particular, which is dedicated to the critical exposition of vitalist philosophy, includes only passing references to Senghor and Césaire and thus seems motivated primarily by Jones' desire to question the influence of vitalism on present-day critical theory and hence to substantiate her belief that vitalism cannot "ground critical theory today" because of its roots in "mysticism and occultism" (p. 57). This is, in itself, a perfectly valid, indeed some would argue an urgent goal but it does, in places, lead Jones on a rather long detour away from her supposedly central focus on vitalism's relationship to negritude.

That said, it should be emphasised that this proves to be an enjoyable and highly stimulating detour, for Jones is able to clarify the roots, evolution, philosophical and political implications of different brands of vitalism in a concise and illuminating fashion. This involves her making some important conceptual distinctions that forestall any too hasty dismissal of vitalism for its allegedly inescapable complicity in the crimes of Nazism. For example, she highlights "the need to differentiate an organicist vitalism from an authoritarian biology in which the putative governing of an organism by the *Führer* of a life force provided an analogy for such a principle in political organization" (p. 38). Too hasty conflations of German Idealist and Romantic organicism with totalitarianism, Jones argues, overlook the extent to which that organicism originally involved a claim to freedom in the face of the threat of every agent being reduced to a fixed role within some impersonal mechanism (p. 39).

Once this distinction has been grasped, it is possible to understand the attractiveness of such organicism to a thinker such as Senghor, for whom it seemed to offer a necessary antidote to the destructive force of Western mechanistic thinking and practice. To understand this point is not, of course, to endorse Senghor's philosophical and political choices unreservedly. As Jones points out, "by absolutizing a social form," such organicism can also lead both to essentialism and to a political "pessimism" since "the organism manifests development only to the point of the realization of its basic form" (p. 41). At this point, Deleuze appears to ride to the rescue by advocating a vitalism that eschews the Kantian and Romantic "vision of complex organic unity at the level of subject or society" (p. 42). As Jones argues, if Deleuze has proved so attractive to the "post-Négritude" thinker Édouard Glissant, it is precisely because his "anorganic vitalism," with its emphasis on the rhizomatic force of machinic production, seems to offer a way out of the essentialism and organicism inherent to Senghor's negritude (p. 43).

If Deleuzeanism appears to represent a solution at this point in Jones' analysis, any such appearance will prove short-lived, for Deleuze's thought will also be subjected to a sustained critique, a critique which echoes but extends and inflects in new ways the charge, notably made by Peter Hallward, of political irresponsibility.^[1] It will only be in the final chapter, in the course of her discussion of Césaire, that the rationale behind this ambivalent assessment of Deleuze will become clear. Here Jones is concerned to contest the claims made by Nick Nesbitt and Brent Hayes Edwards to the effect that Césaire's examination and rejection of different forms of black identity in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* is an example of Hegelian "determinate negation" at work, Césaire's adoption of a positive black identity being contingent on dialectically working through its antitheses in a "negation of the negation."^[2]

Jones argues cogently that to embrace the Hegelian negation of the negation implies acceptance of a continuing dependence upon the Other: in the dialectic of Master and Slave, the Slave depends for his subjectivity upon the recognition granted by his Master to the value of his labour. Such a scenario, Jones argues, had no validity under conditions of plantation slavery and its aftermath. Hence, she insists that in the *Cahier*, Césaire is not engaging in a series of Hegelian determinate negations of racial identities imposed by the Other; rather he is engaged in affirming "positive difference" on a Nietzschean vitalist model (pp.168-170). Jones thus presents Césaire as a kind of Deleuzian *avant la lettre*, pursuing "lines of flight" from an imposed racial identity, whilst affirming plural black identities through an implicit appeal to Nietzschean positive difference (p. 170). The black body hence becomes, for Césaire, a

“body without organs,” liberated from the restrictive identity imposed on it by the French “imperial *socius*” (p. 171).

Aware of Jones’ earlier criticisms of Deleuze, the reader is able to grasp the ambivalence of her assessment of Césaire’s achievement at this point in her analysis. Indeed, Jones shows us a Césaire caught between two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, his efforts to pursue “lines of flight” from imposed racial identities see him apparently eschew limiting forms of essentialism. On the other hand, his affirmation of positive difference demands he find some foundation for that affirmation and this can lead him to appeals to African blood, race, and inheritance, to a “biological African substratum” (pp. 172-173). According to Jones, such lapses into “naïve biologism” (p. 174) do not, however, justify Nesbitt’s claim that Césaire is complicit with fascism.^[3] Here Jones’ analysis again draws on her earlier detailed readings of vitalism, on her insistence on the need to distinguish between “vitalist organicism” and “authoritarian biology”: she argues cogently that Césaire’s embrace of the former allows him to accept and reclaim the subservience and mediocrity of black lives which the latter would seek violently to extinguish in its pursuit of racial purity and vigour (pp. 174-175).

Jones’s patient and detailed readings of vitalist philosophies thus provide her with the grounds for her ambivalent assessment of Césaire’s output. Ultimately, although keenly aware of his lapses into essentialism and biologism, she will salute Césaire’s achievement in attempting “to awaken his readers from the dreamscapes, ideologies, and imaginaries of the colonial world and to affirm black life” (p. 177). Her assessment of Senghor’s achievements is much less positive and this reflects her belief that he is much closer to Bergson, a thinker of whom Jones is highly critical. As a whole, she maintains, negritude owes a four-fold debt to Bergson, in its appeal to the dynamics of duration as the framework for the recovery of racial memory, in the idea of a “fundamental self” as a basis for racial authenticity, in its critique of the intellect in favour of intuition, and in its elevation of the poet to the status of a Bergsonian “mystic” (pp. 131-132). What distinguishes Césaire from Senghor, she argues, is his engagement with Nietzschean vitalism and the positive, affirmative tenor this gives his thought. Senghor, by contrast, remains rooted in “Bergsonian traditionalism” (p. 132).

In the earlier chapter dedicated to Bergson’s thought, Jones had insisted on the fundamentally conservative nature of his notions of both duration and intuition and on their deep implication with contemporary assumptions about racial inheritance and identity. Thus she had argued that “by duration [Bergson] meant the whole virtual field not only of a single subject’s memory but of the race to which he belonged” (p. 100). Similarly, Bergson’s conception of freedom as an act springing from the intuition of one’s whole personality opened the way to interpretations of that personality in racial terms. It is these ideas that Jones argues are at the root of Senghor’s emphasis on the need for the “nègre” to reconnect with an essential African self whose characteristics are determined by an intuitionistic African communalism defined by its opposition to Western mechanistic rationalism. As she acknowledges, there is nothing new about criticisms of Senghor’s essentialist and nostalgic appeals to an edenic African communalism. Yet she claims that the Bergsonian roots of this are “simply not appreciated” (p. 145).

As Jones herself acknowledges, her analysis runs the risk of “overemphasizing the importance of Bergson to Senghor and Césaire” (p. 23). Indeed, the reader may legitimately wonder why such precedence is given to Bergsonism as an explanation for Senghor’s conservatism. It could surely be argued that Senghor’s Catholic spirituality and his multiple debts to a thinker such as Jacques Maritain are equally significant sources of that conservatism. Yet Jones offers no sustained discussion of such influences and Maritain merits just one solitary mention in her study (p. 40). The reader may also question the absence of any significant examination of the work of Léon Gontran Damas, the third of the so-called founding fathers of negritude. Rather like Maritain, he is accorded just a few lines, with no explanation offered for the lack of a more detailed analysis of his ideas and poetics or of his relationship to vitalism (p. 54). Jones’s repeated description of René Ménil as “one of the founders of *Négritude*” (pp.

52, 87) will strike many as equally questionable, since this is certainly not how he understood his own political and aesthetic affiliations in the interwar years.^[4]

More seriously, Jones' claim that Ménil's essays on humour betray the influence of Bergson on his thought seem simply wrong-headed, given the unmistakably Hegelian tenor of his conceptual vocabulary. When Ménil asserts that "*humour knows*, it is even supremely knowledgeable, having transcended life's accidents to achieve the absolute of Spirit," his language is evidently Hegelian rather than Bergsonian.^[5] Indeed, given Ménil's surrealism, such statements clearly resonate with André Breton's appropriation of the Hegelian concept of "objective humour," first in his Surrealist Manifesto and later in his studies of "black humour."^[6]

There are, then, moments when Jones' exclusive focus on the influence of vitalism on negritude does indeed seem excessive, just as there are some unexplained gaps in her analysis. Nevertheless, overall her study is detailed, incisive, and stimulating, representing an important and original intervention into debates around both the influence of vitalism on current critical theory and the legacies of negritude.

NOTES

[1] Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006).

[2] See Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p.120; Brent Hayes Edwards, "Aimé Césaire: The Syntax of Influence," *Research in African Literatures* 36/ 2(2005):7.

[3] For this claim see Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory*, p. 83.

[4] See René Ménil's 1978 Introduction to the re-edition of the single number of the 1932 journal, *Légitime défense* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1978), n.p.

[5] René Ménil, "L'Humour: Introduction à 1945," reprinted in his *Antilles déjà, jadis, précédé de Tracées* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999), p. 137, my translation.

[6] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. R. Seaver & H. R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); André Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions Sagittaire, 1950).

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