

## **MOHAMED KAMARA**

### **Slavery, Colonialism, Human Rights, and the Négritude of Léopold Sédar Senghor**

According to Article 1 of the 1948 United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."<sup>1</sup> Adopted eighty-three years after the Americans abolished slavery, a hundred years after the French, and 141 years after the English, what the UN declaration underscored is the fundamental principle of universal humanity, and what it hoped to achieve was the immediate granting of at least a "juridical humanity"<sup>2</sup> to those under colonial rule. Furthermore, by recognising all humans as such, the declaration aspired to the prevention of future human rights violations such as those perpetrated in the nineties in Sierra Leone, Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, to name just these three. However, the world didn't have to wait for the nineties to witness the powerlessness of the declaration. Indeed, at the time of adoption of the document, European nations still possessed colonies. It was not until exactly twelve years later, on 14 December 1960, a few months after France had granted independence to almost all her colonies in sub-Saharan Africa,

that the same august body finally realised that colonisation was actually one of the agents of human rights violations it had so vehemently condemned in the earlier text. The document that came out of that realisation, “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples,” defines colonialism as “[t]he subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation.”<sup>3</sup> The declaration further asserts that such subjection “constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights,” and that it “is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and co-operation.”<sup>4</sup>

In the first part of this essay, I will talk more generally about slavery and colonialism, as well as the relationship between them and human rights. I will then, in the second part, focus more specifically on Léopold Sédar Senghor’s response to the atrocities perpetrated through the slave trade and colonialism. My discussion of Senghor will look at two areas: first, his illustration and critique of slavery and colonialism; and second, his plea for and promotion of a new kind of humanism that would complement, if not replace, the Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism that failed to prevent them.

The transatlantic or triangular slave trade was a highly codified practice. Each participating nation had its own sets of laws, rules, and regulations governing the status of the slave, the responsibility of the trader or owner, and the general conduct of the trade itself. A look at excerpts from the French *Code Noir* will suffice to illustrate the point.<sup>5</sup> Joan DeJean, in her introduction to the American edition of Claire de Duras’s 1823 novel, *Ourika*,<sup>6</sup> notes that “[v]irtually from the beginning of its colonialist enterprise, France had instituted the most intricate official policy on race ever devised by a European nation” (ix). The *Code Noir* (the Black Code), decreed by Louis XIV in 1685, saw many

revisions, but remained in full force until the dawn of the French Revolution in 1789. Under the Code, which also took care to ban all Jews from French island colonies, slaves had no rights save what responsibility the master had to feed and care for the sick and old. Article XXXIII states that “[t]he slave who has struck his master in the face or has drawn blood, or has similarly struck the wife of his master, his mistress, or their children, shall be punished by death....”<sup>7</sup> One of the most revealing of the articles, as regards the degree of consideration accorded the humanity of the slave, is Article XXXVIII:

The fugitive slave who has been on the run for one month from the day his master reported him to the police, shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded with a *fleur de lys* on one shoulder. If he commits the same infraction for another month, again counting from the day he is reported, he shall have his hamstring cut and be branded with a *fleur de lys* on the other shoulder. The third time, he shall be put to death.<sup>8</sup>

Article XLII of the code, for its part, throws light on the issue of what constitutes torture.<sup>9</sup> As if beating, branding, cutting of hamstrings were not torture, the article self-righteously forbids masters to torture their slaves, while, ironically, allowing them to inflict bodily harm on them:

The masters may also, when they believe that their slaves so deserve, chain them and have them beaten with rods or straps. They shall be forbidden however from torturing them or mutilating any limb, at the risk of having the slaves confiscated and having extraordinary charges brought against them.<sup>10</sup>

Since the end of the trade, the question of reparations for slavery has been raised often and again. The first attempt at reparations for slavery, the “forty acres and a mule” plan by General William Sherman following the end of the Civil War, was quickly aborted.<sup>11</sup> In Britain, The Church of England, which owned slaves and plantations in the Caribbean, seems to be the only body willing to give any serious thought to the idea of

reparations.<sup>12</sup> The issue is far from being resolved. In 2001, Human Rights Watch offered its own contribution to the debate in a document titled “An Approach to Reparations:”

We begin with the premise that slavery, the slave trade, the most severe forms of racism associated with colonialism, and subsequent official racist practices such as Apartheid in South Africa or the Jim Crow laws in the United States are extraordinarily serious human rights violations. If committed today these would be crimes against humanity.<sup>13</sup>

One is left to infer from the above that, when they were committed, the “extraordinarily serious human rights violations” mentioned in the HRW statement were not “crimes against humanity.” This raises some serious questions about criminality and legality, and their sometimes incompatibility with morality. What is crime? Are human rights violations not crimes against humanity regardless of whether they are committed before or after the promulgation of laws rendering them “illegal”?<sup>14</sup>

Among northern hemisphere countries that took part in the slave trade, France on 10 May 2001 became the first and so far the only country to have officially accepted responsibility for its role in it as a nation.<sup>15</sup> At a reception honouring the Slavery Remembrance Committee on January 30, 2007, the then French President, Jacques Chirac, described the trade as an “indelible stain on history.” Unlike Human Rights Watch, Chirac did not hesitate to refer to slavery as a “crime against humanity.”<sup>16</sup>

While it may be different from slavery in name and in execution, colonialism is not different from it from the point of view of human rights. In many respects, colonialism was a natural continuation of the slave trade, if not the condition of slavery’s end.<sup>17</sup> One thing in particular linked slavery and colonialism, and that is, the theoretical apparatuses used to justify their existence. Talking about the putative connections between slavery and racism on the one hand, and between racism and theory on the other,

president Chirac, in the same speech mentioned above, noted: “Slavery fuelled racism. It was when attempting to justify the unjustifiable that people constructed racist theories, i.e. the revolting assertion of the existence of ‘races’ which were intrinsically inferior to others.”<sup>18</sup> A student of European history and the Enlightenment, Chirac knew what he was talking about.

In nineteenth-century France, theories on racial differences were quite fashionable. For example, Gustave Le Bon, French social psychologist best known for his work on crowd psychology, *La psychologie des foules* (1895), wrote in an earlier work, *Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (1894), that each race was distinguished by what he called its *constitution mentale*. According to Le Bon, the mental constitution of a people is what determines how they think and act, what they can or cannot learn, what sort of civilisation they are capable of building.<sup>19</sup> He went on to use his research to conclude that the black race, being of an inferior mental capacity, deserved no more than an elementary education.<sup>20</sup> For his part, Ernest Renan, another of France’s renowned humanists writing almost contemporaneously with Le Bon, observed in his 1871 book, *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, that

The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity. With us, the common man is nearly always a déclassé nobleman; his heavy hand is better suited to handling the sword than the menial tool. Rather than work, he chooses to fight, that is, he returns to his first estate.... Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries which, like China, are crying for foreign conquest.... Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should;.... Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.<sup>21</sup>

Theoretical assertions such as were made by Le Bon and Renan were then used not only to justify slavery but also to condone or even actively encourage post-slavery atrocities like colonialism and Apartheid. It is no surprise, therefore, that Ernest Renan would directly and explicitly urge France to go out and colonise so-called inferior peoples as a way of boosting the nation's prestige at home and abroad:

La colonisation en grand est une nécessité politique tout à fait de premier ordre. Une nation qui ne colonise pas est irrévocablement vouée au socialisme, à la guerre du riche et du pauvre. La conquête d'un pays de race inférieure par une race supérieure, qui s'y établit pour le gouverner, n'a rien de choquant. L'Angleterre pratique ce genre de colonisation dans l'Inde, au grand avantage de l'Inde, de l'humanité en général, et à son propre avantage.<sup>22</sup>

[On the whole, colonisation is a political necessity of the utmost importance. A nation that does not colonise is irrevocably doomed to socialism, to the war between rich and poor. There is nothing appalling about the conquest of a land of inferior race by a superior race which settles there to govern it. England practises this kind of colonisation in India to the great benefit of India, of humanity in general, and to her own benefit.]

Indeed, as the African scholar Simon Gikandi points out, “it is impossible to think about instances of evil, all the way from African slavery to the Jewish genocide, that were not underwritten by a theoretical apparatus.”<sup>23</sup>

In general, colonisation was packaged and sold to the citizens of the colonising nations as well as to the colonised subjects as a divinely sanctioned undertaking (*une mission civilisatrice*, as the French called it) that sought to eliminate ignorance, superstition and disease, to bring progress and the light of God to the heathen savages of the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup> It was the confidence bestowed by this self-delegated mission of altruism, backed by an unequivocal superiority complex, that gave colonialists like George Nathaniel Curzon, viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905, the tranquillity of mind to stand at the Birmingham Town Hall in 1907 and proclaim: “wherever the Empire has

extended its borders ... there misery and oppression, anarchy and destitution, superstition and bigotry, have tended to disappear, and have been replaced by peace, justice, prosperity, humanity, and freedom of thought, speech, and action.....”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, slavery and colonialism, wherever and whenever they may take place, naturally create an environment for the use, misuse, and abuse of the humanity of the enslaved and colonised.

As if in response to Lord Curzon’s celebration of the virtues of empire, Aimé Césaire, writing some forty-eight years later in 1955 on the same subject, spoke of the inevitability of human rights violations in colonial situations. “Between colonizer and colonized,” the co-founder of Négritude noted, “there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless élites, degraded masses.”<sup>26</sup> However, with the passage of time, and through the efforts of people—including the victims themselves—who believe that humanity is not “a status to be recognized and conferred, or seized and taken away”<sup>27</sup> according to anyone’s whim and caprice, but a divine right earned at birth, this denial or suspension of humanity may change into a forced or grudging acceptance of the humanity of the enslaved or colonised. Not unlike many other black intellectuals interrogating the subject of Europe’s contact with Africa, Léopold Senghor was deeply conscious of and disturbed by the evils of colonialism and the preceding Atlantic slave trade. In his poems and other writings, he provides a disquieting inventory of the wrongs committed upon Africa and the black race through the two practices.

Born into a large and wealthy family in coastal Senegal in 1906, Senghor was, at age seven, forcibly removed by his father from what he called the *Royaume d'Enfance* (or the Kingdom of Childhood) and placed in the French colonial school where he was taught that his “real” ancestors were the “Gaulois.” Later on in France, where he had arrived in 1928 for further studies at the prestigious Lycée Louis-Le-Grand, Senghor met, among many others, Antillean students such as Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas, and African-American intellectuals like W. E. B. Dubois and Langston Hughes. He helped found the cultural and literary movement, Négritude, which he defined as “the sum total of the cultural values of the black world,” and of which he remained until his death the “principal theoretician and ‘apostle.’”<sup>28</sup> After a long life of service to France and Senegal (as president of Senegal from 1960 to 1981), Senghor died in 2001.

Senghor’s first volume of poetry, *Chants d'ombre* [*Shadow Songs*], came out at the end of the war in 1945. The poems in this volume “deal with the themes of exile, the poet’s feeling of estrangement in France, and his quest for the Kingdom of Childhood, as well as his affirmation of his black cultural identity.”<sup>29</sup> In 1948, Senghor published the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* [*Anthology of New Black and Madagascan Poetry*]. Prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre, the anthology was a landmark book as it represented the first significant introduction of black poets to the reading public of the day. That same year, his second volume of poems, *Hosties noires* [*Black Hosts*] came out. The Second World War, its impact on Africa, the so-called superior European civilisation that caused it, as well as Senghor’s clarion call for a new humanism founded on love, peace, and reconciliation, are some of the major concerns addressed in *Hosties noires*.<sup>30</sup>



The majority of Senghor's poems in *Hosties noires* deal with the encounter, through slavery and colonisation, between Africa and Europe as well as the catastrophic impact of that encounter on black peoples, their cultures and civilisations. It is also through some of the poems in this collection that Senghor begins seriously to elucidate his vision of a new world order governed by a praxis of love, mutual respect, dialogue, and eventual reconciliation and international cooperation. I have singled out one poem in particular, "Prayer for Peace," because of its breadth and depth of coverage. The poem is a maelstrom of emotions, ranging from anger to calls for peace, forgiveness, brotherhood, and even forgetting:

Lord Jesus—... I know that my brother's blood... //... is the spring libation / The Great Tax Collectors have used for seventy years / To fatten the Empire's lands / ... / ... / Crucified Africa, / ... / ... crucified for four hundred years... /.../ White Europe / ... for four centuries of Enlightenment / She has thrown her spit and her baying dogs on my / lands / And Christians, renouncing Your light and Your gentle heart / Have lighted their camps with my parchments, / And their cannons blasted through the loins of empires / ... / ... / And they have burned intangible forests like hunting / grounds, / Dragging out ancestors and spirits by their peaceful beards. / And they have turned their mystery into Sunday / entertainment / For the sleepwalking bourgeois.<sup>31</sup>

In the foregoing, in addition to the critique of Enlightenment humanism to which I shall return in a moment, Senghor eloquently unveils the greed, heartlessness, and hypocrisy that framed the contact between Europe and Africa. Here, Africa comes across as the hapless lamb sacrificed on the altar of Europe's will to modernity, disposable objects in the bourgeois project of European economic expansion.

The human being, says Immanuel Kant in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, is not a means to an end, but the end itself of existence:

Now, I say that the human being, and in general every rational being, *does exist* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will as it pleases. In all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, a human being must always be viewed *at the same time as an end*.<sup>32</sup>

What we see in the slave trade and in certain practices of colonisation is the instrumentalisation of the human being. Césaire captures the essence of this reality in the colonial enterprise when he observes that during colonisation there was no

...human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. [...] ...: *colonisation = thingification*.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that both the Atlantic slave trade and colonisation took place or continued when they did, led many observers and commentators to criticise what Domna C. Stanton has called the “blind spots and dramatic failures” of Enlightenment humanism.<sup>34</sup> Aimé Césaire called it “pseudo-humanism” for having “a narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist” conception of human rights.<sup>35</sup> In his famous July 1852 address, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass pointed to the contradictions inherent in ideals of freedom, liberty, and equality on which the American republic was founded:

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.... To him, your celebration is a sham; ... your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery....<sup>36</sup>

According to Tzvetan Todorov, “[t]he humanists of the Renaissance and of the eighteenth century saw themselves as universalists, whereas in reality their horizon ended at the edges of Europe.”<sup>37</sup> For Claude Lévi-Strauss, European humanism as it manifested itself

over the last two centuries is more insidious than that. He argues that “[a]ll the tragedies we have lived through, first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally the concentration camps” were “not in opposition to or in contradiction with so-called humanism in the form in which we have been practicing it for several centuries, but I would say almost as its natural continuation.”<sup>38</sup>

Senghor did not reject European humanisms in their entirety. His Négritude was not simply a reaction to Eurocentricism; it was also a world view and praxis that was influenced by, and borrowed significantly from, European humanist thought and practice. A necessary stage on the road to a new planetary humanist discourse, Senghor’s Négritude was a theory of difference to counter all the theories of difference that for centuries “denigrated” black people all over the world. Unlike race theories to which he was responding, his insistence on the specific identity of his race was not intended to negate difference, excluding other races from the site of identity with the purpose of isolating them for discrimination and possible elimination—“Il y a différence, qui n’est pas infériorité ni antagonisme [There is difference that means neither inferiority nor antagonism].”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Senghor’s Négritude did not stagnate in the discursive realm of difference; rather, it evolved to become a more encompassing humanist discourse, one that is more morally universal than it is self-consciously (and aggressively) universalising. The debt his Négritude owes to European humanist discourses is seen in his use of the idea of the *Civilisation de l’Universel*.

The notion was borrowed from French Jesuit priest, palaeontologist, and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).<sup>40</sup> The *Civilisation of the Universal*, which Senghor describes as the “symbiose de toutes les civilisations différentes

[symbiosis of all the different civilisations],”<sup>41</sup> is the search for equilibrium, a shared idea and a common reason for living. It is the acceptance of the complementarity and interdependence of telluric forces. According to de Chardin human differences, physical and otherwise, represent only a phase in the inexorable planetary march to what he calls the “Omega point” where the civilisation of the Universal will find its efflorescence. In de Chardin’s understanding of human existence, the very “spherical geometry of the earth” reflects “the psychic curvature of mind...,”<sup>42</sup> hence the potential for eventual universal human convergence:

...just as it happens on a sphere, where the meridians spring apart as they separate from one pole only to join again at the opposite, this divergence gives way and becomes subordinate to a movement of convergence, where races, peoples, and nations consolidate and complete one another by mutual fertilization.<sup>43</sup>

So, for Teilhard, the natural tendency of the cosmos is unification of all planetary forces, and the violence that has always plagued humankind is a reflection of man’s artificial attempts to move against the forces of “human planetization.”<sup>44</sup> De Chardin reminds us that “[w]e have reached a crossroads in human evolution where the only road which leads forward is towards a common passion.”<sup>45</sup> He warns that “[t]o continue to place our hopes in a social order achieved by external violence would simply amount to our giving up all hope of carrying the Spirit of the Earth to its limits.”<sup>46</sup>

Much like race and cultural *métissage*, or cross-fertilisation, of which the younger Senghor was an avid proponent, the Civilisation of the Universal, for Senghor, is not a melting-pot where race and cultural differences are dissolved and disappear; it is rather the meeting place of giving and receiving where empathy and mutual respect, not simply tolerance, determine and govern the terms of interaction. All races contribute to the

construction of the Civilisation of the Universal. Each must keep their specificity as they come to the rendezvous, otherwise there will be domination rather than mutual fertilization.<sup>47</sup> The appeal of the Civilisation of the Universal resides not so much in the actualisation of the dream of human coalescence as in the realisation that we must sustain the dialogue of races and cultures, lest we sink back into the illusory comfort of our provincial dominions.

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, characterises dehumanisation as a double-edged sword “which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also... those who have stolen it.”<sup>48</sup> Talking about the consequent struggle for humanisation, Freire cautions that “[i]n order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity..., become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.”<sup>49</sup> Even as he recognised the value of remembering abuses suffered, Senghor was keenly aware of the danger latent in dwelling solely upon the feelings such remembrances may elicit. He realised that no progress, local or global, would ever be achieved in the absence of mercy and forgiveness for wrongs suffered, in the absence of true dialogue and reconciliation. In the same poem in which he catalogues and accuses France and Europe of human rights abuses against his people, he intercedes for them with the Lord:

Lord, forgive those who turned ... my people / Into a race of the working class....  
/ ... Lord God, forgive white Europe! / .... / For you must forget those who  
exported ten million / Of my sons in the leprous holds of their ships / That killed  
two hundred million more....<sup>50</sup>

Throughout his life, Senghor sought to promote what the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has called a “philosophy of conciliation.”<sup>51</sup> This philosophy was inspired by

what Senghor regarded as the virtues of black culture and civilisation that guided much of his own efforts in the decolonisation process in Francophone Africa: “It is through these virtues of negritude that decolonization has been accomplished without too much bloodshed or hatred and that a positive form of cooperation based on ‘dialogue and reciprocity’ has been established between former colonizers and colonized.”<sup>52</sup> Senghor’s contribution, then, to the Civilisation of the Universal can be seen in his unequivocal faith in active dialogue and exchange with others.

The model for Senghor’s pan-humanism “that makes the uncharitable its first beneficiary”<sup>53</sup> is the poet’s relationship with France. Among all nations of Europe, he singles out France for special treatment by the Lord:

And I want to pray especially for France. / Lord, among white nations, place France at the Father’s / right hand. / Oh, I know she, too, is Europe, that she has snatched my / children / Like a cattle-rustling brigand from the north / To fatten her lands with sugarcane and cotton, /.../ Yes, Lord, forgive France. / That has turned my Mesopotamia and my Congo / Into a vast cemetery under the white sun.<sup>54</sup>

This is hardly surprising, considering that the cornerstone of Senghor’s pan-humanism is unconditional love (“My empire is that of love...”<sup>55</sup>), nourished not only by the capacity to forgive, but also and especially by a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of greater peace and harmony.

Not only does Senghor ask for divine forgiveness of France’s sins, he also prays for what amounts to voluntary amnesia on his part:

And now the serpent of hatred rears its head in my heart,/ The serpent I thought was dead... / ... / Kill it, Lord, for I must continue on my journey, / ... / Oh, Lord, take from my memory France that is not France, / This mask of meanness and hate on the face of France /... / For I have a great weakness for France.<sup>56</sup>

In his struggle to understand Senghor's "quality of mercy,"<sup>57</sup> and love for France, Soyinka finds no explanation other than the fact that "France is exceptionally blessed simply from the privilege of being itself."<sup>58</sup> Senghor understood that the choice between acrimony and forgiveness is the difference between enduring love and the vicious cycle of violence.<sup>59</sup> Soyinka suggests that Senghor's philosophy of conciliation "may be regarded as a precursor of South Africa's seemingly miraculous resolution of a potentially destructive conflict."<sup>60</sup> The decision to set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the morrow of Apartheid's collapse in South Africa is a clear example of how the spirit of love, forgiveness, and dialogue—all virtues of Senghor's humanism—can begin to help heal a nation cleaved asunder by long years of racial animosity.

In 1980, the year he announced his resignation as president of Senegal in the middle of his fourth term of office (before Senghor, no African head of state had ever willingly resigned from office), Senghor wrote the preface to a book on the New International Economic Order by the International Progress Association (IPO). The preface crystallises his lifelong work as a poet, statesman, cultural theoretician, and humanist. In that preface, Senghor wrote:

Le nouvel ordre ne saurait être bâti sur une vision hégémoniste du monde, qui ferait, de la société occidentale ou de l'univers communiste,<sup>61</sup> le modèle à imiter. Ce n'est ni souhaitable, ni possible. Il s'agit de reconnaître à l'Autre le *droit à la différence*, c'est-à-dire le droit de penser, d'agir et de vivre par lui-même et pour lui-même.... C'est le *dialogue des cultures*, basé sur des différences lucidement assumées, qui permettra aux hommes de se connaître, de se reconnaître et de coopérer dans la fraternité des hommes.... Le Nouvel Ordre économique doit atteindre deux objectifs, qui, pour nous, sont indissociablement liés: transformer le monde et changer la vie afin que l'homme, mieux nourri, mieux vêtu, mieux éduqué, plus fort et plus beau, soit plus homme.<sup>62</sup>

[The new order cannot be built on a hegemonic conception of the world that would establish Western society or the Communist bloc as the model to follow.

This is neither desirable nor possible. It is about acknowledging the Other's *right to difference*, that is, the right to think, act and live by and for oneself.... It is the *dialogue of cultures* based on clearly understood and accepted differences that will enable men to know themselves, to acknowledge one another and to cooperate in the brotherhood of men.... The New International Economic Order must achieve two inextricably linked goals: to change the world and to transform life in such a way that the human being can be better fed, better clothed, better educated, stronger and more beautiful, indeed more human.]

As we celebrate, on both sides of the Atlantic, two important events—the 200th anniversary of London's abolition of slavery, and the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown in Virginia—we should take a moment to reflect on the legacy of Léopold Sédar Senghor and the personalities and events that helped shape his worldview. In a world where fundamentalisms of all shapes and stripes continue to undermine the bedrock of our very existence as a species, and where men, interest groups, and nations are becoming increasingly entrenched in their parochialisms, the above words from a man who made it his vocation to remind the rest of humanity that we are all one, that our differences are God's way of sparing us the ugliness and monotony of sameness, cannot be more relevant, more urgent.

## Notes

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1. United Nations Organisation, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," The United Nations Organisation, <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (accessed 2 July 2007).
  2. Samera Esmeir, "On Making Dehumanization Possible" (*PMLA [Publication of the Modern Language Association of America]* 121.5, 2006), 1544.
  3. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/c\\_coloni.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/c_coloni.htm) (accessed 1 July 2007).
  4. Ibid.
  5. Two examples of *ante-bellum* slave laws in America: "Slaves ... had no head in the state, no name, title or register: nor could they take by purchase or descent; they had no heirs, and therefore could make no will:.. whatever they acquired was their master's: they could not plead nor be pleaded for, but were excluded from all civil concerns whatsoever:.. they were not entitled to the rights and considerations of matrimony, and, therefore, had no relief in the case of adultery:.. they could be sold, transferred, or pawned



as goods of personal estate ...” (31-32); Prop. XII of South Carolina’s slave edicts stipulated that “Slavery is hereditary and perpetual” (99). George M. A. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: H. Longstreth, 1856).

6. Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller, “Introduction,” *Ourika* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1994), ix. The novel is about a black child purchased from slavery by a French colonial official in Senegal. Brought to France to live free with the aristocratic aunt of her liberator during the French Revolution, Ourika dies at the age of fifteen when she realises her black skin matters with regard to whom she can love and marry, and what she can become in life.

7. George Mason University, “The Code Noir (The Black Code),” <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/> (accessed 25 July 2007).

8. Ibid.

9. The ongoing debate over the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, for example, revisits the issue of who and what determines what torture is. For more information on this, including the infamous US Department of Justice 2002 memorandum on the subject, visit Dana Priest, “Justice Dept. Memo Says Torture ‘May Be Justified,’” *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38894-2004Jun13.html> (accessed 6 July 2007).

10. “The Code Noir (The Black Code).”

11. National Public Radio, “Making Amends: Debate Continues over Reparations for US Slavery,” National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/racism/010827.reparations.html> (accessed 5 July 2007).

12. British Broadcasting Corporation, “Church Considers Slavery Payments,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6494243.stm> (accessed 25 June 2007).

13. Human Rights Watch, “An Approach to Reparations,” Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2001/07/19/global285.htm> (accessed 8 June 2007).

14. Two of the four definitions of “crime” offered by the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, fourth edition, answer this question. Definition 3 states that a crime is “a serious offense, especially one in violation of morality,” whereas 4 notes that crime is “an unjust, senseless, disgraceful act or condition.”

15. Compare to Queen Elizabeth’s bare reference to the trade during her 3 May 2007 address to the joint session of the Virginia assembly on the occasion of the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Jamestown (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/queenelizabethvgeneralassembly.htm>), or to Bill Clinton’s near-apology on 17 June 1997 (<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/06/17/clinton.race/>). Tony Blair, for his part, called slavery one of history’s most “shameful enterprises” but fell short of apologising for it (British Broadcasting Corporation, “Slave Trade Shameful, Blair Says,” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/6493507.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6493507.stm), accessed 5 July 2007). The mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, however, apologised for London’s role in the trade, calling it a “monstrous crime” (British Broadcasting Corporation, “‘Sorry’ for Slavery,” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/london/6474617.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/6474617.stm), accessed 4 July 2007).

16. Embassy of France, “Slavery Remembrance,” Embassy of France, [http://www.info-france-usa.org/news/statmnts/2006/slavery\\_remembrance\\_chirac\\_speech013006.asp](http://www.info-france-usa.org/news/statmnts/2006/slavery_remembrance_chirac_speech013006.asp) (accessed 15 June 2007).

17. In this light, it may be instructive to note that Algeria became the first French colony in Africa in 1848, the same year that France finally and officially abolished the slave trade.

18. “Slavery Remembrance.”

19. Gustave Le Bon, *Les Lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1895), 5.

20. Quoted in Bernard Mouralis, *Littérature et développement* (Paris: Silex/ACCT, 1984), 91. Le Bon’s findings in this regard were used, along with others of the same ilk, by the French colonial administration to make important curricular decisions affecting their African colonies.

21. Ernest Renan, *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), 390-91. Quoted in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 16.

22. Ernest Renan, “La Réforme intellectuelle et morale” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1947), 390. The translation which follows is the author’s (*et seq.*).

23. Simon Gikandi, “Theory, Literature, and Moral Considerations” (*Research in African Literatures* 32.4, 2001), 16.

24. Even though the profit motive is hardly disguised in Renan’s statements cited here.

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25. The Open Door Web Site, "Britain," Open Door Web Site, <http://www.saburchill.com/history/chapters/empires/0049.html> (accessed 7 June 2007).
26. Césaire, 21.
27. Esmeir, 1544.
28. Kandioura Dramé, "Léopold S. Senghor: Introductory Notes" (*Callaloo* 13.1, 1990), 12.
29. Ibid.
30. In the many years that followed, Senghor was to publish anthologies, other volumes of poetry, and essays on a variety of subjects. The complete collection of his poems now exists in a beautiful bilingual edition, with translation by the late Melvin Dixon. The vast majority of his essays can also be accessed in the five volumes of *Liberté*, published by Éditions du Seuil.
31. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Prayer for Peace," in *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Melvin Dixon (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 69-70.
32. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Arnulf Zweig; Thomas E Hill, jr. and Arnulf Zweig, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229.
33. Césaire, 21.
34. Domna C. Stanton, "The Humanities in Human Rights: Critique, Language, Politics" (*PMLA* 121.5, 2006), 1518.
35. Césaire, 15.
36. Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Boston/New York and Bedford: St. Martin's, 2000), 253-258.
37. Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 66.
38. Ibid., 67.
39. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Le problème culturel en A.O.F.," in *Liberté Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 13.
40. Of his debt to Chardin, Senghor says: « il s'agit de dire comment un homme, un intellectuel négro-africain, a été, dans sa recherche de la Vérité, aidé, sauvé par Teilhard de Chardin. » [It is a matter of saying how a man, a black African intellectual, has in his search for the Truth been helped, saved, by Teilhard de Chardin.] Unlike Marx and Engels, in whom Senghor sought but could not find his "identité d'homme," de Chardin offered him an affirmation of his inner negritude and much more: "Marx et Engels nous ignoraient passablement. Teilhard nous invite, nous Négro-Africains, avec les autres peuples et races du Tiers-Monde, à apporter notre contribution au 'rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir.' Il nous restitue notre être et nous convie au Dialogue." [Marx and Engels knew virtually nothing about us. Teilhard invites us, black Africans, along with the other peoples and races of the Third World, to make our contribution to the 'exchange of gifts.' He restores our full humanity to us and invites us to enter into the Dialogue.] "Hommage à Pierre Teilhard de Chardin," in *Liberté 5 : Le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 9-13.
41. Ibid., 12.
42. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 172.
43. Ibid., 171.
44. Ibid.: "We will understand nothing of the human being anthropologically, ethnically, socially, and morally, and, again, can never make any valid prediction regarding the future states of the human until we have seen that 'ramification' (insofar as it subsists) now works with the single purpose—and in higher forms—of agglomeration and convergence. The formation of verticils, selection, and struggle for life are from now on merely secondary functions, subordinated in the human being to a work of cohesion. The enfolding in on itself of a network of virtual species around the surface of the earth. A totally new mode of phylogenesis."
45. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth and the Psychological Conditions of Human Unification*, (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 86.
46. Ibid.
47. In a lecture given at the University of Cairo in 1967, on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate to him, Senghor exhorted his audience, made up of such dignitaries as the then President Gamal Abdel Nasser, to work toward African unification while keeping their 'arabité': "...we must move closer to

- each other. *In order to give and to receive*. It is necessary that you remain *Arabs*. Otherwise you would have nothing to offer us.” Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Foundations of “Africanite” or “Negritude” and Arabité*, trans. Mercer Cook (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), 86-87.
48. Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the oppressed,” in *The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment*, eds. Kenneth P. Jameson and Charles K. Wilber (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 551.
49. *Ibid.*, 552.
50. Senghor, “Prayer for Peace,” 70.
51. Wole Soyinka, “Senghor: Lessons in Power” (*Research in African Literatures* 33.4, 2002), 1.
52. Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 186.
53. Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 106.
54. Senghor, “Prayer for Peace,” 70-71.
55. Senghor, “The Kaya Magan,” 79.
56. Senghor, “Prayer for Peace,” 70-71.
57. Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 105.
58. *Ibid.*, 109.
59. Senghor’s commitment to love ‘at all costs’ finds echo in Teilhard de Chardin’s own conviction: “We must believe without reservation in the possibility and the necessary consequences of universal love” (*Building the Earth*, 86).
60. Soyinka, “Senghor: Lessons in Power,” 1-2.
61. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc attests to the transience of socio-economic systems founded on hypocrisy and inequality.
62. Léopold S. Senghor, “Préface” to *The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-Cultural Implications*, ed. Hans Köchler (Guildford: Guildford Educational Press, 1980), vii-ix.