

Fall 2011

Review of Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity.*

Gregory Byala
Temple University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Byala, Gregory (2011). Review of "Review of Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity.*" *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol9/iss2/2>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol9/iss2/2>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 231 pp. ISBN 9780231145480.

Reviewed by Gregory Byala, Temple University

Composed in 1829, Edgar Allan Poe's "To Science" enacts Romantic anxiety about the dominion of reason:

SCIENCE! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?

No longer the exclusive domain of poetry, Poe's natural world has been emptied of its mythical qualities. Subject to the demystifying gaze of science, it is reduced to "dull realities," leaving the poet to wonder what is left for him to exercise his imagination upon. The success of the poem lies, however, not in its diagnosis of the tension between the "peering eyes" of science and the Romantic longing of the "poet's heart" for some transcendent realm, but rather in the material fact of the poem's existence, in the refusal of the poetic voice to be stifled:

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Although they appear to enter the sestet emptied of their poetic capacity, Diana, the Hamadryad, the Naiad, and the Elfin undermine (by their presence alone) the victory of science over poetry that the poem appears to herald. In the end, Poe's lament for the collapse of poetic imagination stands instead as testament to its unfaltering quality, to the capacity of poetry to outpace each attempt to subdue its wondering.

In miniature, Poe's sonnet stages the vitalist project of resistance that Donna V. Jones explores in her recent study, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. Vitalism refers to the range of critical and philosophical enterprises that resist rational, scientific understandings of existence and ground the ultimate meaning of being in a conception of life that is freed from mechanistic restraints. As the title of the text makes clear, Jones wishes to demonstrate how "vitalism, especially transformed by Bergson, was joined not only to European racism but also to the defensive racial forms of African and Caribbean self-understanding" (21). In pursuing this transformation, Jones is attempting to resolve a paradox that sits at the center of postcolonial projects of self-definition. As she describes it, the instrument of vitalism remains

both the dominant political ideology that underwrites colonial projects of subjugation and the chief weapon of postcolonial resistance and emancipation.

Jones's interest in vitalism develops out of two concerns, the first of which is the pressure that contemporary science has placed on the category "life," and the second the cultural and political implications that arise when the notions of responsibility and freedom are measured against it. Once it can be defined at the genetic level, life relinquishes its ineffable quality. It is no longer an intangible force that invests the material world with meaning, nor is it something for which we must have reverence. In the face of this biological reduction, Jones draws attention to the contemporary desire to revive a sense of life's irresolvable character. Although sympathetic to a portion of this program, Jones is ultimately wary of the implications that an unmediated return to mystical or vitalist conceptions of life will have. Invoking such figures as Georges Sorel and Jacques Chevalier, Jones argues that every philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), even when it does not announce itself as such, is likewise a politics of living (*Lebenspolitik*). The danger is that there is little to keep separate what appears—at first blush—to be a reasonable distinction between the accentual character of political formations that appeal to life for their mandate: namely, whether they are premised on the desire to preserve life or on the willingness to dispense with it. Drawing on Foucault and Agamben, Jones reaffirms that life and death become equivalent concepts at the political level, on the one hand because life is synonymous with *death-in-life*, and on the other because *Lebenspolitik* cannot help but imply its more nefarious counterpart: "Today, an exuberant politics of life, based on a Promethean embrace of new technology and the insubordination of life itself, is accompanied by an uncanny thanatopolitics and cultural anxieties about death and decline" (16).

The argument that Jones establishes in the introduction develops across four chapters. The first of them, "On the Mechanical, Machinic, and Mechanistic," affirms Cartesian rationalism as the origin of the scientism that vitalist philosophy, in all of its formations, has contended with from the seventeenth century to the present. The second chapter, "Contesting Vitalism," opposes Nietzsche, Simmel, and Deleuze with two of vitalism's chief critics, Lukács and the younger Horkheimer. In setting them against one another, Jones wishes "to suggest the political multivalence of vitalism and to guard against its simple acceptance or rejection" (71). Chapter Three is devoted to Bergson, while Chapter Four ("*Négritude* and the Poetics of Life") measures the distance between Senghor and Césaire, both of whom appropriated the discourse of life-philosophy in their attempts to construct a uniquely African identity that was rooted in an immediate and intuitive sensibility.

Although she devotes ample space to Nietzsche, Deleuze, Senghor, and Césaire, Bergson emerges as the true focus of Jones's interest and the true center of her study. By far the longest of the work's five chapters, "Bergson and the Racial *Élan Vital*," subjects a number of Bergson's critical concepts to close scrutiny. Here and elsewhere, Jones is not content to describe Bergson's thought. She is instead at pains to challenge the subjectivist approach that Bergson develops through his concepts of intuition, duration, freedom, and memory. At no point in her evaluation of him does Jones claim that Bergson is racist. She is careful throughout to distinguish between Bergson himself and the variety of political theories, most often nationalist in character, that develop out of what Jones refers to as his "mnemonic vitalism." According to Jones, Bergson's belief that authenticity is necessarily grounded in the *self-unified-in-duration* gives rise to

conservative and reactionary forms of "revolutionary traditionalism" (115). In these discourses, Bergson's individual self merges into a collective and ultimately racialized figure that operates through exclusion. Important to this discussion is the fact that tradition is both the sum of historical occasions that precede us and a manufactured entity that survives through willful intercessions into the past. The sentiment that motivates the racialization of life-philosophy—and that equally encourages it from a more aggressive, political standpoint—is a fear that history and identity are being lost. At the political level, Bergsonism imagines that freedom is attainable only through the recovery of the racial past.

The catastrophe of the First World War marked a decisive turn in the history of cultural thinking about the nature and meaning of life. The reality of wholesale destruction, itself predicated upon the belief that life had perhaps only instrumental value, forced intellectuals to reassess what civilization had made of life and what it had fashioned out of it. More pressing, however, was the Fascist arrogation of vitalist discourse, which translated life into a political catchword that permitted the extinction of those who were branded degenerate or diseased. It was in the service of life, Fascist ideology maintained, that death must be visited upon those who were liable to pollute its essence. For these reasons, the interwar years, more potently even than the late nineteenth century, become for Jones the staging ground for the full realization of what she refers to in her analysis of Nietzsche as "the unholy trinity of irrationalism, amoral power politics, and biologicistic thinking" (58).

The paradox that Jones investigates in Chapter Four is that the legacy of biologic thinking that supports the projects of European colonialism and Fascism respectively should give rise (almost simultaneously with the latter) to *Négritude* in general and to its belief in an essential African identity in particular. Jones's treatment of Césaire articulates the contradiction most succinctly:

What I have tried to understand—and here I am indebted to the protocols of deconstructive reading—is how Césaire could be led back at times against his own predispositions to an ahistoric naturalism of racial biologism and noumenal racialism, not through a simple failure to break with racist culture but paradoxically through his very attempt to rise vigorously and vitally above, to take flight from the oppressive racial culture that he had inherited. (174)

The Senghor and Césaire that emerge in Jones's study are divided in their approach to the project of self-definition, in part because they happen to express the central terms of Bergson's thinking, most notably intuition, in different ways. Whereas her Senghor is "best understood as the African Bergson and the father of a racial modernism" (145), her Césaire manages to marry "a Sorelian poetics of volcanic aggression with a Bergsonian call for a mystical return to a more intuitive and contemplative view of nature" (151). Coupled with a Dionysian element that he draws from Nietzsche, Jones's Césaire emerges as the more compelling figure. Though she grants equal space to them, and though she concedes that they are committed equally to a form of racial identity rooted in African essentialism, Jones insists "on the greater complexity of Césaire's poetics and vision" (150).

It is clear that Jones's critical ambition is too large for the work that she has composed. (The introduction refers to *The Promise of European Decline*, a work in progress that will stand as companion to the present study.) As she notes in Chapter Two, the field that she is surveying is too vast to approach directly: "I would urge that vitalism be understood as a polysemous

discourse, a swerving historical discourse that has many side streets (and blind alleys) to which I shall take an appropriately peripatetic approach" (61). The chief difficulty of Jones's peripatetic approach is that the relation between the parts and the whole (and even between the parts themselves) appears more associative than causal. *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* positions itself as a history of vitalism and an investigation of the debt *Négritude* owes to this tradition in fashioning its own essentializing poetics. While not at odds, the aims of the book do not always necessitate each other. The extended analysis of Deleuze in Chapter Two, for instance, ultimately proves irrelevant to the practical achievements of the later chapters. As a resuscitator of life-philosophy, Deleuze sheds no real light on Senghor or Césaire, even if he sheds enormous light on Bergson, the animating spirit behind Jones's interest in the interaction between European philosophical discourse and postcolonial resistance. Nor does Deleuze's philosophy, as it is described, contribute to Jones's assertion of the natural relationship between vitalist philosophy and racial discourse. The curious effect of Jones's "peripatetic" style is therefore that one is often left with the impression that aspects of her argument are both unnecessary and underexplored. Deleuze surfaces at several moments in the text. In each case, it is clear that his appearance arises from Jones's larger interest in the development of critical theory, a field into which *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* wishes to intervene, if only to argue that contemporary critical theory cannot be grounded in the category of life that Jones's work has before its gaze.