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**IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO? THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRATION TO  
FRANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN NOVELS**

A Thesis in

French

by

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**ABSTRACT**

Literary criticism of recent novels about the theme of migration to France often fails to take into account both the reality and experiences of migrants. Worse, critics tend to minimize both the role of French imperialism and the strength of African cultures as they read these works. Their analyses raise the broad question of just how African migration literature can be interpreted to reflect the social realities which frame the action of the protagonists who are most vulnerable to France's contradictory immigration policies. Drawing on the concept of tragedy as both a genre and as a philosophical framework, I analyze four novels that convey the stories of francophone African immigrants to Europe. These are Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Bessora's *53 cm* and Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*.

The study reveals that the novels' characters, style and narrative progression indicate the authors' attempt to simultaneously articulate the suffering of poorer African migrants and appeal to the Republic to redress it. The search for a middle ground between Africa and France minimizes the Republic's pursuit of power at the cost of African lives. This result contradicts the tragic imperative that the powerful actors receive blame for the suffering of the most vulnerable members of society. The unsuccessful attempt at neutrality also reflects the paradoxical situation of Africans who use the French language to articulate the dilemmas in which the Republic is heavily implicated.

This study thus proposes a model of criticism that acknowledges the role of migrant experiences, African traditions and critics' personal inclinations in the experience of and narratives about migration to France. It complements works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and Lewis Gordon that call on intellectuals to accept their implication in pressing social issues and to situate events on a global stage. The study also emphasizes the need to include a range of social, historical and environmental factors in determining the causes of injustice. Above all, it presents reality based criticism as an alternative to literary criticism dominated by theoretical concerns that often minimize the challenges of every day life.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In October 2002, I arrived in Strasbourg to spend a year as an exchange instructor of English at the Université Marc Bloch. Having read poetry by Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, essays by Frantz Fanon and novels by authors such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Ken Bugul, I was acquainted with the alienation suffered by African intellectuals who had lived in France. However, I also knew that notable African-American figures such as Richard Wright and Josephine Baker had enjoyed considerable success in Paris, so I believed that blacks enjoyed a respectable status in France in comparison to other Western countries. My experience living as a single African woman in Europe made me realize that I had never really made a connection between academic knowledge and reality, nor had I recognized the contradiction between French attitudes towards Africans and African Americans.

What made my experience more difficult was the fact that people around me would confidently deny the contradictions that I could see, to the extent that I wondered if I was hallucinating. In order to confirm what the reality actually was, I read sociological studies about migration, but they did not articulate my internal conflict. I therefore began to look for contemporary fiction by Africans. One day, the attendant of a small bookshop recommended a book by an African living in Strasbourg. The book was Fatou Diome's first publication, *La préférence nationale*, a collection of short stories situated in both Senegal and Strasbourg. I was relieved to read an African's perspective



on the local Strasbourg places, events and mannerisms with which I was familiar. Before reading Diome's book, I had felt as if I was pulled in different directions, as if my emotions, my intellect, my history and my present were all separate from each other. Afterwards, I felt pieced back together and, better still, I confirmed that my experience was not unique.

Upon my return to the United States, I felt frustrated when reading criticism that portrayed African literature in French as a celebration of hybrid, universal identities or as evidence of improving fortunes of non-Europeans living in France. I could no longer read Calixthe Beyala's novels without being perturbed by the author's humorous rendition of sexist and racist stereotypes that I had heard them being used in real life. I was even more disturbed to read critical works that celebrated her novels as feminist. Most of all, I could not reconcile myself to the critics' use of the El Dorado myth (Cazenave 2003, Moudileno 2001) to explain why African migrants were prepared to risk their lives and the entire wealth of their families to enter France. The studies focused on the migrants' unshakable belief that France offers better economic opportunities and on the complicity of some Africans in maintaining the utopian image of France.

These views presented only one aspect of migration as I had experienced it. I had met several Africans who would have liked to return home but could not because they had not earned enough money to live on while they settled in their countries. One of these was a man from the Democratic Republic of Congo who could not attend his father's funeral because he had not saved enough money for him and his young family to resettle in Congo should he be denied a visa to return. His bitterness was accentuated by the fact that France was an important actor in the events that made his return difficult.

Having witnessed such realities and experienced the profound relief provided by literature, I wondered how one can read the novels without negating the lived experiences of Africans. Consequently, my study seeks to answer the following question: how can literary criticism read African novels in a manner that reflects the broader reality of migration to France? The evidence for my answer will come from an analysis of Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Bessora's *53 cm* and Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*. The premise of this study is that literature needs to be analyzed in close relation to lived experience because it is one of the means by which human beings make sense of the world.

I have chosen the genre of tragedy as defined by Wole Soyinka (1976) to accomplish this task. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he argues that through tragedy, especially in its dramatic form, human beings gain an overview of their environment and of their place in it. Every element of the universe – human and non-human – is an actor that must respect the integrity of others for its own survival and that of others. Tragic suffering arises when any one element intrudes too far into the territory of another, and it is experienced by the universe rather than by human beings alone. I will argue that the suffering of African migrants with limited French schooling is a symptom of such violation of territories, for it results from the imbalanced interactions between Africa and France, and even more from France's failure to collectively accept certain historical and global realities.

To avoid making France responsible for every single event and experience of African migrants, I will draw on the concept of bad faith developed by intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1948a) and Lewis Gordon (1995a). Bad faith can be simplistically

defined as the denial of the tragic reality that human existence is, as Lewis Gordon explains, a dialectic between “the free and the unfree” (1995a 16). While all human beings have the freedom to choose how they act, their freedom and the consequences of their actions are also contextually facilitated and limited by elements beyond their control. Such elements include biological and emotional qualities, social status, historical events and the natural environmental. Bad faith occurs when we attempt to deny the complexity of our existence in order to minimize or eliminate the role that we or other actors play in influencing who we are and what we do. Gordon elaborates:

Bad faith [. . .] involves an effort to take advantage of the human condition as freedom and the human being as a being who lacks some control over the impact of others’ freedom to affect and to effect certain aspects of its various situations. In bad faith I may assert that what I “really am” transcends my situation in the world; for example, I “am” my freedom but not my gender or biography. Or I may try to take refuge in those aspects of my situation over which I seem to lack control; I can assert that I can’t help being what I am. Further, I can make an effort to be what I was or to disengage myself entirely from my past and my present by claiming to be what I will become. Each of these cases involves taking refuge in a form of being what I “really am,” as though my “real” being is as static and as complete as a stone. (17)

People usually exercise bad faith in order to deny responsibility for their choices or assume sole credit for phenomena which are contextually determined. In other words, bad faith involves the attempt to reduce complex interaction between the personal, social and environmental aspects of human existence to a single phenomenon.

Because it assesses each individual's or society's actions by their choices and their options, the concept of bad faith enables us to see how different people and institutions contribute differently to the same tragedy. All human beings have control of their choices but do not possess the same number of the options from which to choose. Gordon frames this distinction as follows: "Myself will always be my responsibility. Others can, however, share responsibility for forcing situations upon me that limit my options" (1995a 9). Bad faith is also simultaneously tragic and anti-tragic. Like tragic suffering, its manifestation is determined not only by one's actions or intentions but also the prevailing conditions. Bad faith is anti-tragic in the sense that it attempts to deny or suppress tragedy. Simply put, bad faith is the attempt to have one's cake and eat it.

It is important to note that bad faith is not a race or class specific phenomenon but an integral part of the human condition. In tragedy, everyone – from the king to the pauper – acts in bad faith if they deny responsibility for that which they can influence. Consequently, the central interest of tragedy is not who acts in bad faith but how they act in bad faith.

By reading the novels as tragedies, we are able to see that different individuals and institutions in both France and Africa manifest bad faith. The bad faith emphasized in the narratives largely stems from the French and African politicians' denial of the role that colonial history and foreign policy play in inducing and encouraging Africans to migrate. However, the writers also manifest bad faith by evading the logical conclusion that the contradictions between French Republic's ideals and actions often result from the desire to exercise control rather than from ignorance of the consequences of harsh immigration policies. The writers also criticize migrants and their families for

encouraging migration, evading or obscuring the fact that the general political atmosphere in France, from where they derive most of their readers, is also inclined to blame African societies for the troubles that migrants encounter. The writers ironically betray awareness of these implications by appealing to the readers' pity or by using satire to evoke humor.

Within the narratives, even the migrants with few economic resources and their families at home manifest bad faith because they submit themselves to the mercy of the French Republic but refuse to accept the Republic's choice not to act in their favor. A glaring and poignant example of this phenomenon is found in Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*, in which the *sans-papiers* protestors carry out a hunger strike to prick the conscience of the French Republic but at the same time express doubt that that conscience exists.

Despite the fact that bad faith occurs across the social spectrum, tragedy reserves greater moral indignation for powerful actors such as the French and African elite than for African migrants with limited economic resources or French schooling. The indictment of the writers comes from the fact that they are spared some of the inconveniences experienced by the migrants without advanced schooling. Even when writers do suffer discrimination, they sometimes earn significant recognition for recounting their experiences. Fatou Diome's novel, for example, made the top ten on French bookseller lists for a number of weeks, and the author was part of Jacques Chirac's entourage that visited Senegal in 2005. For his novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Alain Mabanckou won the Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire. Such accomplishments

usually facilitate regular travel in and out of France, a privilege that few African migrants enjoy.

In addition to tragedy and bad faith, another important concept that informs this study is that of oppression as a phenomenon that occurs at a mundane level. Gordon defines oppression as “the imposition of extraordinary circumstances of the ordinary upon individuals in the course of their effort to live ‘ordinary’ lives” (1995b 41). All human beings are born, fall in love, migrate, have families and eventually die, and immigration laws interfere with these routines. Consequently, I will argue that immigration policies are oppressive because they suppress Africans’ traditions, love relationships, identities, healing from trauma and interaction with the environment. Oppression is an act of bad faith because it seeks to control such aspects of life that are human but that transcend human willpower.

The link between oppression and the mundane explains the discrepancy between what the writers proclaim to criticize and the real-world implications of their criticism. The writers attack injustice through evocation of ideals such as human equality and feminism as well as contestable categories such as race and gender, and in so doing simplify complex situations and elide the concrete ways in which French colonial history, immigration laws and foreign policy affect people’s lives. Like the writers, critics of African literature in French tend to use these problematic categorizations as evidence of injustice, sometimes overlooking the fact that oppression does not result from categorization alone but from its distortion of reality through institutions and armed force over centuries.

Using this framework, I will argue that Africans with limited schooling or financial resources are the victims of migration, while the tragic heroes are the African elite as well as the French Republic. The African migrants with few resources seek to fulfill human needs such as love and acceptance as well as the desire to support their families financially when they run into the obstacles placed by France's presence in Africa or by immigration laws in France. Meanwhile, the African bourgeoisie offers little or ceremonial resistance because it depends on France for its moral and political influence. In addition, the French government maintains contradictory immigration and foreign policies because its primary interest is in using Africa as leverage in its goal to rival Britain and the United States as a world power. The French citizenry does not sufficiently challenge their government's actions because they inherently accept the justification of their government's actions based on racist stereotypes about a desperate continent in need of European intervention.

Rather than acknowledge these complex forces that influence migration, the narrators and characters with French schooling set themselves up as intermediaries between France and Africa by appealing to France's conscience on behalf of poorer African migrants. This gesture is evidently well-intentioned but ends up comforting the self-perception of the French Republic as a "friend" of Africa that the intellectuals challenge. The Republic is also a tragic figure because the promotion of its culture and interests in Africa inevitably confirms that its anti-immigration laws are simply ceremonial and reinforce the determination of African migrants to defy its immigration laws and border restrictions. These agents are tragic because, as Christine Clark-Evans put it, "the tragic character acts consistently as the central agent and subject who, by

neither virtue nor vice but rather some error, harms her own well-intentioned efforts” (46).

The remainder of this chapter demonstrates why tragedy as a literary genre and philosophical concept is an appropriate framework for studying African novels on this subject. It also presents an overview of literary studies on migration in African novels. The second chapter demonstrates that migration in Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* is inextricably linked to the environment, traditions and gender in Africa. The tragic heroine is the protagonist whose use of feminist and humanist ideologies hampers her appreciation of these complex realities. The third chapter proposes that Mabanckou’s *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is a tragedy of the tension between France’s colonial history and Africa’s traditions. The tragic character is the narrator who tells the story from the perspective of the victim – a young man jailed in France for cashing stolen checks – but who also makes the protagonist appear responsible for his own suffering.

Chapter four will examine the epistemological foundation of immigration policies through an analysis of Bessora’s *53 cm*. The novel successfully depicts the absurdity of French immigration laws, colonial history and anthropology. The tragic figure is the mother who tries to manipulate the French immigration institutions to enroll her daughter in school but is arrested in the end. Chapter five will demonstrate that Etoké’s novel *Un amour sans papiers* is similar to Bessora’s in placing the French-educated African at the center of the tragedy. In the novel, a young university student falls in love with an illegal migrant who is later repatriated to Africa without her knowledge. Despite her suffering, she holds onto the image of Africa as being mired in poverty and corruption while minimizing the same vices behind her experience in France. The study will conclude by



arguing that the novels on migration capture the tragedy caused by France's pursuit of ideals at the cost of human dignity while ironically affirming that dignity. They also reflect the tragedy of African writers who inadvertently or deliberately minimize their compatriots' suffering as they endorse the Republic's inflated self-image.

In the next section of this chapter, I will argue that Soyinka's perspective on tragedy is distinct because it extends the stage to the world in which we live. By contrast, scholars such as Oscar Mandel (1961), Northrop Frye (1968) and Eva Figs (1976) tend to limit tragedy to the human actors at the expense of social and environmental realities. Nevertheless, all the scholars neglect the role of oppression in subverting the performance of and participation in tragedy. The second section will tackle this gap through an analysis of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), particularly the chapter on national culture. The third section will highlight two distinct trends in modern literary criticism on migration: one which takes into places African literature in French on the world stage and the other which is largely informed by the critics' ideological leanings. The chapter concludes by pointing out the challenges that tragedy as a theoretical framework presents.

### **Literature, Tragedy and the World**

According to Soyinka, myth and literature are both tools through which human beings come to terms with the world in which they live. Myth articulates a vision of the world, while literature dramatizes myths. Through literature, the artist helps humanity position itself within the global framework. As Soyinka puts it, "the creative man is

universally involved in a subtle conspiracy, a tacit understanding that he, the uncommissioned observer, relates the plight of man, his disasters and joys, to some vague framework of observable truths and realities” (44).

Soyinka distinguishes theatre and rituals from the rest of literature by focusing on two elements: the stage and the audience. The stage extends from the theatrical platform to the world, for “[s]ound, light, motion, even smell can all be used just as validly to define space” (39). With this broad outreach of the stage, theatre becomes “one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being” (40). This stage exists because the audience is indispensable in the artistic performance, or as he puts it, “[t]he stage is created for the purpose of that communal presence which alone defines it” (43).

The “communal presence” that Soyinka refers to reflects the reality that human beings are simultaneously individual and social, and that theatre enables them to sense how individuals relate to the collective. He uses the traditional mask-drama to illustrate this dialectic:

The “spontaneous” participant within the audience does not permit himself to give vent to a bare impulse or a euphoria which might bring him out as a dissociated entity from within the choric mass. If this does happen, as of course it can, the event is an aberration which may imperil the eudaemonic goals of that representation. The interjector – whose balance of mind is regarded as being temporarily disturbed – is quietly led out and the appropriate (usually unobtrusive) spells are cast to counter the risks of the abnormal event. (39)

Social restrictions on individual participation in the performance are not tightly regulated; they are flexible to the extent that the individual can experience the spontaneous impulse without impeding the participation of the collective audience. Therefore, theatre represents a social dialectic at the global level as well as within societies.

Perhaps the most important idea that runs through Soyinka's analysis is that of the cosmic totality that dictates that all elements of the universe – from the gods, nature and other non-human agents, to humanity, societies and the individual – are equal actors in the world. Harry Garuba's exploration of "animist materialism" as "a religious consciousness of the material world" (268) provides a similar conceptualization but differs from Soyinka's perspective in that it presents human beings as the initiators of the non human actors' participation in tragedy. By contrast, Soyinka considers non-human actors as those to whom human beings must sometimes defer.

Other scholars limit the non-human actors to the gods of Greek mythology and pay little attention to the role of nature in either Greek or modern theatre. Mandel, for example, places emphasis on the protagonist at the expense of other actors in tragedy. The sections in italics are the areas that Mandel cautions are subject to controversy or debate:

A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist *who commands our earnest goodwill* is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, *of a certain seriousness and magnitude*, and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with *grave* spiritual or physical *suffering*. (88, italics in original)

Mandel presents the “given world” as a constant, yet as Soyinka indicates, the world has a momentum of its own because the non-human and human elements are constantly engaged in negotiation and conflict. The role of tragedy is in fact to reflect on the world in order to ensure that the balance between the different elements is maintained. Soyinka calls this relationship the “moral order” and cautions that it should be understood as that which guarantees the balance between human beings and the environment rather than “in any narrow sense of the ethical code which society develops to regulate the conduct of its members” (52).

The other weakness in Mandel’s definition is its central interest in the suffering of the protagonist. Unlike Mandel, Soyinka sees the protagonist’s suffering as a symptom of a universal malady, because “[a] breakdown in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunction of one man” (33).

Frye maintains a wider perspective of nature that is closer to Soyinka’s. He says that in tragedy, “we see the tragic hero disturbing a balance in nature, nature being conceived as an order stretching over the two kingdoms of the visible and the invisible, a balance which sooner or later must right itself” (209). However, he restricts the breach in the moral order to the protagonist alone, unlike Soyinka who says that sometimes even the gods contravene the moral order and human beings demand amends: “The penalties which societies exact from their deities in reparation for real or symbolic injuries are an index of the extent to which the principles of natural restitution for social disharmony may be said to govern the moral structure of society” (14-15).

Eva Figes concedes nature’s important role in tragedy, but relegates it to non-European or “primitive” societies in which people are resigned “to circumstance, [. . .]

weather, disease and death” (11). She states that the laws contravened by the tragic protagonist “are so basic as to be considered divine” (12), implying that it is human beings who determine the moral order and then legislate it as divine. This view espouses an inherent subordination of nature to human beings, which goes against Soyinka’s vision of cosmic actors.

The failure of these scholars to affirm nature’s role seems to confirm Soyinka’s thesis that Western societies have lost their sensibility to tragedy. He holds anthropology, rationality and religion responsible for this anomaly, as is evident in the allusion he makes to the New Testament:

A profound transformation has therefore taken place within the human psyche if, to hypothesise, the same homo sapiens mythologises at one period that an adventurous deity has penetrated earth, rocks and underground streams with his phallus, going right through into the outer atmosphere, and, at another period, that a new god walks on water without getting his feet wet [ . . . ] The ultimate consequence of this – in terms of man’s cosmic condition – is that the cosmos recedes further and further until, while retaining something of the grandeur of the infinite, it loses the essence of the tangible, the immediate, the appeasable. (3-4)

The essence of Soyinka’s argument is that Western epistemology has defied the basic law that each element of the universe must respect the intrinsic qualities of others. His concern is seemingly confirmed by Western scholars who advocate “eco-criticism” as a means to acknowledge the agency of the environment. In an edited volume, Lynn White Jr. notes: “Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards nature [ . . . ] We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our

slightest whim” (12). In the same volume, Christopher Manes decries the artificial silence imposed on nature by Christian and humanist ideologies, observing that animist societies “have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics an explicit social theme with us” (18). The problem with eco-criticism, however, is that it sees the welfare of nature as dependent on human goodwill rather than on man’s recognition of nature’s agency.

Soyinka’s concept of the cosmic totality is crucial to understanding African migration to France because it links human suffering to the environment. This link implies that oppression is immediately visible in the organization of space and man’s relationship to the natural, physical and even temporal space. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that the problematic relationship between France and her former colonies violates harmonious world order and that this is visible in the physical landscape.

Fanon illustrates this dynamic in the opening pages of *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961). The colonial city is divided into two unequal sections. In the colonizer’s section, day and night, the cycle of time, are contradicted by the bright lights. There also seems an obsession with cleanliness. Waste is a natural process of life, but “les poubelles regorgent toujours de restes inconnus, jamais vus, même pas rêvés” (42). The dirt of the earth is covered in asphalt, but there is still an obsessive desire to protect one’s feet: “Les pieds du colon ne sont jamais aperçus, sauf peut-être dans la mer, mais on n’est jamais assez proche d’eux” (42). The culmination of this unnatural city is in the people themselves – in a continent where the majority of people are Africans, the inhabitants of this section are all Europeans. Moreover, they are foreigners despite the years they have lived on the

continent. This foreignness, Fanon argues, is artificial: “En dépit de la domestication réussie, malgré l’appropriation le colon reste toujours un étranger” (43). Colonialism is, therefore, a contradiction with the environment because it intrudes too far into the territory of nature by contravening the natural process of domestication. It also treads too far into the territory of time by attempting to replace the past, on which domestication depends, with a perpetual present.

Kristin Ross (1995) has also drawn a link between colonialism and human interaction with the temporal space. She suggests that during the decolonization wars in areas such as Vietnam and Algeria in the years after World War II, the obsession with hygiene and modern technology became one of the alibis through which the French bourgeoisie evaded confronting the contradiction between their country’s actions abroad on one hand and their republican and humanist ideals on the other.

The French Republic’s losing battle against domestication in Africa is partly responsible for its aggrandized image that gained momentum during colonialism and that now influences migrants’ dreams of a better life. As Albert Memmi (1957) explains, the colonizer could only maintain his waning foreign identity through exhibitionism, and so he exaggerated the image of the “mother country” through elaborate military parades and costumes. The exaggerated image of the mother country was still not enough to suppress the colonizer’s awareness of the imbalance between his imagined world and the reality of the colonial world. In the same manner, the French government actively participates in maintaining its inflated image in Africa in an attempt to stem its waning influence while paradoxically passing laws to curb migration.

The distortion of space not only indicates social and environmental disharmony but also explains the desperation of the poor who defy laws and barriers to reach Europe. Fanon addressed the relationship between environmental conditions and desperation in *Les Damnés de la terre*, especially when he describes the native town as so cramped that all human activities are carried out in the same physical and temporal space:

On y naît n'importe où, n'importe comment. On y meurt n'importe où, de n'importe quoi. C'est un monde sans intervalles, les hommes y sont les uns sur les autres, les cases les unes sur les autres. La ville du colonisé est une ville affamée [. . .] une ville accroupie, une ville à génoux, une ville vautrée. (42-43)

The above situation is unnatural and breaks taboos governing sacred spaces and different rites of passage such as life and death. It also violates the rhythms of time by creating “un monde sans intervalles.” Eventually, the colonized realize that escape from their living conditions means defying the artificial boundaries maintained by police barricades, hence the recourse to armed liberation. In the case of migration, Africans risk their lives and defy immigration laws to live and work in France because they rightly or erroneously feel that the options to improve their lives within their own countries have been exhausted.

Soyinka's concept of cosmic actants thus enables us to see that violence is contextually demanded when even the the environment is artificially structured to suppress their dignity. Fanon makes the same point by describing colonialism as “la violence à l'état de nature et [qui] ne peut s'incliner que devant une plus grande violence” (61). When, how or where the greater violence would break out, he could not tell, as is evident in his rhetorical question: “Mais comment passons-nous de l'atmosphère de violence à la violence en action? Qu'est-ce qui fait exploser la marmite?” (70). Contrary



to the opinion that Fanon exalts the use of violence, he simply declares that violence is inevitable when there is violation of the boundaries of time, nature and humanity. By the same token, migration is like a time bomb because France wants to maintain its historical and cultural visibility in Africa without incurring the cost of migration which inevitably results.

Although Gaston Bachelard (1957) acknowledges that human well being and comfort are dependent on the organization of physical space, he does not address the effect of oppression in distorting it. His book, *La poétique de l'espace*, does not deal with how outside cultural or political experiences can impact the domestic space and the human relations within it. An application of his work to this study would not satisfactorily tackle the fundamental problems of migration within the context of French imperialism.

Another advantage of the concept of cosmic totality, besides its appreciation of space, is its incorporation of the need to respect aspects of human existence that transcend the control of the human will. Since migration and the search for love, livelihood and acceptance are innate to human dignity, immigration laws that interfere with these aspects of life breach the cosmic harmony. These laws also share affinities with racism that denies human integrity by artificially partitioning the human body, intellect and instinct, and then attributing each to specific communities based on superficial criteria. In her analysis of Diderot's *La Religieuse*, Christine Clark-Evans (1995) has explored the relationship between the denial of human transcendence and problematic views of gender during the Enlightenment. She argues that the fascination with female sexuality stemmed from intellectuals' attempts to submit the mysteries of life

to the rigid rational analysis. I will apply this insight to my study of Bessora's novel in which the author attributes the rationalist definitions of human beings to the problems faced by African immigrants.

The cosmic totality reveals that racism violates human dignity by grouping reason together with hygiene, religion, language, love, peace and civilization and identifying them as the domain of Western culture and particularly of the ruling and educated classes. It then defines disease, superstition, dialects, heightened sexuality, violence and vulgar culture, all which defy the control of reason, as innate in the Other. An illustration of this phenomenon is provided by Tzvetan Todorov:

La société des sauvages, d'après Amerigo, se caractérise par cinq traits: pas de vêtements, pas de propriété privée; pas de hiérarchie ni de subordination; pas d'interdits sexuels; pas de religion; le tout se trouvant résumé dans cette formule "vivre selon la nature." (359)

The novels on migration demonstrate that this dynamic described by Todorov still exists because Africa remains the place where France seeks catharsis from the artificial conflict created by the distinctions between "primitive" and "civilized" societies. French politicians attempt to portray the Republic as a benevolent institution that bestows the benefits of civilization on the African continent, while tourists seek in Africans the fulfillment of their sexual fantasies deemed irrational and inaccessible in Western societies. An example of the latter phenomenon is found in Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, in which French tourists are influenced by stereotypes about Africans' heightened sexual performance.

Despite the links that Todorov draws between rationality, exoticism and race, he seems to hold the view that resolving the artificial dichotomies created by race depends on finding an appropriate theory that respects diversity such as what he calls “un humanisme tempéré.” However, diversity is not a product of human endeavors, for no two human beings, even identical twins, think and act exactly in the same manner, even in similar situations. Therefore, theories cannot promote diversity but help identify and dismantle the institutions and ideologies that undermine it. By the same token, migration is an intrinsic human activity influenced by complex human, social and environmental interactions; therefore, it is more fruitful to attack laws that attempt to outlaw it rather than to lament about African risking their lives to reach France.

By limiting his analysis of exoticism and racism to intellectual production, Todorov places inordinate faith in intellectual production to resolve complex issues. The problem with this approach lies in the fact that ideas about race are not a product of studies alone but also of institutional and military power. A similar point has been made by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997) who observes in his analysis of race in Kant’s thought: “it is obvious that Kant is able to hold the above views about the African [as lacking rationality and morality] because, thanks to transatlantic mercantilist slave trades, Kant *sees* and *knows* that, in fact, African slaves are flogged, ‘trained’ in his words, as European labor” (177, italics in original). The relationship between ideas and force was also present in the former French West Africa where, Gary Wilder notes, “government policies were informed by and produced by ethnographic knowledge just as ethnological science was informed by and produced administrative categories” (221).

Todorov's framework explores symbolic language without identifying the power and violence that produced and sustained the stereotypes of non-European peoples. If applied to African novels, it would eliminate the role of power and history in African-French relations, thereby reducing the injustice of immigration to the absence, rather than the suppression of diversity. The writers apply a similar approach by calling for compassion for African migrants while ignoring the specific policies, institutions and individuals that create the crisis in the first place.

The fundamental benefit of applying the concept of tragedy to literary depictions of migration is that we can perceive the novel as a reflection of the world rather than simply a text. Tragedy justifies the incorporation of the realities of migration in the production and interpretation of literature. Ironically, Soyinka fails to include the writer in the reality that literature reflects, implying the writer remains unaffected by the realities he depicts. Soyinka's insensitivity to individual writers is surprising, given his eloquent assertion that "[t]he sickness of one individual is a sign of, or may portend the sickness of, the world around him" (51). The next section will examine the links between personal and social trauma and how these affect the artist and creative process.

### **Literature, Tragedy and the Writer**

In *Les Damnés de la terre*, Fanon argues that the impending outbreak of liberation wars left the writer with the option to support either the armed liberation struggles or the imperial powers. Neutrality would suggest complacency because colonialism eliminated the possibility for the writer to remain impartial. This reality was evident in some

intellectuals' futile appeals for non-violent reform or political mediation while ignoring that neither the natives nor the settlers were interested in reaching a compromise.

Intellectuals needed to understand this reality in order to be socially relevant. Therefore, Fanon illustrates the different interests and motivations of actors in liberation wars as well as their different roles in the tragedy of wars of liberation.

The tragic victims of *Les Damnés de la terre* were those for whom colonialism had left no other means of survival than violent struggle. Although the majority of these people were indigenous peasants, they were joined by anyone who was persuaded that colonialism needed to be removed because it was incapable of reform. This key motivation is outlined in the passage below:

En Algérie, par exemple, où la presque totalité des hommes qui ont appelé le peuple à la lutte nationale étaient condamnés à mort ou recherchés par la police française, la confiance était proportionnelle au caractère désespéré de chaque cas. Un nouveau militant était sûr quand il ne pouvait plus rentrer dans le système colonial. (82)

Under colonialism, the only options for the “wretched of the earth” were struggle or death. This social group therefore had one clear goal in mind during liberation, which was to take the colonizer’s – read the European’s – place. However, Fanon warned, this goal was short-sighted because all it would do was change the color of the colonizer’s skin but not the content of his character. To avoid this pitfall, those engaged in the liberation struggle needed to identify the colonizer by his interests and behavior, for as Fanon argued, “[i]l arrive à des Noirs d’être plus blancs que les Blancs et que l’éventualité d’un drapeau national, la possibilité d’une nation indépendante n’entraînent

pas automatiquement certaines couches de la population à renoncer à leurs privilèges et à leurs intérêts” (138). Since the the time and the resources necessary to carry out such reflection were available to intellectuals and artists, the ideal contribution of these individuals was their articulation of the complex forces which the colonized had to confront.

Like the “wretched of the earth,” the intellectual who sides with the people is also a desperate individual, but he recognizes his desperation within the realm of ideas more than through material realities. Fanon situates the origins of this desperation at the intellectual’s recognition of his implication in the colonial framework and the subsequent mental exorcism that restores the internal homeostasis upset by Western schooling. The process is traumatic and in most cases begins at a subconscious level. At first, the intellectual praises the achievements of Western culture, only to realize that he has to produce original thought in order to fit into Western intellectual institutions. He therefore turns to his own culture for ideas but finds that it hardly offers “les figures de proue capables de supporter la comparaison avec celles, nombreuses et prestigieuses, de la civilisation de l’occupant” (209). In order to compensate for this perceived gap, the intellectual exaggerates specific items of his culture which in turn leads him down the path of “[une] quête forcée, douloureuse [qui] ne fait qu’évoquer une banale recherche d’exotisme” (210).

Fanon argues that this dilemma leads to the second phase of the native intellectual’s awakening. The intellectual realizes that colonialism and racism affect the interpretation of his work, since the European audiences read his presentation of national cultures as exotic and absorb the denunciations of colonialism through catharsis.

Meanwhile, the objectification of his culture makes him estranged from his own people who are more interested in confronting the material challenges they face than in the glories of their culture. Fanon concludes that at this point, the artist interested in his people's liberation must choose to disregard the opinion of the European audience and capture the reality of his own people.

The migration novels reveal that the initial stages of mental exorcism described by Fanon do take place, but they do not culminate in a deliberate decision to disregard the values learned through Western education or the opinions of French readers. The novels thus demonstrate a striking naïveté about public expectations in France of African intellectuals with advanced schooling. Cilas Kemedjio (2003) argues that contemporary African writers are expected to present a façade of racial relations in France that camouflages the Republic's imperial project and racist ideology. He describes this dynamic as “[l]e casting des Noirs” and explains that it extends beyond the French-speaking African elite to all artists of African descent. Kemedjio observes:

Etre noir en France, dès le début, c'est participer à une mise en scène privée ou publique dont la fonction est la validation du paradigme civilisationnel qui est au principe de l'entreprise l'esclavagiste ou coloniale. La mise en scène du Noir permet à la France de contrôler presque totalement le deployment du Noir dans l'espace français, d'assurer en même temps une visibilité théâtralisée du Noir sur la scène française et son invisibilité tout autant réussie dans le quotidien. Les artistes, écrivains et danseurs Noirs Américains sont accueillis parce que somme toute, leur “presence anonyme dans la foule parisienne ou dans l'univers de la nuit” [. . .] est conditionnée par leur succès sur la scène. Les étudiants noirs des

Antilles et d'Afrique seront bien accueillis parce que, dans la mise en scène par l'édit colonial, Paris est le passage obligé pour leur formation universitaire [. . .] (364-65)

Kemedjio's observations demonstrate that while the historical conditions which Fanon addressed in *Les Damnés de la terre* may differ from those encountered by contemporary African writers in France, each generation of African writers is expected to play approximately the same role, which is to affirm the illusion of the Republic as a beacon of freedom and civilization in the world and especially for blacks who purportedly lack or negate these ideals. Within this framework, the African artist or intellectual is expected to promote an image of blackness within a certain degree of flexibility permitted by the racial hierarchy but one which does not significantly challenge the unequal power relations and racist ideology that inform the civilization framework. The tragedy of the African writers is, therefore, the fact that they have been cast to play a role which is historically and politically determined and essentially demeaning.

The writers cannot escape this predicament but they can challenge it. However, this task requires paying attention to the global environment in which one lives and to the contradictions between what the writer intends to do and what the larger society expects of him or her. As Fanon argues in *Les Damnés de la terre*, intellectuals can navigate these issues by interpreting their societies' values and aspirations against the background of the global environment. He illustrates this argument by praising Keita Fodéba, once Guinea's Interior minister, for using traditional art forms to reflect on the liberation struggles. In his prelude to his long citation of Fodeba's poem, Fanon states, "il a réinterprété toutes les images rythmiques de son pays [. . .] on trouve un constant souci de préciser le



moment historique de la lutte, de délimiter le champ où se déroulera l'action, les idées autour desquelles se cristallisera la volonté populaire" (215). For the contemporary African writer now residing in France, this principle translates into situating traditions, histories and aspirations of African societies against the backdrop of French immigration laws and foreign policy.

Fanon also challenges writers and intellectuals to constantly reconfigure the terms and discourses that depict the relationship between the Republic and its former colonies. This vigilance is necessary because one of the formidable characteristics of the French political elite is its versatility in its description of its country's relationship with Africa. Fanon's concern in *Les Damnés de la terre* was that the former colonial power would exploit the rise of Africans to positions of power in order to give an illusion of independence, when in fact it had not abandoned its political and economic interests in the newly formed African nations. Fanon's suspicions were not only confirmed but also superseded by the attempts to camouflage French dominance even within political discourse. In the years following World War II, for instance, Charles de Gaulle promised the citizenship to Africans in the colonies under the banner of the *Union Française*, but this gesture proved incapable of stopping the rising tide of nationalist resistance. He then "offered" independence under the ambiguous banner of cooperation. Ambroise Kom observes that "de Gaulle comprit qu'il valait mieux se présenter comme le libérateur de l'Afrique. Et c'est ce qu'il fit en distribuant les indépendances comme du chocolat aux colonies françaises de l'Afrique dans les années 1960" (116). Behind the scenes, however, de Gaulle used military and economic intervention to stifle nationalist

movements and even kill the movement leaders perceived as hostile to French interests in the continent (Kom 77).

This ability to adapt to changing historical trends was once again proved in the 1990's after the collapse of the USSR that coincided with the clamor for democracy in many African countries. Kom states:

[A]u bout de trente ans de cruelles dictatures soutenues par l'Occident, la France a cru bon, au lendemain de la chute du mur de Berlin, de donner le coup d'envoi de la démocratisation dans les Républiques d'Afrique francophone. Ce fut l'objet de la fameuse déclaration de La Baule en 1990 au cours de laquelle la France proposait aux Chefs d'Etat africains des primes à la démocratie. (156-57)

Kom's central argument in the above passage and in the rest of his book is that for every historical epoch, the discourse of French politicians has changed but the desire to maintain French hegemony in the continent remains constant. Kom urges intellectuals to be aware of this character of French neo-colonialism and its cultural implications by asking the poignant question: "Avons-nous maîtrisé la grammaire de la pensée impériale? Car si tel était le cas, c'est plutôt en terme de rupture et non point d'assistance [. . .] que nous aurions dû envisager notre avenir" (7).

While the sympathies of intellectuals such as Fanon, Kemedjio and Kom are evidently inclined to Africa, it is important to note that what they describe is more complex than simply taking overt political positions supporting Africa or the French Republic. Their approach essentially requires understanding that African graduates of Western-oriented education systems are tragic figures because their positions are rarely considered politically neutral. An African who writes in French while proclaiming

political neutrality or openly disavowing inclinations towards Africa is tragically interpreted as expressing sympathies for the Republic and its harsh immigration policies. From an existentialist perspective, an African intellectual's refusal to take sides in the French-African relationship is an act of bad faith, because it essentially constitutes a denial that colonialism and racism deny them the opportunity to embrace both Western and African cultures without necessarily supporting colonialism and imperialism. It is only when racism and neocolonialism are effectively destroyed that Africans – and anyone else for that matter – will be able to credibly proclaim cultural or political neutrality. In any case, the issue would then no longer be pertinent.

The central question in the remaining chapters of this study is not whether the African writers' sympathies lie with the Republic or with African migrants, but whether the novels demonstrate an awareness and acceptance of their tragic position as Africans with advanced French-oriented schooling. This study will demonstrate that in many cases, the authors and their characters are aware of their historical context, but deflect responsibility for their perspectives by holding African societies or the French Republic responsible for migrants' suffering.

The apparent naiveté of the writers about the potential interpretations of their work may be explained by their youth and by the fact that the novels are the first that they published. Therefore, they may not have had the experience necessary to appreciate the global forces that influence literature or the experiences that they depict. Nevertheless, the authors' inexperience accentuates the tragic role that they play because in tragedy, innocence or goodwill does not avert negative consequences.

The destiny of contemporary African writers in France is, therefore, largely similar to that of the African intellectuals described by Fanon in *Les Damnés de la terre*. Just as the African intellectuals during liberation struggles, contemporary African writers are tragic heroes because they have access to certain privileges while Africans with limited or no Western-oriented education may not. These privileges, which may include easier access to visas, significant social recognition and a stable economic income, are also accompanied by the expectation that the writers are available for consultation by French institutions and readers as representatives of African societies, whether the writers want to play this role or not.

Within the rubric of tragedy, this distinction between African writers and the majority of African migrants translates into that between the tragic hero and the tragic victim. This distinction emerges more clearly in Mandel's observation that the hero's suffering is induced by choice while the victim's suffering is induced primarily by fate: "Tragedy deals with an action harmful or fatal in its nature. The fatality which reaches us 'out of the blue' is one thing; that which we call upon ourselves by our will and deed is quite another" (103). Similarly, the tragedy of African writers partly results from choices that they make while that of migrants with few resources largely emerges from institutional and political forces on which they have little impact.

Nevertheless, African intellectuals play a paradoxical role in tragedy. Even though they are privileged in relation to other Africans, they are also victims of racial discrimination. In contemporary France, the writer enjoys some visibility and even prestige when his or her profession is known, especially now that Nicholas Sarkozy's policy of "immigration choisie" seeks to give preference to skilled workers. When

anonymous, however, they suffer a fate similar to other Africans in pursuit of their daily lives.

Ideally, this paradox should make France the ultimate tragic hero of migration. Moreover, France remains the most powerful actor in migration, and power is the defining quality of tragic heroes. As Harvey Birenbaum succinctly observed, “[w]e kill the king because he matters enough” (4). The novels do indicate that the Republic is morally responsible for the suffering of African migrants, especially because the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* often lack concrete manifestation for many Africans. The disconnection between the Republic’s self-image and the inefficiency of its ideals, also described by two French journalists, Romain Gubert and Emmanuel Saint-Martin in *L’Arrogance française* (2003), makes France an appropriate tragic hero in migrants’ tragedies.

The role of France as a tragic hero is not, however, apparent. Tragedy demands that the hero recognize his fate in the world, something that the Republic often refuses to do. French politicians have in fact attempted to depict the country as the real victim of migration. Jean-Marie Le Pen blames immigrants for the loss of jobs and other social services that should be available to French citizens, while politicians from the center to the left plead that they have no choice but to tighten the migration laws. The logic behind Michel Rocard’s infamous statement that “La France ne peut pas héberger toute la misère du monde” is that France is sympathetic to migrants yet powerless to alter the conditions that migrants are escaping. This statement betrays the myth of innocence that continues to inform views in France of the Republic’s relationship with Africa.

The second reason that France is not a convenient tragic hero is because appointing it to play this role allocates it some form of moral legitimacy. Suffering moral indignation that does not significantly challenge its policies or institutions would prove to be cathartic for the Republic. This need for catharsis is shared by other dominant Western societies and is described by Gordon as follows:

[N]eocolonialism, bolstered not only by the fall of its Eastern European opposition, but also by years of successful political, economic, and military destabilization of Third World sites of resistance, finds itself facing the classical theodicean problem of legitimacy that has plagued many a previous imperial order: How can it legitimate its conquest without depending on conquest itself as a source of legitimation? [. . .] The heart of the new regime must be demonstrated to be pure, to be good, in the midst of its contradictions. (1997 166)

Gordon goes on to argue that this situation makes Western world expect the Third World intellectual to engage in verbal, literal and cultural denunciations of imperialism without fundamentally questioning its power. The expectation differs little from that of colonial governments which encouraged vehement attacks from African artists. As Fanon explains, “[l]es dénonciations acérées, les misères étalées, la passion exprimée sont, en effet, assimilées par l’occupant à une opération cathartique. Faciliter ces opérations c’est, en un certain sens, éviter la dramatisation, détendre l’atmosphère” (1961 228). In migration as in colonialism, catharsis becomes a form of bad faith because the Republic seeks to retain its power in Africa without accepting that the loss of its moral legitimacy is an integral component of that power. The African writer who condemns the Republic’s hypocrisy while affirming its goodwill towards Africans simply performs a cathartic role.

The social situation of the African writers within the contemporary framework renders Soyinka's concept of the artist as an "uncommissioned observer" problematic. Soyinka maintains an unrealistic expectation that writers remain unaffected by the situations they describe, yet a writer's work is influenced by the global context or, as Soyinka prefers to call it, the cosmic totality. Soyinka's unrealistic expectations of artists is evident in his impatient criticism of Negritude as taking "far too much colouring from European ideas even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African" (127). This statement disregards the impact of slavery and colonialism on the writers' sensibilities. His allusion to Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* is particularly harsh: "Suddenly, we were exhorted to give a cheer for those who never invented anything, for those who never explored the oceans. The truth, however, is that there isn't any such creature" (129). However, the exhortation is not as sudden as Soyinka suggests, for four hundred years of slavery had imposed the non-existent creature on blacks as an artificial mode of self-definition. Césaire's poem is in fact an assertion that Western cultures were in no moral position to set frivolous categories such as invention and civilization as standards by which blacks were to define themselves. Even Senghor, whose admiration for France was almost unshakable, was a product of the French assimilation policy, and so his views are understandable even though regrettable. For one who insists that individual suffering indicates a larger cosmic violation, Soyinka is notably intolerant of trauma suffered by African writers and its inevitable emergence in literature.

Even within the African worldview, the "uncommissioned observer" does not exist as Soyinka proclaims. In most societies, storytellers are neither objective nor

anonymous. They are often grandmothers or respected artists with some attachment to their audiences. Thomas Hale (1998) notes that the career of the griots was inherited and therefore associated with certain families. The epic of Sundiata narrated by Mamadou Kouyaté begins with Kouyaté providing his own genealogy. African artists have also earned their livelihood through their work. Hale presents evidence dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century on material rewards griots received and that included “[g]old, clothing, animals, housing, and wives.” He goes on to say: “There is evidence to suggest that the most talented or best connected griots lived well, both from rewards they received and from other activities” (288-29).

The same interaction between artists and audiences applies for African literature in French. As Mohamadou Kane (1982) observes, the first writings were commissioned by French colonial writers and colonial anthropologists whose goal was to depict Africa for French consumers who increasingly demanded texts that presented an “authentic” insight into African cultures. The initial literature did not differ significantly in content from that of European colonialists or travelers except for the fact that the writers were African. This phenomenon is most evident in Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*, which contains no criticism of the colonial system. Adele King (2002) has discovered that French friends and officials exerted a variety of influence in shaping the narrative so that it would convey the “right” image of Africa. Guy Ossito Midiohouan (2002) also observes that French colonial administrators encouraged African writers to publish in the hope that works by Africans would facilitate the entrenchment of colonial rule. This evidence suggests that a writer’s identity impacts how the book is read; therefore, he or she cannot be an “uncommissioned observer.”



While Soyinka extols the figure of the “uncommissioned observer,” he ironically accuses the French surrealist and neo-fiction movements of seeking the illusive goal of objectivity, eventually cutting literature off “from the human phenomenon which it is supposed to reflect, or on behalf of which it is supposed to speculate” (62). The concept of objectivity in literature had in fact gained popularity in France since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and arrived at its peak during the war period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its absurdity angered Sartre as much as it disturbed Soyinka. In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre attacked the romantic notion of *l’art pour l’art* as “[une] brillante manœuvre défensive des bourgeois [. . .] qui aimaient mieux se voir dénoncer comme philistins que comme exploitateurs” (32). Alluding to French poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he argued that poetry was not literature because it transformed language from a tool for understanding the world into an opaque object for admiration.

Ironically, in his preface to Senghor’s anthology published the same year (1948b), Sartre described Negritude poetry as the only revolutionary poetry, presumably because the poets were expressing black pride rather than dealing with racism as a concrete phenomenon in France. The virulent critic of bad faith tragically succumbed to it by using race to excuse his inconsistent views on poetry.

Nevertheless, Sartre’s comments on the impossibility of objectivity remain pertinent, especially for critics of whom he thought even less. He describes them as “des cathares” because “ils ne veulent rien avec le monde réel [. . .] Ils ne se passionnent que pour les affaires classées, les querelles closes, les histoires dont on sait la fin” (1948a 35). Critics were therefore “des hommes qui [. . .] ont trouvé une petite place tranquille de gardien de cimetière” (33). Sartre’s attack on critics took a personal turn when he

observed: “Le critique vit mal, sa femme ne l’apprécie pas comme il faudrait, ses fils sont ingrats, les fins de mois difficiles” (33). The satire in these remarks provides a dramatic note on which to turn our attention from the writers’ to critics’ implication in the reading of literature. After all, if the writer is a commissioned observer, so is the literary critic.

### **Literature, Tragedy and the Critic**

The various studies that deal with migration in African literature generally follow two trends that reveal the political inclination of the scholars. On one hand, critics focus on contextual issues related to African traditions, imperial politics, publishing and reading of literature, while on the other, critics largely restrict their analysis to race relations in France and gender relations in Africa. The distinguishing feature of both trends lies in the extent to which critics address the specific impact of African traditions and of France’s dealings with Africa on the experiences of and writings on migration.

In *Roman africain et traditions*, Kane (1982) makes two strong points about the relationship between the migration experience and literature. First, migration as a leitmotif in literature is rooted in African oral literatures, since many folk tales recount the journeys and adventures of protagonists. Second, migration is the means through which novels reveal the African landscape and the impact of colonialism in reorganizing it. For instance, Kane states that Mongo Beti’s *Mission terminée* depicts urban and rural landscapes, while Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les Soleils des indépendances* captures the natural environment, particularly in its portrayal of Salimata’s flight from the village following her botched initiation and subsequent rape.

Kane's approach enables us to conclude that the treatment of contemporary migration in literature is a continuation of, rather than a departure from African traditions. Thomas Hale has made similar observations in his discussion of the value known as *fadenya*, the Mande term for father-child-ness. In epics from the Sahel region, *fadenya*, or its equivalent in other ethnic groups, informs the hero's departure from home and the subsequent development of identity and communal consciousness. I will revisit this concept in chapter three that analyzes Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*. For now, it is important to note that the links between African traditions, migration and narratives demonstrate that if African migrants are suffering from poverty and discrimination in France, it is not because they migrate but because certain institutional and historical conditions are in place to regulate migration.

Another element crucial to understanding literature on migration is the appraisal of the conditions in which the literature is produced and read. Midiohouan (2002) and Kom (2000) present persuasive studies in this regard. Like Kane, Midiohouan traces migration to France in literature to the historical beginnings of African writing in French. He notes that work by earlier writers like Bakary Diallo, Ousmane Socé and Paul Hazoumé were based on their experiences in France either as soldiers – as was the case with Diallo – or as participants in the 1930 Exposition coloniale in Paris – as was the case with Socé and Hazoumé.

The benefit of Midiohouan's study is its juxtaposition of conditions in both Africa and France during the colonial period. In Africa, French colonial writers and educators encouraged publications from African students that would not only entertain the French metropolitan public, but would also provide colonial administrators with information

about African societies. Midiohouan adds that this dynamic set the foundation of France's control of African publishing in French that persists to this day. Another important point Midiohouan makes is that African literature in French does not owe its impetus to colonialism but to the experiences of Africans themselves, be they in Africa or in France.

Kom pursues the issue of publishing in his analysis of what he terms "la malédiction francophone." He argues that France plays an important role in influencing African writers to seek publishing opportunities in the metropole, away from the African public whose experiences inform the literature. France lends political support to African dictators who impose restrictions on the writers through censorship laws and the arrest of those considered too critical of the government. Mongo Beti's *Main basse sur le Cameroun* was banned in France in 1972 at the request of the Cameroonian government and particularly of Ferdinand Oyono who was the ambassador to France at the time. These conditions necessarily affect the writers' ability to reflect on the dilemmas of their societies.

The French Republic also imposes itself on the production of African literature through the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie and its affiliate institutions. These organizations promote the French language as the common denominator of France and its former colonies as well as award prizes and publishing opportunities to African writers. However, Kom argues, the unity is largely fictional because only 10 to 20% of Africans speak French and therefore do not read literature in French. Furthermore, fiction printed in France is too expensive for most African readers, especially since their purchasing power was further diminished in 1994 when France devalued the Communauté

Financière Africaine (CFA) franc that was then pegged to the French franc at the rate of 50 to 1. Once in the metropole, the few African writers who find publishers are expected to tailor their work to the expectations of French readers. Consequently, the success or misadventures of African writers “sont l’exclusivité d’un public euraméricain qui les traite comme des curiosités, comme de simples objets de consommation, l’Afrique affichant une indifférence ou plutôt une ignorance étonnante mais tout à fait explicable” (75).

Kane, Midiohouan and Kom successfully demonstrate that extra-textual dimensions of African literature have an impact on how African literature is written and read. However, they underestimate the implication of Western-oriented criticism for critics. Kane, for example, attacks European critics for using African literature to test their theories and dominate the European public’s aesthetic tastes, but uses the same model to project the function of the African critic. In an earlier article, for example, he states:

L’université peut, avec ses moyens et dans les limites de la stricte objectivité, travailler à hâter la formation d’une critique au service du public africain qui le préparait d’abord à recevoir l’oeuvre pour en tirer le maximum de profit, et qui, d’autre part se ferait l’interprète du goût public qu’elle dégagerait pour que l’auteur puisse se situer par rapport à ses lecteurs. (1966 19)

This view of the critic as an intermediary between the writer and the readers suggests that the critic has rare aesthetic tastes that he or she should dispense to the African public, yet the primary audience of critics is within, rather than outside, the university. Kane not

only upholds the problematic principle of objectivity, but also assigns the critic the role of propagating it to the African public.

Another weakness of Kane's analysis is its disregard for the relationship between literature and reality. In *Roman africain et traditions*, for example, he criticizes Beti's and Oyono's novels as predicated on attacking colonialism to the extent that they impose an artificial binary between the African and European sections of the towns. However, Manichean-structured neighborhoods were the product of colonialism rather than the invention of the writers. In a similar fashion, Kane laments that many of the young African protagonists are often weak characters who travel from rural areas and become overwhelmed by city life. He says, "Les romanciers ne proposent pas de modèles d'énergie [. . .] Dans le roman africain, le personnage se présente moins sous les traits d'un homme d'action que ceux d'un témoin promis au statut de victime" (1982 218). Kane minimizes the fact that these characters reflect the manner in which colonialism was designed so that an African's efforts to gain access to European culture would ultimately fail.

The contradiction in Midiohouan's study manifests itself differently. The central argument that African literature in French does not derive its impetus from France but from Africans themselves is an essential one. However, Midiohouan reduces this impetus to geographical boundaries, as is evident in the following assertion that includes italics and an exclamation mark: "Mais contrairement à une opinion largement partagée, *la littérature negro-africaine d'expression française n'est pas née en France!*" (17). But the fact remains that African literature in French, even Lamine Senghor's *La violation d'un pays* that Midiohouan praises for its revolutionary fervor, was informed by ideologies and

social conditions in France. The question of the literatures' origins is difficult to establish and, therefore, cannot be disproved by showing its revolutionary tendencies. Besides, the origins of literature are less important than establishing how that literature reflects African cultures and experiences.

Despite the weaknesses of the studies analyzed above, the critics admirably situate African literature in its global context. My concern is that their arguments are predicated on calling into question the European critic's loyalties or familiarity with Africa, but do not question the very institutional practice of criticism as inherited from the West that discounts important realities that are captured in literature.

This problem is indeed evident in certain studies on African literature that privilege France's racial politics over the African experience depicted in novels. Mireille Rosello (1998), for instance, sees literature by Africans, Arabs and Jews as a tool for "declining stereotypes." This framework is problematic because it evades the fact that stereotypes are not simply linguistic but reflective of painful histories suffered by the people who are objects of stereotypes. It ultimately puts the onus for the stereotypes on the victims of the stereotypes rather than on the agents and beneficiaries of the social conditions that give those stereotypes currency. This inclination is evident in the invitation to victims to focus on the naiveté of the users of stereotypes:

People whose skin color makes them likely to be constructed as blacks will find that stereotypes don't go any further than that. The advent of Negritude was a historical moment when the reappropriation of stereotypes by black intellectuals took a certain turn: the colonized elite [. . .] deployed their creative energies in the

creation of other images and representations that could themselves easily be accused of being stereotypical. (5)

Rosello essentially states that the main concern groups for whom stereotypes reflect traumatic events should be to determine the motivations of the users of stereotypes and their personal credibility. More sadly, her argument about the “reappropriation of stereotypes” implies that insults can be transformed into a tool of empowerment, which is like expecting the oppressed to embrace oppression as an opportunity to fight for freedom. When applied to literature, this approach absolves readers of the moral imperative to engage in self-criticism and analysis of the conditions that make stereotypes painful in the first place. It also excludes from African literature the experiences and sufferings of migrants for whom stereotypes reflect discrimination in housing, education, employment and other facets of life in France.

Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s *Black Paris* also imposes a false dichotomy between experience and African literature by proposing Paris as “the ideological and topological foundation” of African writings in French (1998 8). This confinement permits the evasion of the socio-historical conditions in Africa that are largely behind the publication of African literature. Jules-Rosette’s bias for France as a creative center implies that African literature depicting the reality of colonialism is political and therefore has limited literary value. This thesis emerges more clearly in her distinction between literary works and revolutionary writing:

Fueled by the spirit of combat, revolutionary writing is produced from the heart rather than on the basis of established literary canons of colonized writing. The



literature of negritude, by contrast is inspired by an intellectual elite that invoked, but was not removed from its cultural roots. (92)

Jules-Rosette presents African literature as an aesthetic product with little connection to lived experience but inspired by institutional expectations of writers. In the end, the central thesis of *Black Paris* emerges as follows: literature that addresses specific material concerns is political and politics ruins good literature; therefore, literature in which Africans articulate experience related to colonial oppression is not good literature.

A similar attempt to divorce experience from literature is evident in Odile Cazenave's book (2003) that borrows its title from the film "Afrique sur Seine." Cazenave appears to define African identity by one's political differences with or geographical distance from France. Hence writers like Mongo Beti who criticize French imperialism are militant while those like Marie NDiaye with no declared attachment to Africa are "universal." The problem with this framework is that it magnifies simple gestures into cultural, political and ideological statements. For instance, the protagonist's return home in Etoké's novel is described as "une volonté de particularisation et d'ancrage culturel" yet going home is a normal part of life for most human beings (250).

In the case of NDiaye, this ideological thread produces a series of contradictory statements: while NDiaye is black, she is a French rather than African writer, and while French writers are not subject to scrutiny for their French or regional origins, her parentage is nevertheless significant in understanding her work (77). The inclusion of NDiaye in a study of African literature seems out of place since Cazenave explicitly states that NDiaye does not claim an African identity and that her literature does not deal with themes that are easily identifiable with the continent. The analysis of NDiaye's work

is thus based on what it does not include rather than what it actually includes. This ambiguity provides one element of Cazenave's central thesis that recent African literature published in France demonstrates that French society increasingly embraces Africans. In reality, however, the Republic continues to implement policies that adversely affect African migrants.

Two edited volumes, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies* (Forsdick and Murphy 2003) and *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France* (Ireland and Proulx 2001) also evade the traumatic experiences of African migrants in order to sustain the thesis of the improving conditions for Africans in France. In doing so, they make statements that contradict the situations, character portraits and narrative development in the novels. In the Forsdick and Murphy volume, Aedín Ní Loingsigh (2003) proposes tourism as the framework for migration. She argues that "attitudes to both tourists and immigrants tell us something of the impact of class, gender and race in cultural constructions, and reveal important continuities between the colonial and postcolonial worlds" (155). She seeks to challenge the stereotype of the economically desperate African migrant by considering African migrants as tourists. While it is true that tourism is largely associated with wealth, the reality is that tourism and immigration are largely determined by complex factors and motivations. As Castles and Miller (2003) point out, people can sometimes travel with the intention of being tourists but end up remaining in the country for an infinite number of reasons. This complexity renders the use of tourism as an analytical framework problematic.

Nevertheless, Loingsigh assigns undeserved importance to tourism in her analysis of Essomba's *Le Paradis du Nord*. She states that the protagonist Jojo heads for France

because he wants access to the lifestyle of the French tourists he met while he worked in a hotel in Douala. However, Jojo does not admire tourists as much as he steals from them with the help of his friend Charlie. He goes to Paris at the instigation of Charlie, and when the city does not provide the lifestyle that Charlie promised it would, he suggests that they return home. Jojo's friendship with Charlie has a greater impact than tourism in influencing Jojo's departure, especially because Jojo spent his childhood on the streets and so his close friendship with Charlie is very important to him.

In the Ireland and Proulx volume, Rosello (2001) focuses on the fact that Bessora, like her protagonist Zara, is the daughter of a Gabonese diplomat and a Swiss citizen. She makes this unfortunate claim: "From a biological standpoint, Zara understands *métissage*" (195). The emphasis on biological origins is misplaced because Zara's dilemma stems less from an identity crisis and more from the absurdity that her daughter cannot attend school without documents that regularize her status, yet the government does not require these documents for minors. In my analysis of Bessora's novel in chapter four, I argue that this identity crisis does emerge in the novel but is rooted in racism rather than in the protagonist's family background.

In the same volume, Dominic Thomas (2001) also focuses on interracial love relationships and states that Joseph, the Congolese protagonist of Daniel Biyaoula's *L'Impasse*, misses "the potential for reconciliation that a hybrid child would offer" because he does not assume parental responsibility for the child of his French girlfriend Sabine. Thomas adds: "Biyaoula seems to be suggesting the impossibility of forming human relations across racial divides" (173). Calling a child "hybrid" and a "potential for reconciliation" reduces the child to the parents' race. Thomas' statement also lacks

foundation because the novel does not establish with certainty that Joseph is the child's father. Finally, the tension that led to the breakup of Joseph and Sabine's relationship was accentuated when Joseph lost his job after French union workers would not reciprocate the support that their African colleagues had offered them earlier. If there was need for reconciliation, it should have been in the form of employment, not in the form of children.

The problem in all these analyses is the hasty thematization that privileges ideology over the progression of the characters and events in the novel. This problem has been aptly described by James Phelan (1989) as "making any quick leaps from traits to themes." Phelan adds:

Indeed, we label those who leap from skin color or sex to assumptions about a person as racist or sexist [. . .] we must also resist the automatic ascription of traits to themes in literature. In both cases, then, the problem arises not from thematizing itself but doing so prematurely and carelessly, i.e., without sufficient attention to the relation of the trait to the rest of the person or character and situation and actions in which he or she is engaged. (13)

From this perspective, one may conclude that the critics expect the novels by Africans to be about poverty in Africa and identity crisis in France, and so they ignore the complex motivations, idiosyncrasies and situations of the characters. Consequently, the critics generally conclude that the novels explore opportunities for integration and fail to appreciate the novels as stories about how African migrants cope with racism, discrimination, unemployment or the search for residency papers.

Perhaps the most tragic instance of ideological criticism occurs in the analysis of gender. Françoise Lionnet (1995), for example, claims that Malian immigrant women come from a country which is a “ruling patriarchy.” Her conclusions are based on works by scholars such as Claude Levi-Strauss and do not include any studies done in Mali. The condemnation of African traditions is unjustified because African women have always used tradition to engage the issues they consider important, as studies by Ifi Amadiume (1997) and Aissatou Sidikou (2003) reveal. Lionnet inherently supports a common perception in France that non-European women find in Europe opportunities to escape oppressive traditions. Similar points about the better opportunities offered to immigrant women have been reiterated by Cazenave (1996) who postulates that immigrant women are more likely to integrate into French society than men, which essentially makes immigrant men largely responsible for the plight of non-European women in France.

Such analyses are tragic because the critics inadvertently support the injustice that they try to challenge. The proclaimed concern for African women actually reinforces the prejudices that the women confront, because imperialism has always made similar claims about African patriarchy in order to depict the continent as backward and in need of European intervention. Eric Savarèse (2000) traces the contemporary French perception of African and Maghrebian women immigrants to magazines printed in the early part of the twentieth century that presented colonialism as a mission to save African women exploited for their sex and labor through polygamy. Jane Freedman (2000) also observes that immigration discourses in contemporary France use non-European women as a battleground for control. These women are held responsible “both for perpetuating the boundaries of ethnic groups within France and for ensuring that these boundaries are

made permeable to French culture” (15). The attempt to portray African women as unique heroines and to distance their experiences from those of African men evades the reality that the women inevitably suffer even when they are not the direct object of imperialist policies. This gender dialectic is particularly evident in Etoké’s novel in which the protagonist, a young woman, suffers emotional turmoil due to her boyfriend’s difficult experiences and eventual deportation from France.

Even African women scholars who insist that African and Third World feminisms bear a different orientation than Western feminism sometimes fall into the trap of maintaining Western feminism as their main focus, albeit by negating it. A tragic example is provided by Oyérunké Oyewùmí’s (2003a) edited volume in which the scholars harshly accuse Western feminists of bigotry but do not explore Africans’ women’s history on its own terms. Oyewùmí’s (1997) award-winning study of gender from an African perspective occasionally betrays the same inclination when it criticizes the fact that colonialism did not give African women the status of colonial subjects as it did to African men. The suggestion that African women should stake a claim in the demeaning treatment of African men implies that the standard for evaluating African women’s situation should be African men’s position in the imperial hierarchy rather than human dignity. It also implies that women do not voice any concern with colonialism independent of the gender divisions imposed on African societies.

Within literary studies, this orientation presents itself as laments that African women’s access to Western education or to attention in literary scholarship is more restricted than that of men. As Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi’s (1997) study shows, this approach values women’s writing by the attention it receives in the Western academy rather than

by the experiences the writing reflects. For instance, Nfah-Abbenyi limits the criticism of Western education to its limited opportunities for African women but does not problematize the negative social and psychological impact of Western schools on African societies. This perspective also minimizes the fact that it was not African men but the colonial administration which restricted access to these schools. Moreover, only a small minority of African men was able to attend, for the main goal of the colonial administration's main goal was to perpetuate its control through creating an elite sympathetic to its interests rather to impose gender dichotomies.

The other problem with Nfah-Abbenyi's study is that it is seemingly uncritical of the continued reliance of African intellectual production on the West. She observes:

Although the space that is allocated to the writings of African women in university curricular is still minimal, some progress has been made. Scholars of African literature in Europe and North America are increasingly feeling the need to include at least one African woman writer in their course material. The spirit is also catching on in African universities, given that the curricula of these institutions have traditionally been Eurocentric and/or male-oriented. (4)

These remarks equate gender equity in African literary circles with visibility in Western institutions. They fail to relate African women's writing to the important issue of cultural autonomy in areas such as language, the socio-economic status of Western trained writers and the problem of Western audiences, areas that male writers such as Ngugi wa Thiongo (1993) and Boubacar Boris Diop (2005a) have insisted require urgent attention. This approach limits African women's concerns and their literature to gender, which raises the

question as to whether African women tackle issues in which they are not directly implicated.

African-American scholars have more articulately identified the ambiguity of criticism that minimizes the manner in which African-American women writers address the conditions that oppress their societies. Joyce Ann Joyce (1994) notes that critical praise of works by African American women that attack sexism in their communities heightens the tension between women and men, because African-American men understandably perceive the women as allies of Eurocentrism. She suggests that African-American critics need to be aware of this dynamic and promote healing in gender relations rather than provide fodder for conflict. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) also cautions that Eurocentric models of gender are oppressive because they ignore the effect of racism in distorting sexual and other intimate relationships.

So far, few scholars of African literature have analyzed how similar dynamics affect African societies because they are unwilling to admit that the African woman author is a member of the bourgeoisie. As critics trade accusations over whether Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* upholds bourgeois values or criticizes colonially-supported patriarchy, few question the Western academy's apparent interest in works by Bâ, Calixthe Beyala and Ken Bugul that deal primarily with marriage and sexuality. Samba Gadjigo (1994) raises a similar concern when he points to the limited attention to works by Aminata Sow Fall and a few critiques that even dub her as anti-feminist.

In chapter two, I will demonstrate that similar problems emerge in Fatou Diome's novel when the protagonist uses feminism to juxtapose her experiences with that of poor migrants. This gesture subverts the tragic element in poorer migrants' experiences and



minimizes the accomplishments of African women with no Western schooling. The novel reveals a limited appreciation of the extent to which African women writers' criticism of sexism affirms Western misrepresentations of gender in African societies.

The weaknesses of the literary studies that focus on women reflect a larger reality, which is that the road to faulty criticism is tragically paved with good intentions.

Rosello's (1998) vision of reconciliation through "declining" stereotypes and through victims trusting the users' goodwill is largely naïve and inherently oppressive, while Cazenave's (2003) proposal that the success of writers like Calixthe Beyala shows a change in French attitudes contradicts the reality of racism in France. Alec Hargreaves (2003) speaks of the "contribution" of immigrant communities to the "redefinition of contemporary French culture" but "redefinition" in his article sounds more like an increased variety of cultural goods on the market than a fundamental change in social structures that favors non-Europeans. The critics' positions are evidently aimed at seeking alternative models of society, but they become complicit with the very situations they challenge because they do not question the institutions and ideologies which determine the status of Africans in France. The goodwill reflects the tendency for university-trained intellectuals to forget that social change involves them but does not revolve around them. Since our vision of the world does not necessarily translate into reality, the least we can do is position literature within the reality of the world as it is, rather than as we hope it would be.

## **Conclusion**

In this introductory chapter, I have argued that since literature is a reflection of the world, criticism needs to include extra-textual issues such as history, lived experience, publishing and readership in the understanding of the narratives on migration. The evidence presented suggests that tragedy is an appropriate framework for analyzing all these elements in one continuous fabric.

This study will deal with two different tragedies. In one tragedy, the role of the tragic hero is played by the African bourgeoisie while that of the tragic victim is played by poor African migrants. The African characters with French education, the narrators and the authors clearly describe the experiences of poorer migrants, but they also affirm certain prejudices about Africa as well as the image of France as the home of human rights. In so doing, they tragically take sides with the French Republic and blame poor migrants for their own suffering. In the second tragedy, the French Republic is the hero while Africans – including the bourgeoisie – are the victims. The illusion of progress has hampered the Republic's ability to come to terms with the contradictions between its colonial history and foreign policy on one hand and its revolutionary ideals of freedom and human equality on the other.

Each of the next four chapters will analyze one novel. It will begin by highlighting an important contradiction that emerges between the writers' proclaimed criticism of oppressive immigration policies and their projection of France as willing to address the injustices that Africans suffer. The first section of each chapter will place the novels in a larger socio-historical context. Chapter two places Diome's novel on a largely

environmental stage, while chapter three places Mabanckou's novel on a historical stage. In chapter four, the stage on which I place Bessora's novel is largely philosophical, while in chapter five on Etoké's novel the stage integrates love relationships with identity. The subsequent sections of each chapter will examine the meaning and implications of the events, characters and other narrative elements against the background of the global stage.

This study will depart from the current critical practice of engaging literary theory and instead present a close reading of the novels. I will examine the narrative progression, character portraits, relationships between characters as well as the narrators' and audience's roles in the structure and interpretation of the novel. This approach is necessary to avoid arriving at conclusions that contradict evidence in the novels or factors in the real world that influence interpretation. Because of this emphasis on the narrative, most of the literary scholarship that I will engage will consist of the critiques of the novels or studies of literary genre rather than frameworks such as postcolonial and feminist theories that are currently in vogue.

Another important feature of this study is the use of African traditions as a framework for reading the novels. This will be particularly evident in chapter three that uses the concept of *fadenya*, the Mande term for father-child-ness, as a lens for reading the interaction between history, narrative and experience in Mabanckou's novel. Likewise, chapter five will examine the importance of initiation as a rite of passage in understanding the experiences of Etoké's protagonist. Although my references to African traditions will be largely informed by the novels and supporting scholarly work, they will also maintain biases informed by my own experiences as a Gikuyu woman from Kenya.

My references to Gikuyu culture are not intended to depict it as universal or to portray Africa as culturally homogeneous. However, I concede that it is difficult to evade such inferences.

This study will also incorporate a significant element of history and contemporary realities. The reason for this inclusion is that the tragic stage is not only social and environmental but also temporal, and so history remains an indispensable component of tragedy. The incorporation of historical data is also necessary to support my argument that the authors' vision of France sometimes contradicts historical evidence that even the authors acknowledge. Above all, it is difficult to avoid history because fiction is in fact a historical narrative. This fluid interaction between literature and history or between myth, literature and the world, as Soyinka saw it, is reflected in Hale's portrait of the griot as a historian:

If one places the notions of history and literature into one category broadly defined as interpretations of the past, the griot as a historian emerges as a "time-binder," a person who links past to present and serves as a witness to events in the present [. . .] In this sense, the griot's role as a historian is somewhat more dynamic and interactive than what we have in Western tradition – the scholar who spends years in libraries going through archival resources. (1998 23)

Like the griot's art and Soyinka's concept of tragedy, recent African novels on migrants can be read as fictionalized accounts that bind real migrants' experiences to history. Consequently, the incorporation of history will demonstrate the extent to which the novels and the experiences of actual migrants are morally and historically significant. Establishing this link between the reality of and narratives about migration also fulfills

the tragic imperative that individual suffering be interpreted as a symptom of an imbalance at social and environmental levels.

My choice of historical events will be mainly guided by the novels, although it will also be influenced by my own experience and biases. As will become increasingly evident, my references to the Republic's actions will be the ones I find the most absurd, and the most tragic because of the human suffering they usually instigate. An acknowledgement of my bias can be justified by citing Hale's (1990) study which argues that the interpretation of similar events by the scribes, the griots and contemporary African writers vary because of their different social positions, motivations and prevailing circumstances. In a similar manner, my study does not claim objectivity but strongly reflects my experience and observations in France.

The most evident problem with the tragic framework is the question of audience, since I will argue that the writers disregard the realities and assumptions of the French readers whom they address. The audience of novels is impossible to ascertain since it is distant and fragmented, as opposed to the audience of dramatized tragedy whose response is collective and immediate. Consequently, comments in this study about African or French audiences are projections largely based on responses from critics, interviews with the authors, general trends in African-French relations as well as opinions gained from my own experience and interaction with other Africans. The author interviews include conversations with Diome, Bessora and Essomba during my visit to Paris in June 2005, while others are found in the print and electronic media. The inclusion of projected audience responses is justified by Peter Rabinowitz's (1987) argument that readers' interpretation of novels is influenced by their cultural values. For novels considered

realist, readers minimize the difference between the narrative and their perception of reality. This definition of realism bears significant repercussions for African literature published in France, for the writer's criticism of Africans is likely to be read as reality even when the criticism is either faulty or an indication of personal persuasion.

In many cases, arguments about audiences will seem to disregard the complexity of French society itself. However, the framework of tragedy withstands this risk because it incorporates the understanding that values attributed to collective groups do not necessarily indicate the individual persuasion of every single member of the group, but that actions carried out in the name of the collective tragically implicate every member of the group.

Moreover, as an African I am wary that my attempts to specify different layers of French society will be misconstrued as a vindication of French citizens who do not belong to the political and intellectual elite. This interpretation would misrepresent two positions which I attach to the framework of tragedy. First, there are no innocent actors in the tragedy of French-African relations, whether they are French or African. French politicians may be the most powerful French actors, but they are elected and paid by French citizens. The same applies to African presidents who support France's interests but are also sustained by African tax payers. The realization of this personal implication in government policies underlies the passion and urgency with which François-Xavier Verschave (1999) investigated France's corrupt dealings in Africa. With specific reference to his country's involvement in the Rwandan genocide, he observes:

Effectivement, ce n'est pas si simple. Les Français ont les dirigeants qu'ils élisent.

Le Rwanda est l'accomplissement de notre démission collective. Qui parmi nous,

les citoyens ordinaires, a cherché à savoir ce qui se passait là-bas? [. . .] Mais sur ces sujets refoulés, le signal politique que nous émettons en direction de nos gouvernants reste ambivalent. (26)

As in any other tragedy, even individual French citizens like Verschave who may find their country's actions in Africa despicable are personally implicated in the oppressive relationship between the French Republic and its former colonies. It is my hope that my apparent disinterest in the dilemmas of French citizens will not only affirm this reality, but also spur the citizens to find the courage, as Verschave did, to question their own assumptions and institutions rather than simply plead on behalf of Africa that suffers from their country's policies.

The second implication of tragedy that makes me hesitate to pay inordinate attention to the internal dynamics of French society is that African intellectuals within the Western academy are cast into the role of providing catharsis for the Western world whose moral legitimacy is challenged by its relationship with the Third World. As Gordon (1997) has argued, this expectation of the Third-World scholar in the West is based on an overt or subtle scrutiny for indications of whether their sympathies lie with the West or with their home countries. Scholars tragically betray sympathies towards the Western world when they plead that they are too compromised or far removed from their home countries to be considered spokespersons of their home societies, or when they attempt to obscure the dichotomies imposed by global capitalism. Gordon articulates this simple reality as follows: "Tragic dimensions begin to emerge when we cut through the muck of obfuscating language, the morass of self-aggrandizing, narcissistic platitudes,

and get to the point with the crass or properly vulgar language of the streets and logic of the concrete: ‘When all is said and done, my friends, whose side are you on?’” (247).

Given this global reality, taking care to identify the specific French actors who are responsible for their country’s problematic policies in Africa would not significantly change the interpretation of my arguments but simply indicate where my sympathies lie. Yet, as I have already indicated, the bias of my study remains towards the Africans who are the most adversely affected by French immigration policies due to their youthful naiveté, limited French schooling or lack of economic resources. This position is in turn supported by the framework of tragedy that is morally inclined to those from social groups with limited power.

The attenuating factor I consider most important is the fact that as a member of the bourgeoisie, I am implicated in the conditions I criticize. Twenty years of my life and a considerable amount of resources that most people do not possess have gone into my study of French language and literature. Intellectuals like me are implicated in the perception among younger naive Africans that traveling to Europe or the United States is an automatic ticket to success, especially when one considers the simple fact that the cost of a plane ticket to go home for the holidays is enough to maintain an African family for at least a year, or that returning to Africa with Western education is often a ticket to acquiring well-paying jobs. As I accuse France, therefore, I also stand accused. Coming to terms with this uncomfortable reality is necessary for me to articulate my implication in the conditions that make Africans desperate or naïve enough to trek the Sahara desert or cross the Mediterranean in unseaworthy vessels. It also expresses my conviction that the social conditions that provoke human suffering in migration will diminish once



everyone accepts responsibility for that which is in their power to change. In the next chapter, I will argue that the protagonist in Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* attempts to evade her implication and responsibility in the imperial framework.

## Chapter 2

### Tragic Indigestion in Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*

In the previous chapter, I argued that the tragedy of migration takes place on a world stage and presents migrants' suffering as a malady that affects the entire universe, even non-human actors such as the environment. Fatou Diome's novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, captures this dynamic by depicting the intervention of the Atlantic Ocean in the events surrounding migration. The ocean's participation in the tragedies of African migrants is informed by a local myth that depicts its pleasure and displeasure with human action through the motifs of digestion and indigestion respectively. The ocean places both Africa and Europe on the same stage, hence unifying the issues confronting migrants as a human dilemma rather than a dilemma that confronts Africans and Europeans differently. As Bi Kacou Parfait Diandue (2005) affirms, the ocean's symbolic role "entraîne qu'en différents endroits du monde, on peut penser des philosophies quasi-similaires sans appartenir à la même civilisation."

Despite the continuity implied in the Atlantic's role in migration, the novel also imposes a false dichotomy between France and Senegal by addressing the presumably French readers in a manner different from that aimed at the African community portrayed in the novel. Through Salie, the protagonist, the novel reveals to the reader alone France's political support for the African bourgeoisie, the exploitation of Senegal by European tourists and the corruption within the visa application system. However, Salie restricts her conversations with the people in at home to the simple message that France

is not an automatic ticket to success. She does not offer the community a wider perspective on the global conditions in both Senegal and France that would enable it to see the injustice of France's presence in its own country while trying to prevent Africans from entering France. This approach leads one to ask why the novel creates two audiences in contradiction of the unifying gesture of the Atlantic Ocean.

In this chapter, I will argue that the contradiction in audiences emerges from Salie's and the author's attempt to eliminate their implication within the larger framework of migration. The novel therefore projects Salie – an African woman with French schooling – as the tragic victim caught between communal expectations of financial support and the French social environment that is hostile to Africans. The portrayal of Salie as a victim is not convincing, given that there are two tragic victims with fewer options than Salie. One is Sankèle, a young woman who leaves home following her father's attempts to arrange her marriage to a migrant returning from France. The other is Moussa, a young man who is misled into believing that he would receive a contract to play professional soccer in Europe. After the opportunity to play does not materialize, he is deported back to Senegal and is taunted by the mockery of a community that does not understand why he did not return in pomp and glory as is expected of other migrants.

Salie uses these two characters to portray herself as victimized by her community because she is a woman and unfairly expected to provide greater economic resources to her family than those that are at her disposal. However, this attempt to place herself in the same boat as Sankèle and Moussa minimizes their suffering and suppresses the important class distinctions between Salie and the two characters. The narrative also places the onus

of the characters' suffering on African traditions, which contradicts the myths and practices within the community that Salie ironically extols. Most of all, it affirms Western stereotypes about misogyny and desperation in Africa. Salie betrays awareness of this implication but tries to prevent the reader from sharing her conclusions. This preemptive gesture contradicts what Jean-Paul Sartre called "le pacte de générosité" in his book *Qu'est que la littérature?* (1948). According to Sartre, the writer submits himself or herself to the freedom of the reader to interpret the book as she or he deems fit. The writer who tries to overtly manipulate the reader's interpretation in order to contradict certain logical inferences of the novel therefore acts in bad faith.

Salie's maneuvering is designed to project herself as an African intellectual appealing to France's conscience on behalf of the continent. However, the historical background of migration reveals her self-perception as an enlightened individual who can discourage Africans from migrating while appealing to France for compassion towards Africa. Salie's community in Senegal senses this discrepancy and asks fundamental questions that require her to take a clear stand. Instead, she remains evasive by suggesting that the youth are blinded by their ignorance and macho attitudes. This leads one to conclude that she is less concerned about the injustice suffered by migrants than with affirming the social status provided to African intellectuals by French education.

In the first section of this chapter, I will analyze the natural, spatial and temporal framework in order to outline the global stage on which the novel places migration. I will argue that France's presence in Senegal has caused inequalities that are visible in the landscape, which could explain why the youth feel they have no choice but to migrate. In the second section, I will argue that the explosive situation leads to the tragedies of

Moussa and Sankèle. Moussa dies following the emotional turmoil caused by his unsuccessful migration, while Sankèle's child born out of wedlock is killed by an irate father disappointed by his daughter's pregnancy. The ocean intervenes differently in both tragedies through the motif of digestion by rejecting Moussa's body but accepting that of Sankèle's child. In the third section, I will argue that Salie's response to both tragedies is ambiguous, because even though she accepts the cosmic picture, she also uses rationalist values to deny the tragic experiences. Her gesture is inherently selfish because it focuses on minute details and asserts her position as an educated African woman.

### **Latent Violence and Migration**

Salie, the narrating protagonist, is a native of the Senegalese island of Niodior and now a writer living in Strasbourg. Niodior is about 16km in length and 5km in width. In my interview with Diome, she stated that the island's registered inhabitants during the 1998 census stood at 6,000. The main language spoken there is Serere.

Salie's life roughly mirrors that of Diome. She arrived in France as the wife of a French national, but at the time of narration she has been divorced for approximately ten years. Her brother Madické believes that going to France is the best path to realize his dream to be a professional soccer player like his hero, Italian soccer star Paulo Maldini. Salie discourages Madické from concentrating his energies on leaving for France, but her efforts are initially met by his doubt and impatience. Eventually, she convinces him to remain in Niodior and start an income-generating project with money that she sends from France.

As the title indicates, the novel sets the spatial arena in which migration takes place by establishing the Atlantic Ocean as the mediator between Senegal and France. The contrast between the continents is visible in the difference between Salie's apartment in Strasbourg and Niodior where her family lives. Despite the distance, Salie is united with her community in a specific historical time by the live televised semi-final match between Italy and Holland at the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) championship on June 29, 2000. Both she and the Niodior community are watching the match, but the difference in spatial dimensions means that the activities around the television are different. Salie watches the match alone in an apartment so cramped that when she gets excited by the game, she jumps from her seat, kicks the table and spills tea on the carpet (11). Given the confines of her physical space she becomes dependent on technology and her imagination to extend beyond her compartment. She imagines the tension of the Italian players and the goings-on in Niodior as the community watches the match.

In contrast to her solitude and limited space, the community in Niodior reflects the larger natural and geographical environment. The spectators are gathered at the house of the proprietor of the sole television in the village. Their age, gender, activities and interests vary. The older and adolescent men watch the match, but during the intermission, the adolescents vacate their places in front of the television and discuss the match away from the house to avoid making too much noise for their host. The younger boys take their place to watch the commercials, but vacate when the game resumes. In the meantime, the women prepare dinner which they serve to viewers at the end of regulation time. When the match goes into extra time, the spectators move aside to eat dinner,

leaving Madické positioned in front of the television to avoid missing the outcome of the match. The bliss he feels as he watches the remainder of the match uninterrupted is short-lived. It begins to rain and the old television set stops working despite his efforts to shelter it from getting wet.

The difference in spatial dynamics extends from around the television to the landscape and general lifestyle. In Niodior, the boundaries of time, space, nature and humanity are fluid, while in France the same elements are constricted by technology and rationality. The island is described as “la gencive de l’Atlantique,” and the inhabitants reflect sensitivity to the cycle of life in their daily activities. The mosque is “figée dans ses certitudes,” and the coconut palms swing nonchalantly “dans une danse païenne sans raison.” This dance is then connected to the rhythm of rituals and seasons. The first dance is linked to the celebration of funerals, while the second is for marriages after harvest and the end of the dry season. The third is “[une] sorte de danse que déclenchent les tempêtes et lors de laquelle, dit-on, les cocotiers imitent le mouvement de refus des jeunes filles offertes en mariage à des hommes qu’elles n’aiment pas” (13). Salie describes the fourth dance as the most mysterious. It is like “le tango du rêve, et chacun s’y emploie à sa manière, au rythme de son souffle” (13).

It is here that the novel first establishes the global and environmental dimensions of migration. Migration is propelled by human motivations such as love and dreams that are in turn are connected to the weather, the trees and the environment. In conformity with the dances, the general pattern of migration indicates that women’s journeys are influenced by love relationships and men’s journeys by the pursuit of their dreams. For instance, Salie went to France as the wife of a French national, and Madické wants to

pursue his dream of playing like Maldini. Similarly, Sankèle migrates when she cannot marry the man she loves due to her father's plans for her arranged marriage, while Moussa migrates to play soccer on the basis of a non-existent contract. The intricate play between the environment and the migrants' trajectories indicate that stringent immigration laws expose the Republic as being on a collision course with nature and humanity.

The artificial conflict between nature and human activities in France is captured in Salie's description of shoes and the texture of the ground, which reminds one of Fanon's portrayal of the colonial town in *Les Damnés de la terre*. Salie says:

Heurtant le bitume, mes pieds emprisonnés se souviennent de leur liberté d'autan, de la caresse du sable chaud, de la morsure des coquillages et des quelques piqûres d'épines qui ne faisaient que rappeler la présence de la vie jusqu'aux extrémités oubliées du corps. Les pieds modelés, marqués par la terre africaine, je foule le sol européen. (14)

Salie extends this contrast between Niodior and France to the motif of walking. Even though walking is common to all human beings, the people of both continents are not headed in the same direction. In Africa, Salie states, "je suivais le sillage du Destin," but in Europe, she says, "je marche le long tunnel de la performance qui conduit à des objectifs bien définis" (14).

Technology also plays an important role in the distinction between life on both continents. In Niodior, the television is integrated into social activities. In France, the television represents and accentuates the restriction of both physical and mental space:



Ambiance Technicolor, on marche autrement, vers un destin interiorisé, qu'on se fixe malgré soi, sans jamais s'en rendre compte, car on se trouve enroulé dans la meute moderne, happé par le rouleau compresseur social prompt à écraser tous ceux qui s'avisent de s'arrêter sur la bande d'arrêt d'urgence. (14)

In France, technology and the heightened pace of life make individuals become introverted. Moreover, the speed makes individuals feel lost, and so rather than take pride in progress, they are crushed.

The latest manifestation of this alienation is in reality TV shows. While flipping through the television channels, Salie comes across a “casting commercial,” the French equivalent of star search programs like *American Idol*. In this particular episode, the restriction is reflected in the human body. The young women on television are anorexic, as if to compensate for the reality that they cannot sing. “Sur des notes volées à divers compositeurs des cinq continents,” Salie observes, “elles exhibaient leurs corps d'anorexiques en hurlant des vers de mirliton” (42). This scenario violates their own dignity and makes them appear as “une bande de demeurées qui ignorent tout des combats menés pour la dignité des femmes” (42). Technology therefore does not represent progress, but the loss of the vital connection between human beings and their temporal and spatial reality.

The reference to technology and time is interesting because of its connection to the French collective consciousness and to the historical background of contemporary immigration politics. Kristin Ross (1995) argues that after World War II, the increase in technology imports from the United States provided a convenient alibi for the French bourgeoisie to evade the contradiction between the Republic's ideals and the fall of its

colonial empire. She argues that technology gave a Europe dealing with the ravages of war “the fantasy of timeless, even, and limitless development” [*sic*] because capitalist modernization “dissolves beginning and end, in the historical sense, into an ongoing, naturalized process, one whose uninterrupted rhythm is provided by an unchanging social world devoid of class conflict” (10). Ross concludes that this fantasy of timelessness fuels France’s anti-immigration rhetoric, providing the illusion that its colonial past is “an ‘exterior’ experience, added on but not essential to French historical identity, an episode that ended cleanly in 1962” (195). Diome’s novel coincides with Ross’s argument by setting the technologically heightened pace of time as the background of migration.

If Africa is indirectly implicated in the rising importance of technology in France, this effect is more visible on the continent. The contradiction of immobile movement is transmitted in Niodior through the television, but this time it gains caricatural dimensions. In one of the news bulletins, the Senegalese prime minister is reported as waiting at the port of Dakar for a cargo of rice sent by France for populations affected by drought. France is described as “un grand pays ami de longue date” that promises to reconsider Senegal’s economic debt (*Ventre* 57). The humor here emerges from the fact that France, as a former colonial power, could hardly be called a long-time friend. Moreover, there is an inherent contradiction in the fact that a high-ranking Senegalese government official is reduced to waiting for a shipment rather than for a visitor of his rank. It is unlikely that the French prime minister or member of the cabinet would be reduced to performing a similar task.

The rice donation is more amusing when one discovers that the Niodior community does not need it. Even if the people did, Salie says, France does not provide sufficient quantities to make any concrete difference:

Nul n'attend [. . .] quelques kilos de riz français; cultivateurs, éleveurs et pêcheurs, ces insulaires sont autosuffisants et ne demandent rien à personne. Ils auraient pu, s'ils l'avaient voulu, ériger leur mini-république au sein de la République sénégalaise, et le gouvernement ne se serait rendu compte de rien avant de nombreuses années, au moment des élections. (58)

The minimal significance of the gift is similar to that of Miko ice-cream advertised during the game half-time interval and that Salie describes as “une nourriture virtuelle” (21). Neither the rice nor the ice-cream reach Niodior residents, and even if they did, they do not meet the people’s nutritional needs. The foodstuffs thus expose the attempts of the Senegalese ruling elite and the French capitalist economy to mask their insignificance to the majority of Africans by pampering their importance through the medium of television. This irrelevance is evident in the fact that Senegalese politicians, for example, do not render any services, and so in between elections, the Niodior people live as if the government did not exist. In addition to their self-sufficiency in food, they use local medicines and therefore do not need the government-built local dispensary that is empty in any case. The news reports about the government therefore consist of meaningless words, for as Salie exclaims, “on se moquait du gouvernement comme de ce que pouvaient en raconter le journaliste!” (59)

The minimal influence of the Senegalese government would explain why the political elite depend on France for its power. The people confirm as much through their

perception of the government as representing French interests. They consider the fact that all Senegal's presidents have been married to French women as evidence of where the politicians' loyalties lie. To them, the head of state, comically referred to as "le Père-de-la-nation," goes to France in order to win elections. The immediate former president – an obvious reference to Abdou Diouf – also took residence in France after his retirement.<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that in the youth's minds, "la France [. . .] rime franchement avec la chance" (60).

Like the television, the telephone also reveals the frivolity of the ruling elite and of Senegal's purported friendship with France. When Salie calls home to tell Madické the final score of the Italy-Holland match, she complains that the rates are unnecessarily high despite the purported solidarity between France and its former colonies. Salie argues that when Léopold Senghor came up with the idea of *La Francophonie*, he made no demands to the country whose language he sought to protect, and the Senegalese still foot the bill for his error. "En concoctant la francophonie," Salie laments, "Senghor aurait du rappeler que le Français est plus riche que la plupart des francophones et négocier afin de nous éviter ce racket sur la communication" (43). Like the rice handout, *La Francophonie* is the government's attempt to disguise its lack of an authentic power base amongst the Senegalese people.

The idea of *La Francophonie* is already problematic. Language is intrinsic to human beings, but in France's imperial logic, language functions as an object with an end

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<sup>1</sup> Even Senghor spent his retirement years in France as a member of the Académie Française. Diouf, also residing in France, has been secretary general of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie since 2002.

in itself, which in this case is to unify its empire. In *Qu'est que la littérature?*, Sartre voiced concerns about the tendency to objectify language by denying its utility as a tool with society reflects on the world. His concern was not with empire but with poets whom he erroneously singled out for turning language into an object for admiration. In the political realm, the problematic attitude towards language on which *La Francophonie* is founded also distorts reality. The attempt to unite diverse countries under one language disregards the local dynamics of the regions where French is purportedly or actually spoken. Benard Cerquiglini's (2006) claim that *La Francophonie* is "un monolinguisme fictive" is based on this disregard for regional variations within and outside France. However, the various French dialects are not the only thing that France ignores; *La Francophonie* also denies the fact that only approximately 20% of Africans comfortably use the French language in the so-called "Francophone" Africa (Kom 124). France's institutionalization of a human faculty reveals its denial of the reality that one cannot monitor language without distorting reality.

Modern communication gadgets such as the television and telephone cannot successfully mask the Republic's attempt to evade these economic, linguistic and social realities. The link between technology and the French Republic's apparent denial confirms Fanon's observations in the concluding chapter of *Les Damnés de la terre*. He states that the advancements in technology gave an illusion of progress when Europe was actually stuck in a "mouvement immobile où la dialectique, petit à petit, s'est muée en logique de l'équilibre" (303). Fanon urged Africans to steer clear of the European model, stating that "[l]es réalisations européennes, la technique européenne, le style européen, doivent cesser de nous tenter et de nous déséquilibrer" (302).

Unfortunately, evading the mistakes of Europe is easier said than done. The televised matches encourage young men's aspirations to play professional soccer in Europe. Television also diffuses glorious stories about the soccer players tragically called les "Sénéfés – Sportifs nationaux évoluant en France" (*Ventre* 57), a label which evokes the ideology of assimilation whose African graduates were referred to as *les évolués*. The harsh realities of racism that the successful Africans players face are not displayed on television, and this omission reinforces the El Dorado image of France in the minds of the youth. Once again, the Senegalese government's responsibility in this façade is inescapable because Madické associates soccer stardom with being seen on television and being received by the head of state (65).

The television also embodies the Senegalese government's failure to protect the youth from its fascination with France. Fanon warned that the responsibility of the leaders at independence was to create opportunities for the youth to work and to improve the awareness of their surroundings, because work would act as a deterrent against fascination with Western consumer goods to which the youth had no access. He argued that the phenomenon of professional sports was not an adequate substitute for work, for "[l]e stade n'est pas ce lieu d'exhibition installé dans les villes mais un certain espace au sein des terres que l'on défiche, qu'on l'on travaille et que l'on offre à la nation" (186). An active and socially conscious youth would not need encouragement from politicians to play sports, since "des hommes conscients [...] par ailleurs, sont sportifs" (186). But instead of encouraging social conditions that create opportunities for work, the leaders fuel the young men's hope of playing soccer in France as a ticket to honor and success.

But once again, the illusion of professional sport emerges from the same rationalist roots of racism and imperialism. The European bourgeois culture created what Fanon terms as “le pourrissement du sport,” a phenomenon that transforms sports from a space of creativity and harmony into one of rivalry and dominance. Salie evokes the fact that the French media would not concede their country’s defeat by Senegal in the opening match of the 2002 World Cup and instead called the Senegalese players “les Sénégalais” because many of them played in French clubs. Similarly, Italy was unable to digest its elimination from the same tournament at the hands South Korea, while Italian newspapers carried the headline “Un Mondial sale!” (284).

Besides suppressing the value of good sportsmanship, professional soccer has also turned into a form of slavery, or what Salie calls “la traite du footeux” (282), because it transforms sports players into objects of consumption. African players are booed and insulted by European fans, presumably because sports is seen as a form of entertainment for which fans pay, hence the desire to castigate African players for failing to deliver winning goals.

The racial implications of these dynamics are inescapably linked to the rationalist malaise towards the physical human body that it has pathologically framed as a largely African domain. Africans in the French public consciousness have been reduced to a simple formula provided by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* as “Nègre = biologique, sexe fort, sportif, puissant, boxeur [. . .]” (134). The allure of professional sports thus masks its status as one of the few areas in which Africans excellence is socially accepted.

Against the background of these international and national realities, Salie and her former teacher Ndétare single-handedly try to teach Madické and his friends a conceptualization of sports that reflects a consciousness of the larger world. Ndétare, also the youths' soccer coach, urges them to cultivate motivations for playing other than the possibility of securing a professional contract in Europe. He says, "Aimez le beau jeu et l'esprit d'un sport désintéressé! [. . .] C'est ça, le vrai sport, et ça peut être ainsi sous tous les cieux. Pas besoin d'aller en France pour ça!" (106). Salie reinforces Ndétare's efforts by trying to persuade Madické and his friends that success through playing soccer in Europe was not guaranteed.

Nevertheless, Madické is already unique because, unlike his friends, his passion for soccer is rooted in his desire to play as well as Maldini and not to earn a living. He therefore possesses the seeds of social consciousness, which germinate when he gives up the dream of playing in Europe and starts a business with the money his sister sends him. His words to Salie confirm Fanon's argument that the youth require work opportunities more than sports facilities in order to feel and become socially relevant. The consciousness is evident in Madické's awareness of the social problems that he has to confront as he runs the business. He sells goods on credit and does not expect to make huge profits because he understands that the people are not wealthy. He tells his sister, "Moi, j'aime mieux vivre chez moi, surtout maintenant que j'ai ma boutique. C'est vrai que les gens me prennent beaucoup de chose à credit, certains viennent carrément quémander [. . .] Mais bon, ça va, on se file tous des coup de main" (293). Madické confirms that dignity resides in familiarity with one's environment and in being responsible.



But the efforts of Salie and Ndétare are not sufficient to override the effects of the government's inefficiency and lack of vision. The leaders have abandoned the people to the ravages of the tourism industry under the pretext that the country needs to earn foreign exchange. In the coastal town of M'Bour, for example, foreign hotels occupy the best beaches and exploit the people for labor. The government's inaction in the face of this injustice sends the following message: "Laissez fonctionner l'hôtellerie, au bon plaisir des touristes occidentaux! Ne soyez pas trop regardant sur ce qu'ils y font, ils ne faut surtout pas les froiser. Il faut fidéliser la clientèle!" (229). Salie sarcastically adds: "Tant pis si quelques libidineux viennent uniquement visiter des paysages de fesses noires, au lieu d'admirer le Lac rose, l'île aux oiseaux, nos greniers vides et nos bidonvilles si pittoresques" (229). This depiction of the tourist industry illustrates Fanon's observations that the African bourgeoisie would organize in their newly independent countries "des centres de repos et de délassément, des cures de plaisir à l'intention de la bourgeoisie occidentale," and in so doing turn the countries into the brothel of Europe (*Les Damnés* 149). Diome's novel shows that the objects of consumption are not only the landscape but the Africans themselves.

It is important to note that the malaise of the Western bourgeoisie which tourism is designed to service occurs before the tourists step on African soil. The principle of tourism is the rationalist view of nature – human and non-human – as having no intrinsic value other than human pleasure and consumption. Barthes makes a similar point in his analysis of the presentation of Spain in the *Guide Bleu*. The guide book betrays the bourgeois habit of reductionism and essentialism, reducing Spain, her cultures and peoples to "un vaste ballet classique" (137). Barthes adds:

En réduisant la géographie à la description d'un monde monumental et inhabité, le Guide Bleu traduit une mythologie dépassée par une partie de la bourgeoisie elle-même: Il est incontestable que le voyage est devenu (ou redevenu) une voie d'approche humaine et non plus "culturelle" [. . .] Cette conduite traduisait une double exigence: disposer d'un alibi culturel aussi "évadé" que possible, et cependant maintenir cet alibi dans les rets d'un system numérable et appropriatif, en sorte que l'on pût à tout moment comptabiliser l'inéffable. (138)

Just like the *Guide bleu's* preconceived and objectifying notion of Spain, tourists arrive in Africa with an overdetermined conceptualization of the human body. This mentality transforms buttocks into a synecdoche of the African body and even of Africans themselves, as if Europeans do not have buttocks. It assigns to Africans special sexual abilities as if Europeans are incapable of sexual relations among themselves. Male tourists marry comparatively young African women "[qui] espèrent être veuves avant la ménopause," while women tourists fulfill fantasies of eternal youth and unparalleled sexual pleasure. They do not seek to have sexual relations with flesh and blood men but with their own perception of sex with a black man as "un étalon [qui] posera ses plaques de chocolat sur leurs seins flasques et les arrosera de son nectar jusqu'au bout des vacances" (*Le Ventre* 231). Unlike the Spanish people who are reduced to stereotypes of "le Basque est un marin aventureux, le Levantin un gain jardinière, le Catalan un habile commerçant et le Cantabre un montagnard sentimental" (*Mythologies* 137), Africans in M'Bour are reduced to their sexuality.

The tourists' expectations of Africans reveal the discomfort with the realities of sexuality and aging that stems from rationality's suppression of human physicality. Fanon

makes a similar argument in *Peau noire, masques blancs* when he contends that the obsession with African sexuality is an overcompensation for the artificial conflict created by rationality between emotions, physicality and reason. Whites see sexual relations with blacks as a means to recover their sexuality which they perceive to be eliminated by intellectual thought (133). Blacks, on the other hand, see interracial relations as a means to access the power and social status they have been denied.

The alienation caused by the denial of the human body is transmitted to the Africans who service the tourists. The African men are reduced to non-existence by their self-absorbed female clients. African women, unlike European women with money to maintain sexual relations with young African men, keep their breasts artificially perked in order to remain marketable and to fight the physical toll of age and their profession. They seek the services of plastic surgeons to revamp their busts with silicon, which in turn diverts services from the victims disfigured by civil war to the mass-production of “la Barbie tropicale” (230).

Tourism thus appears as a form of slavery based on the objectification and commercialization of sex and emotion. It distorts love as a common ground for human motivations and experiences into a site of mutual exploitation; one exploits for human emotion, the other for socio-economic status. The pronunciation of “Merci chéri” by sex workers as “merci, c’est riz” (231) becomes symbolic of this dichotomy, because what appears to the tourists as an endearment is in reality the African’s pursuit of economic wealth. Love and sexual relations are transformed from expressions of commitment and intimacy into euphemisms for superficiality. It therefore gains the slogan “C’est l’amour qui passe” (230).

The superficial character of the tourism industry contrasts with the traditional wrestling festival taking place when Salie arrives in M'Bour during one of her visits home. The festival occurs at the end of the Harmattan season and is accompanied by traditional music and percussion. It is held yearly while the tourist activities take place on a more regular basis, yet the former has an aura of timelessness while the latter is rootless. This distinction emerges from Salie's description of the festival:

C'est comme une communion du plus profond des âges. On peut remplacer nos pagnes par des pantalons, trafiquer nos dialectes, voler nos masques, défriser nos cheveux ou décolorer notre peau, mais aucun savoir-faire technique ou chimique ne saura jamais extirper de notre âme la veine rythmique qui bondit dès la première résonance du djembé. Raison et sensibilité ne s'excluent point. (225)

The festival offers a feeling of human harmony with the universe across time and space, opposing the separation between sensuality, age and reason imposed by race.

While Salie's homily about African culture is morally uplifting, it is also ephemeral for historical and contextual purposes. The image of Africa in French thought has stereotypically been associated with rhythm and soul, a theme summarized by Senghor's infamous remark that "l'émotion est nègre comme la raison est hellène" (24). Awoken from her reverie, Salie discovers that the harmony between reason and sensitivity that she revels in is still suppressed because tourism reinforces the compartmentalization of age, emotion and sexuality. Since Senghor, emotion has progressed from being black to being good business.

Senghor also ironically proved that love is not only good business – it is also good politics. He and the successive Senegalese presidents all married French women. Since

love does not distinguish between races, one could argue that the presidents' marriages to European women are the natural result of meeting and falling in love. But neither love nor marriages occur in a vacuum; therefore, the presidents' marriages cannot shake off the implications of racism and sexism. As Salie notes, Madické and his age mates see the marriages as a confirmation that migration to France is a pathway to an elevated social status. Their perception appears to be justified because the French women are married to presidents but rarely to subsistence farmers or returning migrants with fewer economic resources. Regardless of the personal motivations of the couples, the social reality is that interracial marriages also function as a status symbol, and their image in the public mind roughly echoes Fanon's rendering of the black man's attitude towards the white woman: "J'épouse la culture blanche, la beauté blanche, la blancheur blanche [. . .] c'est la civilisation et la dignité blanches que je fais miennes" (1952 51).

The tourist industry embodies the cosmic imbalance enhanced by racism and colonialism. Its foundation is the denial of the fact that human beings age and eventually die, and that love and sexuality are intrinsic to every human being and limited to Africans. But the ultimate victims of this denial are the young girls whose lives are consumed on the altar of the insatiable thirst for youth and purity. Salie calls those who exploit them "[des] vieux touristes pathétiques [. . .] des hordes de névrosés amateurs de chair fraîches" and describes the girls as "des chrysalides auxquelles on ne laisse pas le temps de déployer leurs ailes, des fleurs écrasées avant d'éclore" (232-33). The chrysalis symbolically indicates that by refusing to accept the limits of humanity, human beings ultimately endanger not only the most vulnerable members of the community but also plant and animal life.

Tourism encroaches into temporal space because adults refuse to accept that they age and so consume the fragile lives they are supposed to nurture and protect. The thirst for youth is a stain that even the environment cannot erase because it violates humanity, nature and the universe. As Salie says, the environment is unwilling to forgive this contravention of human nature: “L’Atlantique peut laver nos plages mais non la souillure laissée par la marée touristique” (233).

Diome’s novel admirably sets the stage for migration as a potentially explosive situation in which human beings refuse to come to terms with their reality. The internal alienation caused by rationalist thought leads the French bourgeoisie to seek an illusionary consolation in Africa. The African bourgeoisie, characterized by complacency, laziness and inefficiency, depends on France for its survival and leaves the people to suffer under exploitation. These gestures encroach too far into the territory of time and nature, creating an atmosphere of latent violence that presents Africans with the option of being exploited by foreigners in their own country or dying to reach Europe. Those convinced that their salvation lies in reaching France have no choice but to get there by any means necessary. Garouwalé, a friend of Madické, states as much when he tells Salie: “On se débrouillera sans toi, on va y aller quel que soit le prix à payer. Nos parents vont vieillir sans retraite, nos petits frères et petites sœurs comptent sur nous! *Chaque miette de vie doit servir à conquérir la dignité!*” (20, italics in original). Since the global socio-economic conditions justify these sentiments, the least Salie can do for her community is to provide concrete evidence of the corruption, government inefficiency and global racism so that the people can assess if going to France is the only way out of their predicament, and if so, if they are prepared to pay the cost. The urgency of this task

is accentuated by the tragic experiences of Moussa and Sankèle that I analyze in the next section.

### **The Migrant Wretched of the Earth**

Moussa's experience is recounted by Ndétare out of the latter's frustration with his students' determination to reach France. Ndétare is particularly irked by *l'homme de Barbès*, a former migrant now resettled in Niodior, who fuels the boys' dreams to migrate. *L'homme de Barbès* owns the television that Madické and his friends watch, and so he has a ready audience to tell his fantastic stories about France. The paradox of his stories begins with his name that evokes the Rue de Barbès in the eighteenth arrondissement. Known for its comparatively larger African population in relation to the rest of central Paris, this arrondissement is also less plush and prestigious than the seventh and eighth arrondissements where one finds historic landmarks such as the Tour Eiffel, the Champs Elysées and the Arc de Triomphe. Rue de Barbès is populated with shops that sell pornography, cheap consumer goods and souvenirs for tourists visiting the Sacré Cœur cathedral, unlike the Champs Elysées where stores sell luxury goods and designer labels. But during his biannual holidays, *l'homme de Barbès* presents cheap goods as valuable gifts, which in reality are "des pacotilles *made in France*, que personne n'aurait échangées contre un bloc d'émeraude" (35, italics in original). When he eventually resettles, he has the admiration of the community because he has married four wives and has built a large house as well as a provisions store.

The success of *l'homme de Barbès* is, however, more symbolic than functional. He does not know how to set his Rolex watch, his leather-covered seats are always hidden under cloth, his refrigerator is kept locked, and he can hardly keep up with the rotation among his wives. But most of all, the flashy lifestyle hides the pain of his experience. He initially survived in France on petty theft and charity from the Salvation Army before working illegally for unscrupulous employers. Eventually he understood that “son corps était son unique capital” (102), and found work as a security guard. The job stripped him of his identity. In the apartment building where he initially worked, he was known by the stereotypical name Mamadou (103). He then found work at a supermarket where his task was the surveillance of non-Europeans. As his humiliation increased, so did his bitterness. He detested Africans whom he judged as “assez arrogants pour faire leurs courses comme les Blancs, ou trop pauvres pour être honnêtes” (103). The victims of what Salie calls his “devoement aux bourges” (103-04) carried out their revenge in an ambush that resulted in the loss of two teeth, which he covered up by calling “un petit accident *dé trawail*” (104, italics in original). When he resettled in Niodior, he used stories and buying power to cover up his painful experience. Although no one knew exactly what he did in France, his youthful audience listens to his stories and believes that “il n’y avait plus de mystère, la France, il se devait y aller” (104).

Another paradox of *l'homme de Barbès* is that he raises the illusion of television a notch higher when he describes life in Paris as follows: “C’était comme tu ne pourras jamais l’imaginer. Comme à la télé, mais mieux, car tu vois tout pour de vrai [. . .] c’était magnifique, et le mot est faible” (95). He uses hyperboles that are more pompous than those in the news reports about France’s “friendship” with Senegal:



Avant, je n'avais jamais pensé qu'une si belle ville pouvait exister [. . .] La tour Eiffel et l'Obélisque, on dirait qu'ils touchent le ciel. Les Champs-Élysées, il faut une journée, au moins, pour les parcourir, tellement les boutiques de luxe, qui les jalonnent, regorgent de marchandises extraordinaires qu'on ne peut s'empêcher d'admirer. [. . .] comme ils sont riches, ils érigent un monument au moindre de leurs exploits. Cela leur permet aussi de se souvenir des grands hommes de leur histoire. D'ailleurs, pour ceux-là, ils ont un cimetière de luxe, le Panthéon: un prince pourrait y vivre, dire qu'ils y mettent des morts! (96)

The description of Paris by *l'homme de Barbès* resembles that of Spain in the *Guide Bleu*, and in which, Barthes observes, "l'humanité du pays disparaît au profit exclusif de ses monuments" (137). *L'homme de Barbès* leaves out the human details of France including his own experience. He does not mention the contrast between the majesty of the dead and the poor conditions of the living, especially of immigrants. It is no wonder that his young listeners would think: "là où les morts dormaient dans les palais, les vivants devaient certainement danser au paradis" (97).

But *l'homme de Barbès* differs from the African bourgeoisie because he bears scars of his experience in France, unlike those whose malaise is caused by their irresponsibility. His trauma is so deep that he would rather be disturbed by his conscience than recount his experience in France. Even Salie sympathizes with him when she asks with an underlying humorous tone: "[Q]uel mal y avait-il à trier ses souvenirs, à choisir méthodiquement ceux qui pouvaient être exposés et à laisser les autres enfouis sous la trappe de l'oubli?" (101). But even though his fictitious stories assuage his pain, they also have tragic consequences, especially for people like Moussa whose tragedy remains

unacknowledged for some time because of the community's unwillingness to accept that France is not as grand as *l'homme de Barbès* describes it.

Moussa was the oldest male child in a large family whose father had assigned him the task of providing financial support. He moves to M'Bour in search of employment, and in the meantime joins the local football club. A French national by the name of Jean-Charles Sauveur presents himself as a scout for football talent and promises to place Moussa in a professional club in France. Once in France, Sauveur turns out to be the opposite of the savior that his surname suggests. Moussa never gets off the bench to play, and the racist taunts from the fellow players take their toll. Meanwhile, Moussa's father writes impatient letters castigating his son for not sending money home, accusing him of selfishness typically associated with Western attitudes. Eventually, Sauveur informs Moussa that he cannot play, and that he would have to reimburse his travel expenses by working on a ship at Marseille. His salary would be directly remitted to Sauveur. With no money nor valid residential papers, Moussa has no choice but to take the job.

The life of Moussa follows the same pattern as Salie's by becoming further restricted in terms of space. After a month of working on the ship, he ventures to do some sightseeing in the port town, which would be his first time to see France beyond the walls of a football stadium (121). It also turns out to be his last, because he crosses paths with the police – sarcastically referred to as the “comité d'accueil” – and is asked for his identity documents. When his employer denies knowing him, he is arrested and his space is even further restricted. In the prison cell, Moussa wishes for the days when he was confined to the ship:

Devant la nourriture infecte que le gardien lui apportait, cette déjection de la conscience du pays des Droits de l'homme, qu'il appelait la *mouriture*, il arrivait à regretter la purée à la morve servie sur le bateau. Le plus dur pour lui fut la manque d'activité. Alors, pour s'occuper, il s'allongeait sur le dos et plongeait dans son imagination pour se métaphosier en araignée tissant sa toile, non pour capturer ses rêves fuyants mais pour combler les nombreuses fissures des quatre murs et du plafond. (123)

Like Salie in her apartment, Moussa depends on his imagination to escape walls in which his body is confined. The cell also embodies the contradiction between space and the reality it represents. France's image as "pays des Droits de l'homme" is contrasted by Moussa's living as a virtual slave. Similarly, the stadium that is supposed to represent sportsmanship and goodwill instead houses racism and the obsessive desire to win. Under these spatial violations, paradise is neither home, nor the stadium, nor France; it is the ship where Moussa worked in inhuman conditions and was served tasteless food.

The ultimate desecration of space occurs at Moussa's home. Home is supposed to be a refuge from the contradictions of the world, but Moussa dreads returning due to his father's unrealistic expectations to take care of the family. His suspicions are confirmed when the initial celebration of Moussa's return is quickly replaced by scorn. The contradictions ultimately reveal that space cannot perform its functions in the midst of injustice caused by the distortion of human beings' internal, individual and social relations.

Moussa's suffering eventually solicits the intervention of the non-human universe in his fate. The village fool, whose state of mind is a factor beyond human control,

reveals what the community is thinking but unwilling to tell Moussa: “Tous ceux qui ont travaillé là-bas ont construit des maisons et des boutiques, dès leur retour au pays. Si tu n’as rien ramené, c’est peut-être parce que tu n’as rien foutu là haut” (126). In the meantime, Moussa’s father and the Niodior community persistently deny the reality that France does not provide automatic success. When Moussa seeks shelter and emotional solace from Ndétare, the people suggest that the two men “devaient probablement se livrer, en secret, à des pratiques ramenées du pays des Blancs” (128). Moussa’s existence became even more and more introverted because he has now internalized the prison walls, unlike in France where his confinement was largely physical.

With no refuge even from his own experience, the Atlantic Ocean provides solace through the legend of Sédar and his wife Soutoura. According to the legend, Sédar was mocked by his mother-in-law for not having children, and out of grief he plunges into the ocean. When he does not return home, Soutoura goes to the ocean in search of him and finds that he has been transformed into a dolphin. The dolphin urges her to find another husband, but Soutoura loves him too much to abandon him and plunges into the waters herself. Since then, the legend goes, dolphins swim in families and remain the friends of human beings.

There is a parallel between Moussa’s situation and the legend. Both Moussa and Sédar are caught in the inevitable conflict. In the legend, the society is caught between the necessity of posterity and the reality of infertility, while in Niodior, Moussa is caught between tough economic conditions that necessitate migration and the legal and physical violence used to repulse migrants from France. In Sédar’s case, however, the realities were beyond human control, but in Moussa’s case, the realities were the consequence of

human activity. Migration has been made necessary by the money economy, which was introduced with the goal of entrenching colonial power. As Wilder (2003) explains, French colonial administrators calculated that migration made necessary by the monetary taxes would oblige young men to attend school or find employment in the cities, which would weaken African kinship systems and secure colonial power. He cites anthropologist Henri Labouret as saying, “The kinship collectivity upon which we have counted until now is rapidly disintegrating; another group is succeeding it, weaker, but more accessible, more flexible and easily educated [ . . . ]” (233). The effects of this policy remain in Niodior where, Salie explains, the island population largely comprises young wives separated from their husbands and older parents in retirement, all whose survival depends almost uniquely on young male migrants. Like the older men, the young wives are left to fend for themselves by buying on credit guaranteed by “la foi d’un hypothétique mandat” (40).

Sédar and Moussa both become scapegoats for the tension between the community’s unrealistic expectations and their realities. In the tragic genre, however, a scapegoat only fulfils its role when the community collectively assumes responsibility for the sacrifice. By contrast, Moussa’s role as the sacrificial lamb for his community’s disappointment is not socially acknowledged. As he contemplates the legend, business in Niodior goes on as usual. The boys continue to play soccer and nurse their dreams of playing in Europe, the evening prayers are still said at the mosque, and the women continue to pound the mortar in preparation of the evening meal. As Salie says, “Les semaines passaient, identitiques” (129). The communal indifference is contrasted by the rising tide, which is evoked at intervals in the build-up to Moussa’s impending death. The

images that capture the sound of the tide also accentuate the rhythm of the narrative.

These dynamics are conveyed through the motif of indigestion:

La marée montait. Les vagues de l'Atlantique frappaient, astiquaient la mangrove, mais, malgré leur insistance, elle n'avaient pas à donner à la boue l'éclat du sable blanc des rives ensolleillées. La marée montait. Avec elle, le bruit des vagues qui charriaient la fange. La marée monta. La brise, comme à l'accoutumée, se répandit, nauséabonde, sur tout le village. (127)

The passage captures the symptoms of food poisoning or indigestion – the stomach rumbles and the patient experiences nausea before the body ejects the food. The ocean goes through the same process, and so when fishermen find Moussa's inert body in their nets, Salie remarks: "Même l'Atlantique ne peut digérer tout ce que la terre vomit" (131).

The ocean refuses to accept the irresponsibility of human beings, or in more dramatic terms, it rejects Moussa as a sacrifice because the community had not collectively acknowledged the tragedy behind his suffering.

However, the people ignore the ocean's intervention and self-righteously cling to their image of France. Madické and his friends rationalize that Ndétare, who tells Moussa's story, has a reputation for talking too much (132). They continue to train fervently in the hope that they will eventually be recruited to play soccer in France. They counter Ndétare's charges that *l'homme de Barbès* was not telling the truth by claiming that Ndétare was jealous of the returnee and by citing the success of another former migrant, Wagane Yaltigué.

This stature of Wagane adds salt to a social wound because he exploits Moussa both in life as well as in death. While at M'Bour and before moving to France, Moussa

had worked on Wagane's boats and in risky fishing expeditions that sometimes resulted in the loss of life. Wagane rarely attended the funerals of the fishermen, but he attends Moussa's funeral in order to make political capital of the traditional status of Moussa's father. He uses an essentially sad occasion to flaunt his wealth, and the role of singing his praises is assumed by *le vieux pêcheur*, an old man whose title assumes an added irony because his career in fishing did not bestow the economic fortunes that Wagane enjoys. *Le vieux pêcheur* tells the boys to emulate Wagane and disregard the warnings of Ndétare. He argues:

Partez, partez où vous pouvez, mais allez chercher la réussite au lieu de rester là, à servir de compagnie à ce dépravé blanchi. S'il avait un fils de votre âge, croyez-vous qu'il le ferait gambader inutilement, comme vous en ce moment? Oh que non! Il en aurait déjà fait un fonctionnaire, comme lui, un perroquet savant, payé pour vous inculquer la langue, les coutumes des Blancs, et vous faire oublier les nôtres! (141)

The cumulative effect of Wagane's behavior and the words of *le vieux pêcheur* perpetuate the incompleteness of Moussa's tragedy, which further irks Ndétare. But the violence of Ndétare's anger provides the boys with additional material for rationalizing their dismissal of his warnings. This time, they appeal to the inexplicable bad chemistry between Ndétare on one hand, and *le vieux pêcheur* and *l'homme de Barbès* on the other. Unknown to them is the fact that the three men are linked by the other tragic figure: Sankèle.

Reputed to be the most beautiful girl in the community, Sankèle is the daughter of *le vieux pêcheur*. Diome indicated in my interview with her that Sankèle is Serere for "le

sacrificié.” Sankèle was in love with Ndétare when her father promised her as the second wife to *l’homme de Barbès* while the latter was still in France. In protest, Sankèle makes love with Ndétare and becomes pregnant. In the name of protecting his honor, her father forces her to remain in seclusion during the final months of her pregnancy. When the baby boy is born, *le vieux pêcheur* drowns him in the ocean. At this juncture, the ocean assumes its role outlined in the myth of Sédar and Soutoura. The child remains under water, partly because his body was tied to a stone, but also because Sédar and Soutoura “transforment les bébés noyés en dauphins et les adoptent” (153). To save her from being overwhelmed by grief, Ndétare arranges for Sankèle to escape the island by boat and provides her with money on which to survive. Two years later, scandalized Niodior residents receive reports from their relatives in Dakar that Sankèle worked as a dancer in the city. Sankèle is later rumored to have left for France, but *l’homme de Barbès* searches for her in vain.

Why does the Atlantic transform Sankèle’s son and not Moussa into a dolphin? The fundamental difference in Sankele’s and Moussa’s experiences lies in the collective awareness of the events. As we have already seen, Moussa’s downfall was surrounded by public indifference. By contrast, the pain behind Sankèle’s experience endures in the hearts of the actors involved. Sankèle’s mother silently mourned her daughter’s fate, and when she hears rumors that her child is in France she hopes to see Sankèle again. Sankèle’s presence also endures through the men’s relationship. It was occasionally visible to the boys even though they were not familiar with the details of the tragedy itself.



Behind Sankèle's experience are additional traumas that each of the men has suffered, hence the reader may sympathize with their silence about the events leading to Sankèle's departure. Ndétare's pain is the deepest because he was in love with Sankèle and was the father of the child that was drowned, which makes the remarks of *le vieux pêcheur* about what Ndétare would do if he had a son particularly brutal. Ndétare's pain is accentuated by the fact his presence in Niodior was a result of yet another difficult event, which was his expulsion from Dakar by the government due to his political activities. Ndétare, as Diome indicated to me, means "l'autre" in Serere. The fact that he was not a native of the community may have influenced the initial silence about his relationship with Sankèle before her forced engagement.

The pain experienced by *le vieux pêcheur* is the double trauma of a parent unable to translate his obligations into action. As a young man, he was a handsome and sturdy wrestler who captured the hearts of many young women. One of these gave birth to his son whom he promptly disowned. Scorned by the community, the young mother took to the city where fortune smiled upon her. She got married to a rich businessman who adopted her son, and the son grew up to follow the same destiny as his biological father. He becomes a successful soccer player in France and a national hero at home. *Le vieux pêcheur* tragically punishes Sankèle for being in a situation similar to that of his son's mother, and displays the same selfishness to his grandson that he showed to his son.

Because the traumas of *l'homme de Barbès*, Ndétare and *le vieux pêcheur* induce their silence, the Atlantic Ocean intervenes on Sankèle's behalf. We therefore witness an interesting interaction between the silence of human beings and the sounds of nature during the hours surrounding the birth of Sankèle's child. After months of seclusion

Sankèle's silence is broken by her labor pains, when "ni Sankèle ni sa mère ne dormaient: quelqu'un frappait à la porte" (150). The sound of the knocking is echoed in the natural realm:

Les chiens aboyaient d'une façon inhabituelle. Le hibou chantait ce qu'il savait de plus que les hommes – ici, les mangeurs d'âmes, dit-on, se transforment la nuit en hibou et signalent leurs forfaits par de longs hululements. La chèvre du voisin léchait son petit. Au loin, des loups guettaient l'agneau imprudemment sorti de son troupeau. La mer, réveillée par la faim, rugissait, mordait la terre et exigeait des Niomikas, comme Minos des Athéniens, son tribut d'humains. Quelqu'un s'impatientait et cognait à la porte du monde.

Sankèle, en sueur, gémissait dignement. Il lui était interdit de crier sa douleur, puisqu'elle était tenue responsable de la plus grandes des peines: le déshonneur familial.

Quelqu'un forçait la porte du monde. (150)

The contradiction between Sankèle's forced silence and the cosmic sounds represent the quick succession of impending birth and the imminent death. The knocking symbolizes entry into the world, and the animal sounds represent the exit. Even the baby maintains some form of unusual silence, for as Salie observes, "il semblait avoir compris qu'on lui demandait de ne pas perturber le silence du monde. Son premier cri fut timide et vite tu (151). Sankèle goes through the same contradictions but in reverse; after the imposed silence during the months of seclusion and her hours of labor, she finally screams when her father wraps the child in a plastic bag to go and drown him in the ocean.

This complex motif of silence reflects how nature, history and human trauma interact with the politics and economics of migration. The trauma suffered by immigrants prevents them from recounting their experiences, even though their candidness could warn others against making the same mistakes. In such cases, the injustice behind the French imperial policies and anti-immigration laws gains immoral dimensions because its longevity stems from the intimate tragedies that human beings are unable to surmount. These moral implications force the ocean to intervene. In the same vein, Diandue observes:

En effet, le ventre, par opposition axiologique à la tête, est le siège de la douleur, du secret, et de la parole. Il ne s'agit pas de la seule douleur physique mais surtout de la douleur morale. Quant à la tête, elle est le siège de la pensée et du savoir. En général, chez ces peuples des sentiments comme la colère, la joie, la méchanceté, la jalousie etc. se rattachent au ventre; tandis qu'une réalité comme l'intelligence est liée à la tête. Dans leur philosophie, l'homme est un être bipolaire. Sa tête représente le pôle de réflexion et son ventre le pôle émotionnel. (2005)

This role of the ocean in the novel captures the intensity of emotion in the tragedies of Sankèle and Moussa. It also justifies the failure of immigrants to recount their experiences to the people at home. The interaction between man and nature makes the portrayal birth of Sankèle's child and the death of Moussa the most poetic and beautifully written passages in the novel.

This intimate interaction between human beings and their environment leads to the conclusion that expecting Africans not to migrate to France or anywhere else in the world is to ask them not to love, nor dream, nor help their families. It is effectively

requiring them not to be human. But it is one thing for the universe to assert the human right to freedom and to migration; it is another thing for an individual to believe in it. In the next section, I will argue that Salie betrays skepticism about this reality through her appeal to values learned through her French education. She ultimately proves that she does not really believe that the French immigration laws are inherently unjust.

### **The Misadventures of the Migrant Intellectual**

Tragedy remains incomplete without the audience's participation, because as Richard Palmer notes, it "cannot tolerate audience indifference" (154). But in order for the audience to recognize the drama as tragic, it must share the value systems presented in it. Palmer adds that the audience must accept that the laws broken by the heroes are so divine that the protagonists must suffer regardless of their intentions or innocence. Spectators who may consider the drama's values incompatible with their own beliefs must temporarily suspend their own values and assume those embodied in the tragedy. However, there are cases where the audience seems "incapable of abandoning, even in fantasy, their own values." In such cases, Palmer suggests that one must examine "the interaction between the context presented by the play and the values of the responder" (154).

For observers to accept the experiences of Moussa and Sankèle as tragic, they must also accept that the two characters find themselves in a conflict between their tragic flaws and the prevailing conditions, and that suffering would inevitably result regardless of their choices. Sankèle's fatal flaw was her love for a man her father did not like, while

Moussa's was his gullibility and his intention to support his family. The ocean accepted Sankele's tragedy by mythically transforming her baby into a dolphin, but rejected the social indifference to Moussa's suffering by allowing his body to be retrieved.

Despite her identification of the mythical and natural dimensions of Sankèle's and Moussa's experiences, Salie does not accept the situations as tragic because she holds onto two fundamental ideas associated with Western education: individualism and its gender corollary of feminism. She believes that the marriage arranged by *le vieux pêcheur* was inherently unjust because it flaunted the principle of individual liberties, especially for women. She attributes the arrangement to a rigid African communalism that she describes as follows: "Ici on ne se marie rarement deux amoureux, mais on rapproche toujours deux familles: l'individu n'est qu'un maillon de la chaîne tentaculaire du clan" (144).

However, this assessment is a literal interpretation of traditions and misrepresents African societies as imposing an unbridgeable gap between the individuals and the society. It also discounts the reality that human beings are simultaneously individual and social, and so an arranged marriage still involves two individuals even when the society subordinates the couple's personal values to their families' wishes. Moreover, the attribution of arranged marriages solely to Niodior – indicated by the word "ici" – is disproved by Salie's own marriage to a French national. The community had initially disapproved of the marriage, but they later accept it and even criticize her eventual divorce by saying: "L'âne n'abandonne jamais le bon foin [. . .] si un homme quitte sa femme, c'est qu'elle n'a pas pu être une bonne épouse" (68). Secondly, the family involvement in marriage is not unique to Niodior, as is evidenced by the fact that Salie's

own marriage succumbed to pressure from her French in-laws. She observes that upon arrival in France, “ma peau ombragea l’idylle – les siens ne voulant que Blanche-Neige –, les noces furent éphémères et la galère tenace” (50), meaning that her ex-husband was also trapped in the tentacles of his family.

The portrayal of arranged marriage as uniquely and rigidly African contradicts the reality of the world and denies the flexibility of African traditions. In France and the rest of Europe, the monarchy and the bourgeoisie directly or implicitly arrange marriages among each other as a means of making political alliances or keeping up social appearances. Arranged marriages are not determined by ethnicity alone but also by considerations about class and power. The hostility of Salie’s in-laws’ presumably arises not only from their prejudice but also from their desire to protect their position in the racial power hierarchy. Meanwhile, the arrangement of Sankèle’s marriage was based less on cultural concerns and more on her father’s desire to gain access to the wealth which *l’homme de Barbès* had acquired through his migration. These variations in the arranged marriages prove that social interest and involvement in marriage is a human phenomenon and, therefore, not unique to particular societies.

Another misreading of Sankèle’s tragedy is Salie’s singling her out as the sole victim in order to portray the arranged marriage as an instance of women’s oppression. Salie charges that the marriage was arranged because “[l]a plus haute pyramide dédiée à la diplomatie traditionnelle se ramène à ce triangle entre les jambes de femmes” (144). If Diome calculated that her readers would take her references to woman’s genitalia figuratively, this was a gross miscalculation. It is likely that the readers would give a literal interpretation of this statement, since history shows that French scholars and the

public at large have betrayed an obsession with African women's genitalia. The scientific interest during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Saartje Baartman's physical features is probably the most prominent example in this regard, but the continued exploration into practices such as female excision shows that this interest has not waned. Drawing a similar link between Baartman's tragedy and the orientation of Western feminist scholarship, Oyewùmí observes that Westerners "have been known to create persons, events and customs that affirms [*sic*] their voyeuristic and groin-centered preoccupations with Africa [. . .] For most Europeans who viewed her, Saartje Baartman existed only as "a collection of body parts" (2003b 160). Salie seems to disregard this context when she extends the imagery to almost a whole page. She says that Sankèle made love to Ndétare because "[elle] entendait faire de son triangle d'un amour libre" (144-45), as if love and sexual relations are limited to the genitalia of the woman. It is difficult to escape the impression that there is, at some level, a link between this objectification of intimacy and emotion and that of the tourists whom Salie ironically criticizes for coming to Africa in search of sexual relations.

It is probably Salie's own experience that leads her to misread that of Sankèle. Salie was born before her mother got married, and her step-father mistreated her because Salie's grandmother had insisted that Salie retain her biological father's name. Her step-father would leave the baby Salie in the cold and dust while her mother was away. As far as Salie is concerned, her step-father married her mother as a second wife because "il voudrait rattraper ses camarades, s'octroyer un supplément de virilité et multiplier sa propre descendance" (84). Her mother later bore Madické whom she considered her first child (85). Salie seems to feel that she was neglected because she was a girl and that these

events were necessarily informed by misogynous and macho attitudes engrained in local traditions.

Salie's attempt to place her experience and Sankèle's in the same feminist framework minimizes the fundamental variations between them. Although both their situations revolve around the birth of a child outside marriage, they are not analogous because Sankèle was the unmarried mother while Salie is the daughter of an unmarried mother. Salie's position is in fact equivalent to that of Sankèle's child who was drowned, except that she, unlike the child, was rescued and raised by her grandmother. Moreover, the fact that Sankèle's child was a boy proves that gender was not the primary determinant of the treatment Salie received as the child of an unmarried woman.

Salie's implied suggestion that women are the sole victims of the traditional disapproval of pregnancy outside marriage contradicts certain realities in the community. Even Ndétare suffers when Sankèle's father drowns their child and causes grief to the woman he loves. Salie's interpretation also conflicts with the legend of Sédar and Soutoura in which the primary victim of infertility and the resulting anguish is the man and not the woman.

Salie also does not realize that her ideals are dependent on patriarchal and racial power because they are transmitted by Ndétare through French schooling. She suggests that Sankèle revolted against her father's wishes due to feminist inspiration from Ndétare, "[qui] aimait passer des heures à parler à sa dulcinée des grandes figures historiques de toutes sortes de résistances, y compris du féminisme. C'était donc très naturellement que Sankèle, pourtant analphabète, avait acquis le sens de la révolte" (147). But the link between French education, feminism and women's self-assertion is rendered problematic



by Salie's grandmother who did not attend school but who also revolted against the traditional frown on children born outside marriage. Moreover, she did not reject the tradition but simply accepted that she was going against the social norm. As Salie grows up, she tells her: "Elever une enfant illégitime dans ce village, j'ai dû accepter le déshonneur pour le faire: prouve-moi que j'ai eu raison, sois polie, courageuse, intelligente, irréprochable" (261). The difference between Salie's grandmother and Sankèle's father was not one of respecting women's rights but of taking responsibility. Sankèle's father sought to protect the socio-economic status that would have accrued from his daughter's marriage to *l'homme de Barbès*, but Salie's grandmother was not willing to let her granddaughter die from neglect. This difference cannot be reduced to gender, because Salie's mother, like *l'homme de Barbès*, lacked the courage to raise a child born outside marriage. Salie seems aware that her grandmother challenges the link between women's assertion and feminism, for she dilutes her grandmother's courage by calling her "une féministe à sa façon" (261).

An added irony of the attribution of feminist ideals to Ndétare and by extension to France is the fact that Ndétare issues unfair indictments of African women. For instance, he tells the skeptical Madické and his friends that polygamy and high fertility are to blame for the desire to migrate to France. He refers to French history to back up his claims even though he is telling the young men to abandon their fascination with France:

Ici, comme là-bas, les idées de Marx se meurent, et les arbres d'espoir que nous avons plantés en 68 n'ont donné que de bien maigres fruits; la modernité nous laisse en rade, en dehors de la pilule tout reste à faire. Et même la pilule, je crois qu'il faudrait la programmer dans un riz génétiquement modifié afin d'obliger les

femmes à s'en servir; si seulement les féodaux qui leur servent d'époux pouvaient arrêter de mesurer leur virilité au nombre de leurs enfants. Ça aussi, petits, c'est le sous-développement et ça se joue dans les mentalités [ . . . ] La polygamie, la profusion d'enfants, tout cela constitue le terreau fertile du sous-développement.  
(205-6)

These observations are based on the misrepresentation of French history and African traditions. The existence of the pill preceded the May 1968 riots, but had been unavailable to French women because of state bans on contraception and abortion that were lifted in 1967 and 1975 respectively. Leslie King (1998) explains that these landmark victories in French women's struggle for reproductive rights have still not removed maternity from the French national agenda, for the government encourages pronatalist policies while the extreme right openly calls for the birth of more European children. Sargeant and Cordell (2003) have linked this discourse to concerns about the increase in non-European immigrant populations that are considered to be characterized by high fertility rates. Without addressing these important details, Ndétare endorses the French Republic as a model for respecting women's rights, when in fact its history in this regard is not that exemplary.

Another unfortunate aspect of Ndétare's reasoning is his statement that women should be obliged to take birth control, even if it means doing so without their knowledge or consent. For him, women are not adults with the capacity to determine the modalities of motherhood; they are helpless victims of dated African traditions and of men who assess their achievements by the number of children. His argument that polygamy leads to underdevelopment is based on a logical fallacy, because under-development, if such a

concept exists, is not related to the number of children alone. He essentially affirms the stereotype that Africans are characterized by unbridled sexuality.

But most of all, Ndétare is insensitive to his audience. The young people whom he addresses, including Madické, are born in polygamous households, and so to tell them that they are the product of feudal traditions or that they provide fertile conditions for under-development is essentially to say that the problems they face are related to their existence. Ndétare objectifies parenthood as an end in itself, effectively denying the history, experiences and moral values that are also interwoven in the lives of adults and children. Ndétare's disrespect for the children and their families raises doubts about the benefits of French-oriented education if it leads teachers to voice negative attitudes towards adults in front of their own children.

One can attribute Ndétare's remarks to bitterness about what happened in his own relationship. But the fact remains that he operates in a larger picture in which the education of Africans in the Western tradition was designed to create emissaries of Western enlightenment to "backward" African peoples, and so his comments acquire an added element of power. They are subsequently propagated by his former student Salie, who admires "la patience de l'instituteur" (206) and owes him her knowledge of a plethora of intellectuals, including Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar and Mariama Bâ (74). She adopts his condescending attitudes particularly towards motherhood and distances herself from the rest of the women, arguing that they looked down on her because she was divorced and did not have children. She says that their comments were based on "cette thèse millénaire" that "[l]'honneur d'une femme vient de son lait" (68). She quips:

Quelle bouche aurait osé nommer la pilule devant elle, au risque de se tordre à vie? Leur dire qu'en Europe on peut programmer et limiter les naissances aurait été perçu comme une provocation [. . .] Elles suivaient leur ligne, je cherchais la mienne vers une autre direction; nous n'avions rien à nous dire. (68-69)

Salie evidently shares Ndétare's views about family planning based on a literal interpretation of the proverb. The proverb simply affirms the human need for posterity that involves both men and women, as the legend of Sédar and Soutoura shows. It also affirms that the greatest legacy that human beings leave is not in buildings or ideas but in human lives.

Moreover, motherhood is not simply the act of childbirth and breastfeeding as Salie purports. It also manifests caring and affirms women's participation in the cycle of life. Women's fulfillment of these roles is not limited to biological motherhood, a factor which Salie is aware of since she was raised by her grandmother when her mother was unable to step up to the task. Ifi Amadiume (1997) makes a strong case for these social dimensions of motherhood when she notes that the matriarchal systems of African societies "had a very clear message about social and economic justice." She adds that matriarchy "was couched in a very powerful-goddess-based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood and a general principle of love" and safeguarded social stability from the excesses of patriarchy (101). If anyone embodies these values, it is Salie's grandmother who defied public opinion and her son-in-law's arrogance in order to raise her granddaughter.

Naturally, we can read Salie's comments as more figurative than literal, especially given that she and the women find common ground despite her disinterest in domestic

duties or motherhood. The women accept Salie's financial contribution and do not expect her to participate in the meal preparations to celebrate her visits home for the holidays. When she was younger, they watched as she spent her time reading rather than on domestic duties. But since colonial discourse has historically portrayed African women as reduced to childbearing, French readers are likely to make literal interpretations of these statements about the women. Salie seems aware of this possibility, and so she interjects that she admires the women's "sérénité, ce confort psychologique qu'elles tiraient sans doute de la fermeté de leurs convictions" (69). But her words betray a paternalistic attitude towards the women, which is then reinforced by her reference to them as "menhirs sur le socle de la tradition" (69).

These shifting positions on women reveal the problem that feminism represents for African women, even when women try to give it an African twist. Because its origins are Western, it puts African women intellectuals in the awkward position of not knowing how to analyze the impact of oppression on gender relations without affirming Western stereotypes about African women. Moreover, certain African women use feminism as a rallying point between African and European women in order to negotiate their personal status within the French hierarchy and distance themselves from migrants of a lower socio-economic status. This ambiguity is illustrated by Calixthe Beyala's essays (1995; 2000) in which the author pleads to French feminists not to abandon the cause of feminism and help liberate African women. In *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales*, for instance, she states: "Femmes Occidentales, occupez-vous des conditions de vie des femmes d'autres continents! C'est le seul droit d'ingérence qui mérite d'être vécu!" (1995 103-104). Beyala's remarks are reminiscent of those of

African heads of states who sought French patronage by embracing France's civilizing mission. They expose her as seeking to garner French sympathy on the basis that she, unlike most Africans, has embraced French ideals about women's liberation. One can therefore understand Kemedjio's sentiments that Beyala seeks to distance herself from African immigrants by presenting herself as a feminist and a French citizen: "Elle abandonne ainsi sa 'consœur africaine dont les droits primaires ne sont pas reconnus' [. . .] et ne prend la parole qu'au nom des Afro-Françaises" (374).

The foundations of feminism are inherently problematic; not because they are Western in origin but because they embody the fallacy that freedom can be tailor-made for women and they contradict the tragic dimension of African traditions. It is understandable that one would consider that the traditional hostility towards the birth of children outside marriage unfair to women who bear a greater burden for the shame than men. However, if the caution against pregnancy outside marriage is subjected to a rigidly rational and feminist analysis, it minimizes the larger social imperative that children be raised by adults who are responsible for them. The issue of innocence or fairness, even to women, is not the sole or primary concern here. Unlike women, babies are not adults who can take care of themselves, hence the primary interest of society is to determine that there are adults to take care of children. When adults – men and women – fail to assume this responsibility, the universe intervenes and the adults pay the price for their weakness or insolence. Consequently, the ocean mythically transforms Sankèle's child into a dolphin while Sankèle, Ndétare, *le vieux pêcheur* and the other parties involved carry the emotional scars induced by the child's fate.

That is not to say that women's welfare is irrelevant to and separate from children's welfare, as traditions such as the American pro-life movement seem to suggest. Salie's grandmother proves that African traditions are flexible as long as there is an adult who assumes responsibility for taking care of children, which in turn affirms the African philosophical orientation behind discouraging conception outside marriage. Salie eventually accepts this tragic outlook when she states that her residency in France helps her deal with the ambiguity of her history. She says:

Désireuse de respirer sans déranger, afin que le battement de mon cœur ne soit plus considéré comme un sacrilège, j'ai pris ma barque et fait de mes valises des écrins d'ombre [. . . ] L'ailleurs m'attire car, vierge de mon histoire, il ne me juge pas sur la base des erreurs du destin, mais en fonction de ce que j'ai choisi d'être; il est pour moi gage de liberté, d'auto-détermination. (261-62)

Salie accepts her tragic history because migration gives her the distance necessary for coming to terms with socially accepted contradictions. Unfortunately, she contradicts this profound statement with the ideal of human beings being judged solely on the basis of their action, since she also complains that Africans are subjected to "la préférence épidermique" (202). Moreover, the anonymous tag "l'ailleurs" is not as neutral as she suggests, for the fact remains her contact with France is historically rooted in colonialism and not simply a result of chance. Her attempt to de-historicize France and portray it as a migration destination like any other manifests bad faith.

Salie's problematic application of feminism to portray herself as a victim of African traditional misogyny points to her resistance to accepting her own tragic place in the world. Tragic resolution requires that the character "recognizes the true nature of the

world and accepts responsibility within it” (Palmer 147). However, by failing to accept her position as a Western-educated African woman in France, Salie tragically affirms the imperial ideology that the French prince is justified to rescue African damsels in distress from African male dragons.

The tragedy of Moussa, like Sankèle’s, points once again to Salie’s refusal to position herself as an African woman within the larger universe. I have shown that the environment intervened in Moussa’s death because the community had not assumed responsibility for their role in the tragedy. Towards the end of the novel, however, the narrator partially compensates for this silence by depicting Moussa’s father as having finally accepted that professional soccer was a viable career. He changes his mind following the impressive performance of the Senegalese soccer team at the 2002 world cup finals, during which it beat the defending champions France and then reached the quarter finals. Moussa’s father realizes that “le football est un gagne-pain de choix; en fait, l’issue de secours idéal pour les enfants du tiers-monde” (278).

It is comforting to know that Moussa’s father sensed his error in sending impatient letters to Moussa and in failing to comfort his son upon returning home in disappointment and shame. But while his unrealistic expectation was the final straw that broke Moussa’s back, it was not the fundamental cause of Moussa’s unfortunate experience. Sauveur, the soccer scout, lied to Moussa about finding him a contract and paid bribes to procure the necessary documents. “Le visa? Une formalité!” Salie exclaims. “Dans les ambassades aussi, on sait boire son pot-de-vin en silence. Du bon vin français, ça fait mieux passer les cacahouètes” (111). Sauveur profited from an already unbalanced situation, and that balance is not restored. Moussa’s father’s reckoning does



not provide a complete resolution to the tragedy because it does not address the fundamental imbalance caused by corruption and stringent visa requirements that largely determined Moussa's fate.

To be fair to the narrator, such this partial resolution of Moussa's tragedy reflects the reality of the world, which is that few unscrupulous employers of immigrants, if any, are punished, since illegal immigrants are unlikely to raise complaints about them to the authorities. However, the problem lies in the novel's larger theme that African families are largely to blame for pressuring their young people to go to France. At one point, Salie laments that relatives' expectation of financial assistance is "le plus gros fardeau que traînent les émigrés" (52). This statement places on African families a larger responsibility for the difficult experiences of immigrants than on French institutional structures, yet the burden of responsibility for Moussa's experience falls less on his father than on French laws that render immigrants vulnerable to exploitation.

The contradiction in Salie's assessment arises from the fact that she is trying to read Moussa's tragedy through the lenses of her own experience without acknowledging significant differences between them. She argues that she is forced to spend her hard-earned money budgeted to last a month within a matter of days, because "je devais nourrir mes convives autoproclamés sans broncher, sous peine de passer, dès mon arrivée, pour une individualiste occidentale, une dénature égoïste" (191). Her complaint echoes Moussa's father's letters accusing his son of being individualistic because he had not yet sent any money home. However, collapsing the difference between Salie and Moussa evades the fact that Salie had resources to share with her community while Moussa did not have money to even return home. It also provides fuel for the stereotype

of Africans as so desperate that they prefer receiving resources from France to caring about the welfare of their family members. Salie seems aware of this risk of misrepresenting her community when she blasts the audience for its anticipated response:

Que voulez-vous? Une carcasse est bienvenue pour qui n'a pas de gigot. Osez seulement vous permettre de les traiter de sans-gêne, et je vous renvoie votre jugeote par la poste avec, pour leur défense, l'argument péremptoire selon lequel la pire indécence du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, c'est l'Occident obèse face au tiers-monde rachitique. Mes économies étaient mon corps du Christ, ma peine muée en gâteau pour les miens. Tenez, mangez mes frères, ceci est ma sueur monnayée en Europe pour vous! Hosanna! (192)

Salie literally mocks her community behind its back, but senses the readers may participate in the mockery and so blasts them as too rich to point fingers at the poor. This gesture fails to hide the fact that she still portrays Africans as poor – as is evident in the term “tiers-monde rachitique” – and that she views the Western world as duty bound to deliver Africans from their poverty – hence the reference to the Christian sacrament. Diome evades responsibility for negative inferences that she evidently predicts, and instead puts pressure on the readers by appealing to their sense of guilt. The novel essentially blackmails the reader in a manner that roughly translates as follows: “You and I know that these Africans are too poor to understand their predicament, but unlike you, I have the right to say so because I am an African. If you say so, I can accuse you of being selfish or racist.” Salie violates Sartre’s “pacte de générosité” that respects the freedom of the reader to interpret the book without undue pressure from the writer.

The narrator's bad faith is geared towards portraying Salie as an innocent actor in the complex arena of migration. Having implied that the stereotype of African poverty can be attributed to the reader's interpretation but not to her portrayal of the community, Salie can appear as a having no choice but concede to her community's demands unless she wants to suffer the same fate as Moussa. But Salie does have a choice which she exercises when she declines to help Madické go to France. Minimizing this fundamental difference between herself and Moussa transfers the burden of his tragedy from Sauveur to his father.

Another instance of bad faith emerges in Salie's call on soccer players to be candid about the racism and stringent residency laws in France. Her clarification that "[i]l ne s'agit pas de dégouter les nôtres de l'Occident, mais de leur révéler le dessous des cartes" (286) betrays a concern to avoid calling France's relationship with Africa into question. This concern is tied to the belief that the solution to the problems facing African immigrants lies applying the Republic's own values to the letter rather than in Africans breaking away from its grip. Salie even ventures that professional soccer provides Europe the opportunity to show its respect for Africans and asks a rhetorical question: "Si l'Occident n'accepte même pas d'être égalé par le tiers-monde, ne serait-ce qu'en football, comment peut-on espérer qu'il aide à se hisser à son niveau de développement?" (284).

The fallacy of elevating Africans aside, centuries of slavery and colonialism demonstrate that there has never been a desire on the part of Europe to raise the Third World to its level. Moreover, it is doubtful that many Africans would consider such "elevation" desirable. Fanon asserted in his conclusion to *Les Damnés de la terre* that

Africa did not need to catch up with Europe because Europe had proved incapable of resolving fundamental problems of justice. The appeal to an abstract intention to raise Africa to Europe's development is also naïve, for as Kom observes: "Eu égard à une culture fondée sur l'exploitation impériale, il est illusoire et même naïf de croire à la générosité de l'Autre et de s'attendre à son soutien dans le développement du continent" (94).

Salie refuses to accept the reality of France's history and ambitions in so far as Africa is concerned, and persists in trying to redeem France's conscience. This position is convenient because it assigns her and other Africans living in France the special role of being France's emissaries to the ignorant masses at home while soothing France's conscience. This is an inherently classist position because it maintains a distinction between successful African immigrants such as writers and soccer players from the rest of poorer migrants such as *l'homme de Barbès*. At the same time, it exploits the plight of the unfortunate in order to maintain the attention of French readers. Fanon describes a similar maneuvering gesture among the African elite around independence:

[Les élites] utilisent l'esclavage de leurs frères pour faire honte aux esclavagistes ou pour fournir un contenu idéologique d'humanitarisme falot aux groupes financiers concurrents de leurs oppresseurs. Jamais, en vérité, ils ne font appel réellement aux esclaves, jamais il ne les mobilisent concrètement. (66)

Discouraging Africans from heading for France without explaining the complex global factors that influence migration essentially leaves space for Salie and the soccer players she calls upon to plead to the French Republic on behalf of migrants. From this

perspective, Africans are not agents of their own destiny and so they should wait upon France to rectify that injustice that they suffer.

Mobilizing Africans in the contemporary situation goes beyond simply informing them about the dangers of migration to presenting the global stage so that they can see all sides of migration simultaneously and make informed decisions. However, Diome's novel renders France's presence in Africa privileged information for the readers whose collective values can be assumed to be French. The only African collectivity in the book is the Niodior community, and Salie does not let them see the contradiction between the hardships that African migrants face in France and the relatively privileged reception that French nationals are treated to in Africa. One occasion that reveals this dichotomy is when Salie returns to Niodior after the short visit to M'Bour. She recounts her visit to Madické and his friends:

- J'étais vraiment content de revoir M'Bour. La ville ne ressemble plus à ce qu'elle était pendant mes années de lycée, mais j'étais si heureuse...

- Aussi heureuse qu'en arrivant en France? m'interrompit la voix malicieuse de Garouwalé.

Il était encore là, plus effronté que jamais.

Ah! Sacrée France, c'est peut-être parce qu'elle porte un nom de femme qu'on la désire tant. (233)

The above passage reveals the different messages that Sali reserves for her brother and his friends on one hand, and for her readers on the other. She tells the young men of the joy of visiting M'Bour but does not describe the economic exploitation of the tourism industry to which she has already made the readers privy. Ironically, she castigates

tourists for not telling the whole truth about Senegal when they returned to France. She observes: “Après quoi, tous ces amoureux de l’Afrique s’en retourneront, bronzes et frétilants. Ils affirmeront à qui voudra l’entendre [ . . . ] ‘Ah, le Sénégal, quel magnifique pays!’” (231). Unfortunately for Salie, Garouwalé senses the discrepancy between her actions and what she tells the youths. Instead of addressing his remarks, she dismisses them by making a frivolous statement about France’s feminine appeal.

Garouwalé performs the same function as the village fool because his nickname, “le Pique-feu,” attenuates the brutal truth of his statements. But Salie uses this quality to dismiss his observations through sidebars with the readers. On another occasion, she dismisses Garouwalé’s comments by describing him to the reader as “l’intello de la bande, qui venait d’être renvoyé du lycée pour redoublement fréquents” (203). In yet another instance, she rejects his remarks by saying that she was irritated by “ces dialogues stériles” (239).

This last reaction was provoked by Garouwalé’s response to an episode she recounts in order to illustrate her suffering in France. In Salie’s rendition of the story, an arrogant immigration official at the airport asks her to translate his instructions to an African couple. When Salie says that she does not speak the same language as the couple, the official retorts: “Mais enfin, c’est incroyable, et vous vous parlez comment chez vous, avec les pieds peut-être?” (237) Unsympathetic to her story, Garouwalé retorts: “Eh bien! Il faut croire que t’aimes bien les épines? Autrement, tu n’y retournerais pas à chaque fois. Elles me plairaient bien, moi, tes épines” (238-39). Once again, Garouwalé proves to be more perceptive than Salie is willing to acknowledge. He sees that Salie is evading

complex issues and zeroing in on minute manifestations of racism in order to portray herself as the ultimate victim.

Salie's reference to this event is inherently narcissistic. The immigration official is trying to inform the couple of their impending arrest and repatriation, but she is preoccupied with asserting her educational achievements. In response to the immigration official's question, she refers to Georges Fortune, a French scholar who confirms that Africa has numerous different languages. Salie's intention is to show that she is well read, and this does not escape the official who responds: "Je m'en fous de votre Georges et sa fortune, ce qui m'emmerde, c'est de vous voir tous, autant que vous êtes, venir chercher la vôtre ici" (237). Salie does not see the contradiction in using a French scholar to confirm the linguistic realities of Africa, and expresses her adoration of the French language when she observes earlier: "Heureusement qu'il y a le français et l'anglais, sinon, à l'OUA, il faudrait se réunir autour d'un tam-tam" (235). Her inability to see that the couple is in a much worse position than her own, and that she is inherently affirming France's civilizing mission shows that she has not situated herself in her immediate and historical context. She confirms what Fanon said of intellectuals:

L'insertion de l'intellectuel colonisé dans la marée populaire va se trouver différée par l'existence chez lui d'un curieux culte du détail. Ce n'est pas que le peuple soit rebelle à l'analyse. Il aime qu'on lui explique, il aime comprendre les articulations d'un raisonnement, il aime voir où il va. Mais l'intellectuel colonisé [. . .] privilégie le détail et on arrive à oublier la défaite du colonialisme [. . .] Il ne voit pas tout le temps le tout." (*Les Damnés* 51)

Salie concentrates on minute details such as an anonymous immigration official's disrespect for her high level of education and tragically misses the opportunity to confront Garouwalé's skepticism by pointing to the irony that France exploits the resources of the African continent while it closes its borders to Africans.

The fundamental tragedy of Diome's novel is that of a French-educated African woman who does not situate herself in the world and who underestimates the implications of the opinions she expresses. Salie blames the hardships of African societies on patriarchy and poverty but tries to retract or qualify her claims when faced with the possibility that she may be confirming stereotypes about Africans. She manifests bad faith, which Lewis Gordon (1995a) describes as the persistent denial of the dialectic between existence in and of itself and existence in the world, as well as the refusal to accept responsibility for one's choices. Salie is unwilling to acknowledge her position as a Western-educated African woman in order to remain neutral on the question of the unequal relations between France and Senegal that influence migration.

In the midst of painful experiences such as that of Moussa, the central dilemma facing humanity is the fundamental question of justice. On this issue, Salie demonstrates that she prefers reconciliation to justice which, in the real world, translates into the author's inadvertent support for France's anti-immigration policies. At the 2004 edition of *the Etonnant Voyageurs* festival in Bamako, Diome was asked to respond to the criticism that her novel had comforted "une certaine France dans sa volonté de justifier l'application de mesures drastiques en matière d'immigration" (Cissokho 2004). She defended herself by replying, "Dans ce livre, ce n'est pas l'Afrique et l'immigration qui sont critiquées [ . . . ] Je veux seulement faire comprendre à ceux qui veulent venir en



France qu'ils doivent se demander, avant de prendre la décision de venir, quels sont leurs atouts pour réussir en France, sachant que la politique européenne est de plus en plus sévère en matière d'immigration." But with her novel occupying a position in the top ten of French booksellers' lists in November 2003 (*L'Internaute 2003*), the conclusion that Diome reassures those who agree with the Republic's harsh immigration policies becomes inevitable. The attempt to sit on the fence is regrettable when one considers that poor African migrants live in deplorable conditions, under constant fear of being asked for documentation and of being deported home, without the comfort of gaining fame through writing.

Nevertheless, Diome's novel is an enjoyable book to read because it depicts the complex interactions between history and individual destinies, which would explain its popularity in France. It admirably portrays the universal dimensions of the injustice suffered by immigrants. It also shows that the Republic collides with humanity and nature by maintaining its presence in Africa while closing its borders to Africans. Until the Republic revises this anti-tragic worldview of human dignity and the world at large, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea will continue to claim the lives of Africans desperate to reach Europe. However, the Republic remains in denial of this reality because it is unable to acknowledge the schism in its collective psyche, a phenomenon that I will analyze in the chapter on Bessora's *53 cm*.

## Conclusion

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it is clear that Diome's novel situates the French-educated African woman as the tragic figure in the larger context of Africa's struggle for autonomy. The tragedy of Diome's protagonist remains incomplete because her alienation caused by French rationality prevents her from acknowledging the reality of the world and her place in it. The protagonist shuttles between two world views, attempting the impossible reconciliation between Africans' human needs and the French Republic's imperial ambitions. Her efforts lead to an obsession with the minute details of her existence while the African societies are trying to cope with and alter concrete social and economic realities. They also impose a false dichotomy in the audience, projecting two separate messages for African and French audiences.

I have also shown that the legacy of assimilation is not only contemporary but feminized. The abstract and impossible ideal of a liberty tailored specifically for women curtails African women's confidence in traditional values and lures them away from addressing the fundamental question of Africa's break from France's colonial stranglehold. It provides the women with the opportunity to partake in the patriarchal system accentuated by colonialism and functions as an alibi to, in Amadiume's words, "create new categories of collaborators" (50). The compromises Salie makes call into question scholars' tendency to place all African women at the bottom of the race-gender hierarchy without tackling the class issues in which the women are implicated.

Above all, Diome's novel shows that Africans suffer in France partly because oppression tries to subvert a global perspective of the African experience. In this chapter,

I looked at the universe from a largely environmental perspective. The next chapter examines the global stage as a primarily temporal phenomenon through an analysis of Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*. It demonstrates that the injustice of French immigration laws lies in their fragmentation of historical continuity embodied in African traditions.

### Chapter 3

#### Tragic Empathy in Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*

One of the problems in narratives on migration written by Africans in French is the writer's reluctance to allow the broader social context play a significant role in the reader's interpretation. In *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, the author minimizes the indictment of the Republic that migrants' suffering necessarily entails by appealing to feminist and humanist ideals. The roots of this gesture appear to be the protagonist's unwillingness to acknowledge the class distinctions between her and poorer migrants. However, the novel ultimately gives the impression that the source of migrants' mishaps is simply Africans' ignorance about the realities of life in France rather than its combination with larger social-historical issues.

Alain Mabanckou's novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge* initially seems to evade this contradictions brought about by class because the events are recounted by Massala-Massala, a poor migrant from a village not far from the port city of Pointe-Noire, who is duped into believing that going to France is a ticket to automatic success. Massala-Massala manages to make his way to France, but is eventually compelled to engage in illegal activities in order to survive. Through a long flashback, we learn of his arrest, imprisonment and impending repatriation.

The victim's perspective ironically undermines the novel's potentially powerful insight because the victim's voice provokes the reader's empathy and sometimes amusement which, in turn, act as alibis to avoid examining the global stage of migration. The emotions lure the reader away from considering the social actors involved in

migration and thus thwart the tragic principle that the powerful remain the scapegoat for suffering. This result raises the question: why does giving the victim a voice appear counterproductive?

In this chapter, I will argue that Massala-Massala's voice minimizes his suffering because it evokes empathy and laughter without providing a coherent view of events to which the reader can attach those emotions. The absence of correspondence between emotions and the object of emotion compounds the risk already inherent in empathy. As Amy Shuman (2005) observes, empathy caters to the moral sensibilities of the empathizers while minimizing the suffering of those with whom they empathize. By empathizing with Massala-Massala, therefore, the reader can privilege individual sensibilities over understanding the complex social forces behind his fate.

The other emotion of amusement is provoked by the apparently frivolous concerns of the secondary characters and particularly of Moki. Massala-Massala attributes his decision to go to France to Moki's fantastic stories that convince him that France is indeed a land of automatic success. However, Moki's ostentatious behavior is transparent to the reader and provides the opportunity to laugh at him. This situation becomes problematic because it allows us to ignore the profound alienation that he exhibits and to blame Massala-Massala for his gullibility. This result points to Oscar Mandel's observation that when tragedy invokes pleasure in the audience, the audience gets the impression that the hero's suffering results from personal action, and "with the man who suffers or dies results from the hero's own action, we feel that we are safe, for we can (and usually do) choose not to imitate him" (83) .

The reason that *Bleu Blanc Rouge* ends up placing blame on the victims is because it does not make explicit connections between the emotions that it provokes and the social actors of migration. Jean-Paul Sartre (1948a) vehemently criticized such gestures when he singled out poets and accused them of transforming emotions from a tool with which human beings reflect on the world into objects. He observed:

A mesure que le prosateur expose des sentiments, il les éclaircit; pour le poète, au contraire, s'il coule ses passions dans son poème, il cesse de les reconnaître [. . .]  
L'émotion est devenue chose, elle a maintenant l'opacité des choses; elle est brouillée par les propriétés ambiguës des vocables où on l'a enfermée [. . .]  
Comment espérer qu'on provoquera l'indignation ou l'enthousiasme politique du lecteur quand précisément on le retire de la condition humaine et qu'on l'invite à considérer, avec les yeux de Dieu, le langage à l'envers? (24-25)

Mabanckou's novel demonstrates that Sartre's comments are applicable not only to poetry but to novels as well, for the emotions that it provokes do not facilitate the reader's understanding of the social issues surrounding Massala-Massala's fate.

In the next section, I will argue that the concerns raised by Shuman, Mandel and Sartre are confirmed by critiques of Mabanckou's novel by Odile Cazenave (2003), Lydie Moudileno (2001) and Dominic Thomas (2003). Each of these analyses tends to empathize with Massala-Massala and gloss over important social questions raised by the novel. I will subsequently propose that a more appropriate interpretation of the novel resides in recognizing migration as an integral part of the human condition that is also embodied in African traditions. One of these traditions is *fadenya*, a concept in the Sahel region that conveys the notion of rivalry and individual achievement. The equivalent of

*fadenya* is *baba-izi-tarey* for the Songhay and Zarma, and *fandirabe* for the Fulbe (Hale, 1998 115). For the Mande hero, *fadenya* may mean departure from home, conquest, return and insertion into the historical continuum of society. In the past, it symbolized a place in the family genealogy for individuals. For heroes, it meant a place in the national epic maintained by griots. Today, this value may be manifest in the form of migration of workers who return from the coast with goods or graduates who return from studies abroad with a diploma. For the purposes of this study, I will use the Mande word *fadenya* to represent the various ethnic terms for this regional value.

I will subsequently compare *fadenya* with *la sape*, a cultural phenomenon in both Congolese republics that the novel identifies as one of the major influences of migration. The comparison between the two forms of migration raises the question as to why *la sape*, unlike *fadenya*, seems to have the adverse effects evident in Massala-Massala's misadventures. In response to this question, the third section will analyze the central role of names in interweaving migration, history and narrative performance. In Mabanckou's novel, renaming represents the loss of history and with it, emotional trauma and physical violence. The fourth section will highlight some of the narrative inconsistencies in *Bleu Blanc Rouge* and the manner in which they undermine appreciation of the global stage on which migration takes place. The chapter concludes with the assertion that the victim's voice is counterproductive in narratives about tragic experiences.

### **The Scintillating Colors of Migration**

The title of Mabanckou's first novel is a direct reference to the French national colors, while the opening scene is a cell in Paris where Massala-Massala is awaiting repatriation after serving his prison sentence. The contrast between France's image in the title and the opening scene makes Cazenave's (2003) use of the *miroir aux alouettes* an appropriate analogy for his misadventure. She argues that France functions as a lark mirror by enticing young Africans with the image of the country as a land of automatic success, only for the Africans to realize that the reality of France contradicts this representation (123). She implicitly identifies characters such as Moki as the main agents who fuel the false hopes in France because they return home with fantastic tales about France but do not inform their communities of the hardships that Africans face there:

[L'auteur] met le doigt sur la part de la responsabilité de ceux qui, tels Moki, vivent en France et font circuler certaines images de réussite facile, jetant de la poudre aux yeux et responsables à leur tour de faux rêves qui poussent nombre de leurs compatriotes à s'expatrier, à miser tout sur l'apparence, à voter s'il le faut, afin d'être à Paris et de connaître la même aventure. Aventure qui s'annonce trompeuse, lourde de désillusion et non sans certains dangers. (123-24)

Cazenave places the onus of Massala-Massala's fate on Moki for misrepresenting the reality of life in France. However, global dynamics in the real render impact of Moki's dishonesty relatively smaller than the legacy of colonialism and the French Republic's continued presence in Congo. Moreover, Moki is a victim of fascination with France



despite the fact that his misadventures are relatively mild when compared to Massala-Massala's.

It is true that the author seems to place the responsibility for the false image of France on Moki and other migrants; however, such a position implies that migrants are mostly responsible for a historical context in which they are largely powerless. In order to use the lark mirror as an analogy of migration while evading this pitfall, it is important to understand how the lark mirror functions. Arentsen *et al.* (2004) explain that the *miroir aux alouettes* is a hunting decoy that was used in Western Europe between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries during the seasonal migration of larks. It consisted of a block of wood with small pieces of mirror that was rotated to capture the attention of the birds. As the birds drew near the decoy, they would be shot by hunters waiting nearby. As some birds dropped dead, the others would fly away, only to return shortly after, unable to resist the attraction of the rotating mirrors. Scientists have not yet determined what exactly attracts larks to mirrors with such a force that they disregard the danger of being shot.

Blaming migrants for advancing the utopian image of France is like holding larks responsible for their own death. However, Cazenave does not clearly state if Moki is largely responsible for circulating the false images of France. Instead, she proposes that Mabanckou's novel is among recent narratives of migration that extend assimilation and integration into French society from identity to "des conditions de réussite pour un arrivant non-européen dans la société française" (126). The paradox is that assimilation functions in the same way as the *miroir aux alouettes* because it invites Africans to pursue the goal of integration into French culture while ensuring that the integration cannot take place. In his study of colonial education, Samba Gadjigo succinctly defines

assimilation as follows: “Loin de constituer une tentative d’assimilation, l’entreprise coloniale consiste plus exactement, de la part de l’Européen, à se donner comme modèle, mais, en même temps, à bloquer l’autochtone dans la voie d’accès à cet idéal” (13). Cazenave’s interpretation of Mabanckou’s novel simply extends the scope of the *miroir aux alouettes* because it does not highlight the dialectic that Gadjigo describes.

The *miroir aux alouettes* thus reveals the need to nuance the different power positions, responsibilities and interests in migration. Massala-Massala does blame Moki for his predicament, for as he says, “[il] est à l’origine de tout” (39). However, one needs to place his situation and disposition in perspective before taking his words at face value. He is in jail nursing the wounds of his painful experience and dreading the shame awaiting his arrival home. Incarceration also denies him the larger perspective necessary to construct a global vision of migration, which he confirms when he says, “[m]on univers se limite à ce cloisonnement auquel je me suis accoutumé” (11). In such conditions, it is easier for him to focus on a flesh-and-blood character than on the various individual and institutional characters responsible for his predicament. Moki is an easier scapegoat because he is the one Massala-Massala knows best.

An appreciation of the broader context of migration in *Bleu Blanc Rouge* requires acknowledging that even though Massala-Massala’s reasoning and vision are skewed, he still provokes the reader’s empathy due to his situation in prison and his role in the novel as the narrating protagonist. His position as a witness and the use of the first person induce the reader to believe that his rendition of events is balanced, especially since, as Philippe Lejeune (1980) observes, narratives in which the witness recounts events directly observed or experienced appear to provide a direct link to the events observed.

However, even though it is human to empathize with those who suffer, Shuman cautions that empathy is deceptive because it disempowers the victim of suffering:

If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position as the empathizer than empathized. Storytelling needs a critique of empathy to remain a process of negotiating, rather than defending, meaning. The critique of empathy, and the recognition of the inevitably failed promises of storytelling, avoids an unchallenged shift in the ownership of experience and interpretation to whoever happens to be telling the story and instead insists on obligations between tellers, listeners, and the stories they borrow. (5)

Shuman's remarks imply that the reader's obligation is to maintain a considerable distance from Massala-Massala rather than adopt his perspective wholesale. Readers can only participate in the novel's tragedy by experiencing the clash between the natural tendency to empathize with Massala-Massala and the apparent callousness of refusing to take him at his word. Without doing this, the readers appropriate the tragedy of migration as proof of their own beliefs and minimize the suffering of African migrants captured in the novel.

Besides Massala-Massala's bias, another mitigating factor in understanding Moki is his own alienation. The fact that he survives in Europe or that he deliberately misleads people about his life does not negate the reality that he too suffers. Moki takes many risks to enter and stay in France and also spends an inordinate amount of energy trying to hide this reality. He bleaches his skin despite the health risks involved. He sits outside the new villa he built for his family so that people can see him read French newspapers, and claims that the African languages distort the pronunciation of French. He behaves like the

European colonizer who, as Memmi (1965) explains, desperately tried to hide the fact that his standard of life in the colonies was much higher than what he had access to in Europe. Memmi notes: “[Le colon] aime les symboles les plus éclatants, les manifestations les plus démonstratives de la puissance de son pays” (79-80), because “il s’agit tout autant d’impressionner le colonisé que de se rassurer soi-même” (80). Likewise, Moki’s exhibitionism is designed to compensate for his pathetic living conditions which contradict the glorious image of France.

Given this alienation, the portrait of Moki as arrogant and pretentious minimizes his internal conflict. It provides the reader with the opportunity to laugh at and despise him, and in so doing, ignore the serious social issues with which Moki grapples. This ridicule breaches one of the conventions of satire, which is to avoid poking fun at extreme characters who lack a balance between their redeeming and negative qualities. In his book *The Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet (1962) argues that since satire combines both laughter and contempt, it is problematic to employ it in subjects that already solicit our horror or shock, or for characters who are either victims of suffering or perpetrators of unspeakable crimes. Moki’s alienation is an inappropriate topic for ridicule and humor because he evidently displays symptoms of the self-hatred that leads Africans to degrade themselves and their cultures. Moreover, the ridicule ultimately makes Massala-Massala the target of criticism because it leaves the reader wondering why he was naïve enough to trust a character as transparent as Moki. This vicious cycle of the narrative is in turn linked to the fact that Massala-Massala inevitably blames Moki for his fate since prison denies him the lucidity to evaluate his experience.

Contrary to Massala-Massala's belief, Moki's role in his predicament is not solely dependent on his honesty but is largely mitigated by the prevailing circumstances. If, as Cazenave argues, migration was influenced primarily by returning migrants, another minor character, *le Paysan* should have attracted a significant following, or at least raised doubts in the people's minds about Moki's credibility. *Le Paysan* informs the community of the high price of living, especially in Paris, but is unable to discourage people in Congo from going to France because Moki successfully convinces his listeners that *le Paysan* is not telling the truth. The fact that Massala-Massala believes Moki and not *le Paysan* means that certain forces besides migration reinforce the credibility of Moki's claims.

Moudileno raises this point when she suggests that even though information contradicting Moki's claims was available from characters like *le Paysan*, it was largely inaccessible. No one listens to *le Paysan* because his experience is "non-narrable," as opposed to Moki's which was "narrable." Moudileno also argues that Massala-Massala's inclination to believe Moki over *le Paysan* could result from the fact that "l'écriture, malgré ses bonnes intentions, ne peut pas menacer une fiction orale, qui s'élabore en dehors de champ d'action" (186). However, this latter argument restricts *le Paysan*'s discourse to the written word, yet the novel gives no indication that he issues his warnings in writing. *Le Paysan* lives in the community and so it is likely that he contradicts the fantastic image of France in conversation.

Moudileno's argument relies too heavily on Massala-Massala's account about *le Paysan* without analyzing the multilayered voices through which *le Paysan*'s words are transmitted to the reader. Moki, who brings up *le Paysan* in his story, is determined to

quash any narrative that may contradict his own. Massala-Massala, who cites Moki, seeks to demonstrate that Moki's stories were convincing enough to override *le Paysan's* warnings. The narrator, who interweaves different events and characters, seems to place blame on returning migrants for fueling potential migrants' illusions about France. Moki is therefore portrayed as desperate to hide the truth, and this desperation is conveyed through Moki's repeated accusations against *le Paysan*: "Menteur! Toujours des mensonges. Il ment comme il respire [. . .] Le Paysan ment. C'est un grand menteur" (90). With these multiple voices, it is difficult to know *le Paysan's* exact words, or even if he exists or is just a prototype of Moki's imagined adversaries. Even if he does exist, *le Paysan* lacks the stature necessary for the status Moudileno assigns him as "le contraire du Parisien" (186).

Moudileno also neglects to mention that the socio-economic advancement of Moki's family validates his claims. Before Moki left for France, his father lived in a dwelling that left residents in the community wondering "par quel miracle elle [la baraque] parvenait à déjouer la vigilance des tempêtes de la saison des pluies" (*Bleu* 40). With the money he earns in France, Moki is able to complete a family villa that once again captures the attention of the community:

[La villa] se dressa, impériale, en quatre pentes. Ses tôles en aluminium luisaient avec les rais de soleil. Elle se distinguait de loin et dépassait en hauteur les bicoques avoisinants qui n'étaient plus qu'un capharnaüm dont le désordre sautait aux yeux comme dans une favela. Il y avait deux mondes. Celui de la famille et celui du quartier. (43-33)

The spatial juxtaposition of Moki's house with the rest of the neighborhood reminds one of Fanon's description in *Les Damnés de la terre* of the colonizer and the colonized sections of the town. In Massala-Massala's home town, the difference in housing structures not only indicates economic disparity but also serves as a visible reminder to the residents of France's economic prosperity.

The rapid pace and size of the family's transformation has similar social implications. Moki's father rapidly advances to become the president of the elder's council, bypassing men more qualified than him. The elders can only voice their disapproval in hushed tones for fear of offending him. Moki's previously lackluster brothers gain a newfound influence among their peers, especially among young women seeking a chance to talk to Moki. The silent contempt of their peers is evident in the nicknames Dupont and Dupond, the famous twin characters of Hergé's comic books on the adventures of Tintin. These nicknames could not be used in the presence of Moki's brothers, otherwise one would compromise "[les] chances d'approcher le Parisien un jour" (67). Against this background, Massala-Massala seems to be asking, how can one not believe Moki's stories about France?

Unfortunately for Massala-Massala, the reader cannot take his side because Moki's performance in Congo is transparent, ironically thanks to him. The word of a desperate young man in a prison cell is hard to resist, and so when he blames Moki for his predicament, he preempts the reader to expect the worst of Moki. The reader is shocked, but not surprised, when Moki cynically goes through the motions of his community's welcoming reception, and distributes cheap trinkets as gifts of value. For a reader familiar with the colonial degradation of African cultures, Moki's behavior is not

only transparent but also contemptuous, for instance when he refuses to eat *manioc* and *foufou* because they purportedly lack nutritional value. By despising Moki, however, the audience also finds it difficult to believe Massala-Massala's claims that Moki fooled him into genuinely believing the fantastic stories about France.

Given these narrative intricacies, it is evidence that the credibility of Moki's stories rely on factors besides his own claims. Dominic Thomas (2003) proposes that *la sape*, to which Moki claims allegiance, possesses certain historical and social dimensions that make migrants like Massala-Massala inclined to believe in the myth of the French El Dorado. *La sape* is derived from the French verb "saper" and has inspired the acronym "Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes." It is commonly associated with Congolese pop icons Kofi Olomidé and Papa Wemba and is characterized by competition among the young men for status "by acquiring French designer clothing and wearing it as part of an ostentatious lifestyle" (953). The migration of the *sapeurs* is in turn motivated by the need to earn enough money to afford the expensive clothing.

Thomas traces the roots of *la sape* to assimilation that promoted access to European culture as a marker of socio-economic success. However, he also implies that France unwillingly remains the principle actor in *la sape* because its image has "survived in the postcolonial context" (951). In his view, the primary power behind contemporary *la sape* is dictators such as Denis Sassou-Nguesso and Mobutu Sese-Seko, since the youth in both Congolese republics bought European fashion to resist policies like Mobutu's "zaïrianisation." Thomas thus concludes that *la sape* "is clearly reformulated as a counter-hegemonic practice indisociable from the dictates of political authority that serve as a catalyst for its dynamism" (959).



Thomas's argument that *la sape* is counter-hegemonic remains problematic. On a practical level, risking imprisonment in France is too high a price to pay for acquiring expensive clothes. If anything, *la sape* appears to reinforce hegemony by encouraging young men to aspire for standards that are not only degrading but also out of their reach. The ultimate beneficiary of this dynamic is the French Republic that maintains its cultural stranglehold and that gains African customers as well as cheap laborers who cannot claim social benefits.

If *la sape* is to be considered counter-hegemonic, the hegemonic structure must incorporate France and not be limited to African dictators. In an article cited by Thomas, Didier Gondola (1999) demonstrates that the *sapeurs* are aware of the global dynamics of imperialism. They justify their migration by arguing that “[p]uisque l’ancien ‘colon’ refuse cette identité, ils la lui font ‘politiquement’ payer” (29).

The implicit role of the French Republic in inspiring *la sape* after formal independence is also confirmed in *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, although it is not accompanied by the rhetoric of resistance that Gondola describes. Moki states that his migration was inspired by French literature and magazines that his father brought home from the hotel at which he worked. The hotel was run by French nationals and frequented by French clientele (76). Most of these clients were *coopérants*, French expatriates working in Africa under the rubric of the ostensible cooperation between France and its former colonies. Another feature of France's presence in Africa since independence is the Centre Culturel Français in Pointe-Noire from which Moki claims to borrow books by famous writers such as Victor Hugo, Albert Camus and André Gide. These two elements indicate that the role of France in inspiring *la sape* extends beyond colonialism to the present day.

Thomas nevertheless pursues the colonial-postcolonial binary by concluding that Mabanckou's protagonist "finds himself located somewhere between Africa and France, between the postcolony and the former colonial center" (971). The problem with this "between" theme resides in its reduction of concrete experiences to abstract phenomena. Massala-Massala is physically not between two continents but in prison in France awaiting repatriation to his country, wondering how he will explain his predicament to people at home. Historically, he is a victim of the French Republic's failure to bear the consequences of its colonial history and its contemporary presence in Africa. To appreciate the characters' predicament, one needs to specify the concrete dynamics of their situation, or as Lewis Gordon succinctly put it, "to deal with the flesh-and-blood embodiments of our institutions in their historic moments" (1997 3). Failing to address these material realities obscures the social, physical and historical actors in Massala-Massala's fate and reduces him to a victim of his own identity.

The analyses offered by Cazenave, Moudileno and Thomas reveal the problem of placing undue emphasis on Moki, Massala-Massala or on African leaders without calling into question the role of France in contemporary migration. Moki and returning migrants like him cannot be held entirely responsible for the attraction of migrants to France because they too are victims of France's colonial heritage. In the case of the *miroir aux alouettes*, the prominence of the non-human actors allows us to distinguish human responsibility in tragic consequences of lark migration. Human beings exercise choice, unlike the birds that cannot control the seasons, their attraction to mirrors, nor the human beings who gun them down. Human beings are therefore responsible for the deaths of the

birds, a factor which was proved by the ban on the *miroir aux alouettes* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If the utopian image of France functions like the lark mirror, one must determine who plays the role of the hunter in contemporary African migration, which is not as easy when the migrants are human. This dilemma can be resolved by finding parallels of four elements of the *miroir aux alouettes*: the inevitability of migration, the inexplicable attraction to certain images, the use of these images as a decoy, and the ambush awaiting the migrants.

### **Migration, History and Narrative**

As noted in chapter one, African oral traditions and modern literature embrace migration through the experiences of protagonists as they move from one place to another. This phenomenon is not unique to Africa. Even European folk tales such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Puss in Boots* recount the adventures of protagonists who travel to “seek their fortune.” The film genre popularly referred to as road trip films also capture the phenomenon of people coming of age or experiencing other forms of self-discovery through journeys.

The gender dimensions of migration are also important. The previous chapter demonstrated that the migration of young women appears to be inspired by love relationships while that of men is generally motivated by dreams of success. This distinction follows the trend of African oral traditions. In the Sahel region of Western Africa, for example, one finds the tradition referred to in the Mande region as *fadenya* or

in Songhay as *baba-izetarey* and that roughly translates into “father-child-ness.” It contrasts with *badenya* which translates to “mother-child-ness” and captures “the more domestic, cooperative and collective mode” (Hale, 1998 135).

While I do not suggest any rigid links between the peoples of the Sahel and those of the Congo, the attributes of father-child-ness versus mother-child-ness can be attributed to Africans’ experiences in Congo and elsewhere in the continent. *Fadenya* is generally related to the passage of the male child from adolescence into adulthood. Hale observes that in epics, genealogies and other art forms performed by the griot, migration and *fadenya* are intricately linked because the epic hero must “break with tradition, pursue his own path, and go through a series of transformations as he acquires power” (135). Young men generally aspire to perform individual feats that would guarantee them a place in the larger social narrative. In order to position themselves in history, the young men seek to surpass the achievements of the older men in the family, since “from the perspective of the male adolescent, the first competitor is his father” (Hale, 20). The ensuing rivalry risks spilling over to the rest of the community, especially when the inheritance of power and wealth are at stake or when families have numerous siblings among several wives. *Fadenya* reflects this tension by incorporating two forms of competition: one is the rivalry “between male children of the same father but different mothers,” and the other is the “longer-term rivalry between the son and the father’s reputation for a place in the family history” (115).

Hale does not examine male characters who embody *badenya*, presumably because the nature of the epic is to recount the experiences of characters who leave home. Nevertheless, *badenya* can be seen in Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* by the uncle who

remains at home in the village visited by the young narrator, and who emphasizes the importance of cooperation during the harvest. Moreover, Hale's observation that *badenya* and *fadenya* are "two family-oriented concerns" (115) reveal that the contrast between the two indicates less about gender and more about the social structures that mediate different roles and relationships. This perspective roughly corresponds with Amadiume's (1997) vision of matriarchy and patriarchy as metaphors for ethical social relations in African societies. Amadiume defines matriarchy as a system "generating love and compassion" that "acted as a constraint on the patriarchal structure, checking the development of totalitarian patriarchy and monolithism which are typical of the Indo-European legacy" (86). One can use this framework to argue that African men can and do play roles in society that reflect the values embodied in matriarchy. This appears to be the case in Mabanckou's novel, for Massala-Massala is closer to his parents than Moki who has a greater taste for risky adventure.

The role of values similar to *fadenya* in developing identity and guaranteeing social stability appears not only in the narratives, but also in their performance by griots. As Hale observes, griots act as "buffers in human relations" (115), diffusing the risk of narrow-minded rivalries by reminding listeners of the larger historical continuum in which they are situated. *Fadenya* is therefore a complex institution in which society maintains stability through the complex interaction between migration, rites of passage, narratives and narrative performance.

Like the heroes and the young listeners of epics, the *sapeurs* seek to prove themselves capable of fulfilling their functions in the community. As Gondola states, *la sape* symbolizes the entry of urban African youth into career and marriage. In

Mabanckou's novel, Moki's migration represents improved living conditions for his family, social advancement for his father and a means of employment for his brothers. Likewise, Massala-Massala's aspirations to reach France are motivated more by the potential economic assistance he can provide to his family than by the possibility of dressing like Moki. In other words, *la sape* is a contemporary rite of passage in Congolese societies made necessary by the market system introduced by European colonialism.

Another important parallel between *fadenya* and the *sapeurs'* migration is the search to make a name for oneself that will be inserted into the society's history. This similarity is implied in Hale's following observation:

Whereas an ancestor made his name in war, a descendant today may acquire a similar level of renown by traveling from the Sahel or Savanna regions to the coast to find a job and eventually returning to distribute some of the wealth he has accumulated, or by going off to Europe to earn an advanced degree and then returning to assume a position as a civil servant, doctor or lawyer who is able to help support the extended family. (20)

One can argue that the exploits of the *sapeurs* are close to those of the epic heroes because they overcome significant institutional obstacles to enter and live in France. An illustration of this comparison emerges from one of Gondola's informants who tells of having been twice expelled after attempting to gain entry into France through Luanda, Angola, and then through Rio de Janeiro. On his third and successful attempt, he begins his journey from Luanda, then passes through Lisbon and Madrid before arriving in France. Moki also provides a similar story. Without his father's knowledge, he first goes

to Pointe-Noire, then proceeds to Luanda where he stays for a while in order to earn some money for his ticket by selling fish and other produce at the market (85). His efforts are evidently rewarded by his contribution to the socio-economic advancement of his family. In such stories, the *sapeurs* appear as heroes who defy French institutions through their trickery, bravery and persistence, and enter into the annals of the local history.

The fascinating exploits of the *sapeurs* as well as the audiences to whom they recount their adventures points to a third parallel between *fadenya* and *la sape*, which is the important role of teaching. Genealogies, for example, provide the standards by which “those in the present [. . .] must measure themselves against the past recounted in the deeds of the ancestors” (Hale 20). Likewise, the *sapeurs*’ accounts provide important lessons for the aspiring migrants. Gondola observes that conversations between the aspiring migrants provides forums in which “[l]es jeunes [. . .] découvrent également les dernières mesures administratives destinées à leur barrer la route de ce paradis, aussi bien que les préfectures à éviter, ou au contraire, celles où ils peuvent *kobwata nzoto* (‘jéter son corps’ c’est-à-dire introduire sa demande d’asile) avec l’espoir d’obtenir un *nkanda* ou *doc* (carte de séjour)” (16).

In addition to teaching future migrants about how to overcome the obstacles of migration, the narratives provide entertainment. Gondola provides a fascinating urban legend of a migrant, termed as *mikiliste*, who accomplishes the amazing feat of obtaining asylum on the basis of having suffered torture under Mobutu’s dictatorship. Gondola remarks: “Rien n’y manque, rien n’y est falsifié, tout est authentique, les dates peuvent être vérifiés, tout est là, tout, sauf un détail, et c’est le détail le plus important: le *mikiliste* n’y participait pas” (30). Gondola also notes the legend closely matches the reality of

migration, because it is “une histoire, la plus plausible possible” (30). Despite the tragic dimensions, the humorous aspects of this legend are hard to ignore.

Just like the epics, therefore, the stories of migrants interweave lived experience with narratives to provide important lessons and entertainment to audiences. Moki captures the attention of his friends when he recounts his adventures in a manner that could be compared to the griot’s performance. He possesses an influence over his audience that reminds one of the griot’s power to inspire others to action. The impact of Moki’s stories leads Massala-Massala to observe: “C’était parole d’évangile [. . .] J’avais succombé au charme, à l’enchantement” (91, 92). The similarity in performance is not only in effect but in also in style. Moki’s performance contains certain figures of speech that are largely associated with orality, such as short phrases, exclamations as well as rhetorical questions which invite the audience to participate in the story. It is this oral quality that probably leads Massala-Massala to say: “Je pouvais reprendre ses récits à la virgule près” (91).

It is important to note that Moki’s verbal style generally mirrors the style and tone of most of the novel. The first part, for example, opens with the statement: “Au commencement il y avait ce nom,” which is repeated twice: “Au commencement il y avait ce nom-là” (35), “Au commencement il y avait le nom de Moki” (38). Another notable element of orality emerges as Massala-Massala ponders his relationship to Moki. The passage begins with the questions: “Et si je n’étais que son ombre? Et si je n’étais que son double?” The word “ombre” appears in the subsequent paragraphs: “J’ai vécu comme son ombre [. . .] Je n’étais qu’une ombre [. . .] J’étais l’ombre de Moki” (39). These stylistic forms serve at least three purposes in the novel. First, rhetorical questions



solicit the audience's response and rally the audience to Massala-Massala's side. Second, repetition increases the humor since it is a form of linguistic excess, and excess is one of satire's dominant qualities. In this case, the satire would seem directed at Moki in order to ridicule his ostentatious behavior and credulous stories. The third and more redeeming role of orality is the accentuation of the text's rhythm. This becomes particularly necessary because jail denies Massala-Massala access to the rhythms of daily life. In the opening scene of the novel, he has no sense of day and night; hence his lament in short sentences and repeated phrases: "J'ai le sentiment que tout ceci ne s'est déroulé qu'en une seule journée, en une seule nuit. Une longue journée. Une longue nuit" (11). It is only through words that Massala-Massala can find the tempo of life that prison denies him. These linguistic and stylistic properties make Moki and Mabanckou's narrator share with the griot the artistic talent of entertaining and informing audiences.

Another important aspect of migration narratives is the role of the performer. The genealogies, epics and praise songs are recited by griots and not by the families. Even when the griot includes himself in the performance, it is often to "persuade listeners of the verbal art that is being presented" (Hale 1998 122). In contemporary migration, however, it is up to the individual to narrate his own accomplishments. Part of the reason why the narratives of Massala-Massala and Moki seem credible is because colonial ideologies impose a dominant narrative about success in France while immigration laws deny opportunities to greater numbers of immigrants who would either contradict or corroborate narratives about migration.

The similarities between *fadenya* and *la sape* in terms of content, experience and performance demonstrate the paradox of immigration laws. Like the actions of epic

heroes, illegal immigration inspires narratives that make survivors appear more heroic, the stories more impressive and the language more entertaining. The narratives also provide instructions, warnings and increasingly complex rationales for migration. The impact of narratives is evident in the fact that even after reminiscing his journey to France, Massala-Massala decides to try his luck again, convinced that a second migration attempt would be more successful now that he knows that staying in France requires persistence and being unscrupulous. He rationalizes his decision by calling a new attempt at entering France “une affaire d’honneur” (222).

Another paradox of the immigration laws is that they create an economy that thrives on helping people contravene those laws. When Moki arrives in Luanda, he finds that commerce has developed around illegal migration that comprises other migrants who settle in the city rather than proceed on their journey to Europe. Other Africans make money from demanding bribes at the airport or from making forged travel documents (85). In France, the character Préfet earns a significant amount of money by providing false identity documents. The demand for his services is directly proportional to the numerous changes in French immigration laws that confuse even the administration officials. As Massala-Massala notes, “les préfectures, entraînées dans une valse législative ininterrompue, ne savaient plus à quelle procédure se vouer” (159).

This absurdity notwithstanding, the ridicule seemingly intended for French immigration laws has a boomerang effect, because it also provides the readers the opportunity to smile at Massala-Massala’s inability to learn from his errors and at Moki’s transparent and ludicrous behavior. The readers can also comfortably confirm the stereotype of African migrants as fatally inclined to flee from the continent’s

irremediable poverty. Through laughter, they can avoid recognizing the social and institutional agents of migration and blame migrants' suffering on their folly and that of their communities at home. In this sense, Cazenave's application of the *miroir aux alouettes* to Mabanckou's novel is largely accurate, since Africans – at least from the novel's perspective – are both the victims and perpetrators of their own suffering. But this picture of African migration does not match the reality, which is that the French Republic is the most powerful actor of migration to this day and that it simultaneously encourages migration and criminalizes migrants.

*Fadenya* demonstrates that the need to migrate in the quest to become an adult member of the community on whom the family's welfare depends is deeply rooted in the human experience. *La sape* responds to the same need, for as Gondola observes, it is encouraged by the difficult socio-economic conditions in African towns that maintain youth in a limbo between childhood and adulthood, or what he refers to as “un statut bâtard mi-jeune mi-adulte” (19). However, *la sape* resembles *fadenya* in all but one crucial element, which is the migrants' meaningful re-integration into society upon return from their adventures. The *sapeur* migrants take risky journeys in which they encounter humiliation and trauma, and then return to perpetuate the devaluation of African culture that was set in motion by colonialism. As Moki distributes gifts and serves food, his guests think he cares when in reality, he is simply going through the motions of “[l]e rituel de la chance et de la réussite” (60). His father shares in his cynicism when the guests leave: “Le père du Parisien pouvait enfin respirer, les gêneurs avaient déguerpi” (60). The negative impact of Moki's behavior is also reflected in the fact that by the time his holiday ends, Massala-Massala states that “[m]a raison d'être au pays se remettait en

cause. Je me sentais inutile, perdu” (92). Unlike the griot’s art that inspires confidence in the listeners, the *sapeurs’* stories instigate feelings of inadequacy.

An interpretation of the *miroir aux alouettes* that is closer to reality can therefore be framed as follows: migrants’ attraction to France is partly fueled by the human need to assume adult roles. France exploits this need by misleading young African men with promises it has no intention to fulfill; it also uses its cultural and economic power to suppress models of migration enshrined in African traditions that provide, as Hale notes of genealogies, the yardstick by which those in those in the present “must measure themselves against the past recounted in the deeds of ancestors” (20). As a result, young African migrants seeking their fortunes in Europe erroneously believe that France is their only alternative. Moki confirms as much when he states: “Il n’y a pas un autre pays qui ressemble à la France dans l’imaginaire [. . .] De sorte que ne pas y aller est un péché impardonnable. Y aller, c’est accepter désormais de ne plus vivre sans elle” (86).

Such an interpretation demonstrates that challenging the allure of France lies in using African traditions and histories to provide alternative models of adventure and self-affirmation. However, African youth are currently trapped between the mythology of the French El Dorado that makes promises that it cannot keep, and African cultures whose values are undermined by colonial ideology and global realities. Fanon described a similar dynamic in *Les Damnés de la terre*:

Normalement en effet, il y a homogénéité entre le niveau mental et matériel des membres d’une société et les plaisirs que cette société se donne [. . .] Mais dans un pays africain où le développement mental est inégal, où le heurt violent de deux mondes a ébranlé considérablement les vieilles traditions et disloqué

l'univers de la perception, l'affectivité du jeune Africain, sa sensibilité sont à la merci des différentes agressions contenues dans la culture occidentale. Sa famille révèle très souvent incapable d'opposer à ces violences la stabilité, l'homogénéité. (185-86)

The economic and political structures rooted in colonialism have given France an unfair cultural advantage over African traditions in influencing young people's decisions about the destinations and reasons for migration. Consequently, a major antidote to the fascination with France lies in affirming destinations and modes of migration inherent in African traditions. In the next section, I will argue that such traditions are embodied in the name Massala-Massala, but that their power is usurped by the process of renaming made necessary by French institutions.

### **An African by Any Other Name? Identity, History and Agency**

Like other details of daily existence, names are important in affirming individuality while situating the individual in the universe. Through names, societies position individuals in terms of who they are and the social roles they expect individuals to play. Naming situates individuals not only in the present, but on the larger historical continuum of the society. Thus, it becomes one of the many sites that guarantee the balance between individuals and society, between the past and the present, and between the human beings and their environment.

The importance of naming explains why the recitation or performance of genealogies is common to many African societies. Hale explains that in naming

ceremonies, the griots' performance of genealogies transforms individuals in the audience into "the living product of those who went before" (19). Knowledge of the names of those who preceded the listeners forms an essential part of their heritage and determines how they behave in the present.

In Mabanckou's novel, names are intricately linked to the trajectory of the characters as well as the characters' relationship to both Congolese and French societies. Upon reaching France, Massala-Massala progressively acquires new identities in order to "regularize" his status. He arrives in France as Massala-Massala and obtains identity documents as Marcel Bonaventure and as Eric-Joselyn George. The problem with these identities is not in their variety, for individuals in African societies usually acquire different names according to their different identities, relationships, or accomplishments. In the *Epic of Lat Dior*, for example, Lat Dior "is often referred to as the child of his mother, Ngoné Latir" (Johnson et al. 1997 212). But unlike the epics in which different names refer to the same person, Massala-Massala's names refer to different people, and more importantly, people who are unknown and are imposed by the institutional demands of France.

The name Massala-Massala differs from the names he subsequently acquires in France because it situates him in the history of family and of his society, as is evident in passage below that merits a lengthy quotation:

[Massala-Massala] veut dire "ce qui reste restera, ce qui demeure demeurera." Le nom de mon père. Le nom de mon grand-père, de mes arrière-grands-parents. Je pensais que le nom était éternel, immuable. Je pensais que le nom reflétait l'image d'un passé, d'une existence, d'une histoire de famille, de ses heurts, de ses

déchirements, de sa grandeur, de sa decadence ou de son déshonneur. Oui, je pensais que le nom était sacré. Qu'on ne le changeait pas comme on change de vêtements pour mettre ceux qui correspondent à une reception donnée. Qu'on ne prenait pas un autre nom comme ça, sans savoir d'où il vient et qui d'autre que vous le porte.

Mais qu'est-ce que le nom dans notre petit monde à nous, ici, loin du pays natal? Le nom, une étiquette sur la merchandise, un passeport qui ouvre les frontières, un laissez-passer permanent. Le nom ne valait rien.

Le nom n'a aucune histoire pour nous... (127)

The name Massala-Massala links the protagonist linguistically, biologically, historically, geographically and spiritually to his community. The irrelevance of Massala-Massala's communal identity to France's legal and economic institutions essentially denies the community transcendence of its historical and geographical borders. The issue of transcendence is important because without it, both the individual and community are imprisoned in the here and now, without a global perspective necessary to give coherence to their experience over time and space.

By undermining this holistic approach to history, French institutions weaken individual agency. As Massala-Massala acquires new documents, and with them, new identities, he gradually lives separate and disconnected lives. He laments, "Je ne suis plus une seule personne. Je suis plusieurs à la fois" (127). The name Marcel Bonaventure, belongs to a native of Guadeloupe born in Saint-Claude (162), while the name Eric-Joselyn George belongs to the owner of the stolen checks that Massala-Massala cashes before being arrested. Because he does not know these people, he has to rely on Préfet

who got him the documents, to inform him where he is supposed to have come from and what he is supposed to do. The loss of agency is particularly evident in the instructions that Préfet issues to Massala-Massala before they execute the plan to cash stolen checks: “Tu es Eric-Joselyn George. Tu présentes *ta* carte d’indentité avec un chèque au guichet.” (173-74, emphasis in original). By the time Massala-Massala has served his prison sentence, he has lost all agency and feels that he has simply been swept by events: “Ce ne sont pas les pieds qui m’ont porté, mais la vague déferlante des événements [. . .]” (16).

The coherence intrinsic to Massala-Massala’s name is not only chronological but also moral. The name embodies both the triumphs and trials in his people’s history, rather than restricting history to triumphs or trials exclusively. This perspective of history matches the oral traditions of African communities which present both the achievements and the mistakes of the heroes. By contrast, however, the ideology of the French El Dorado is based on one-sided histories that are interchangeable depending on one’s location. When in Africa, France represents the land of milk and honey, but when in Europe, France represents living in poor conditions and in constant fear of the law. Moki embodies this historical dualism because he maintains a gap between his narratives at home and his lived experience in France. As Massala-Massala notes, “Moki avait deux visages. Il portait plusieurs masques. Un masque pour le pays. Un autre pour Paris” (134).

Moki’s split personality is a symptom of the two conflicting histories embodied in his original name. His first name is Charles, which his father gave him in honor of Charles de Gaulle. Moki’s father calls de Gaulle “Digol, un grand homme comme il n’en existe plus de nos jours” (53). The significance of de Gaulle has an added historical



dimension in Congo because it was in Brazzaville that de Gaulle attended a conference in 1943 reaffirming the commitment to the French empire after the World War II. Moki's father contradicts this history when he proudly states: "A l'issue de cette conférence fut projetée une organisation nouvelle des colonies françaises d'Afrique noire" (48).

According to John Chipman, the view of the Brazzaville conference as beneficial to Africa has gained some legitimacy from what he calls "the mythology of Gaullism" (89). Contrary to this mythology, the Brazzaville conference was not the launch pad for decolonization; it was instead "the time to adapt language to a changing situation," in which "[t]he path from essential 'unity' through to loose 'union', 'community' and finally 'co-operation' could be followed by minimal loss of [France's] power and influence" (93). By naming his son after de Gaulle, Moki's father passes on a historical legacy in which Africans lack agency. The name Moki, which means "the world" in Lingala, therefore becomes ironic, because the legacy of de Gaulle denies Moki an autonomous place in the world.

The name Charles Moki symbolizes the suppression of history that comes with adopting certain names. In his study of African American self-identities, Obiagele Lake (2003) observes that the renaming of African slaves isolated them from their history and was intended to break their collective spirit, since "[a] nomenclature that is not historically contextualized lays the groundwork in which individual interests thrive and collective consciousness has no meaning" (2). By forcing Africans to abandon their original names and adopt those of their slave masters, Europeans essentially reduced Africans to their functions in the capitalist economy.

Lake's restriction of renaming to slavery ignores the role of missionary baptism in attempting to suppress African names. Lake also suggests that the self-hatred epitomized by the use of chemicals to alter skin color or hair texture is unique to people of African descent in the Americas, yet there are Africans in the continent who use the same products. The failure to identify the common foundation of the oppression of African peoples worldwide distorts the continuity in the history of Africans on the continent from Africans in the diaspora, a continuity that Mabanckou establishes in *Bleu Bleu Rouge*. The credibility of Massala-Massala's French-sounding names is guaranteed by the communities in the Antilles that arrived from Africa as slaves and who now possess French names as well French citizenship as members of the "départements d'Outre Mer." Even before arriving in France, Massala-Massala anticipates the dynamics of global racism that reduce Africans to their labor, and so he vows to himself before he leaves for France: "J'étais prêt à tout. J'étais résolu à m'épuiser. A travailler en France vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre. Comme un nègre..." (108).

Massala-Massala provides links to the history of both Africa and the diaspora, legitimating Fanon's claim in *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952) that the history of Africans all over the world must be weaved into a continuous historical fabric. This does not mean that Africans share a homogeneous history and experience, but that they cannot tackle slavery and colonialism unless they understand that they are faced by the single enemy of racism. Having a common enemy does not in any way imply homogeneity, since human experience is infinitely broader than particular enemies.

Lake also neglects to point out that there is no human force, even that of slavery, powerful enough to undo history. An individual forced to abandon one identity for

another does not completely lose the original one – he or she simply internalizes the conflict between the two identities. How different individuals experience or cope with this conflict varies according to personal and social histories as well as environmental realities, but all individuals engage in the common aspiration to insert themselves in a historical narrative that they feel affirms them. Some notable figures who have used naming to coincide with a history they value are the eminent poet Amiri Baraka who dropped the name Leroi Jones, and the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o dropped the name James. In Mabanckou’s novel, the character Préfet copes with this conflict by adopting Guadeloupe and Martinique as his new home. He fluently speaks the Creole languages of both islands and claims that he particularly likes Guadeloupe because of its resemblance to Pointe-Noire. His ties to the Antilles are commercial as well, because he acquires residency permits for Africans by using documents of French citizens from the islands.

Préfet’s new history nevertheless remains ambiguous because it has been made necessary by French immigration laws. He abandons his family and original name in order to adopt permanently fluid identities and even arrest. Préfet has never returned to Congo since arriving in France, and while in France he has never lived too long in one place. It is also reported that his family is suffering in Congo from neglect. With the loss of his name comes loss of family ties, of historical reality and of his identity as an African man, which contrasts with *fadenya* that asserts the place of the man is in the framework of African traditions. The nickname “Préfet” also symbolizes the institutionalized patriarchy identified by Amadiume as intricately linked with Western political systems.

Rather than provide stability, Préfet's new identity requires that he leads a nomadic life. He is reputed to have had over twenty different identity documents. Massala-Massala calls him a chameleon because "[i]l n'était jamais le même" (155). This instability paradoxically becomes a form of stability because it earns him a reputation among the African community in Paris and even the French police. As Massala-Massala says, "Il se disait le Parisien le plus recherché de la police française" (156). This factor is later confirmed when he slips through the police net, and the police subsequently bombard Massala-Massala with questions on his whereabouts.

Préfet embodies the reality that an African's survival in France demands the ability to enact the abdication of African identities and an assumption of the Eurocentric images of Africans. The key word here is enactment, because while one may deny his or her past, it is humanly impossible to abandon it. Préfet's historical consciousness is French-centered. He has adopted Pompidou as his historical landmark, since as he proudly recalls, he arrived in France when Pompidou came to power (155). He understands that France has already scripted a role for blacks and decides to profit economically from it, which is evidenced by his advice to Massala-Massala as they go to the bank: "Si le guichetier est pointilleux et te demande pourquoi tous ces cinq coupons, tu l'envoies balader en lui signifiant que nous, les nègres, on a le droit d'avoir des familles nombreuses à cause des pertes qu'on a subies pendant l'esclavage et toutes les autres conneries de l'Histoire" (174). With much less cynicism, Fanon makes similar observations about the role-play that racism imposes on blacks arriving in France:

Les nègres, du jour au lendemain, ont eu deux systèmes de référence par rapport auxquels il leur a fallu se situer. Leur métaphysique, ou moins prétentieusement

leurs coutumes et les instances auxquelles elles renvoyaient, étaient abolies parce qu'elles se trouvaient en contradiction avec une civilisation qu'ils ignoraient et qui leur en imposait. (*Peau noire* 89)

The difference between Fanon and Préfet is in their consciousness of the impact that this role-play has on others besides themselves. Préfet seeks to exploit the narrative of race to his advantage, which coincides with the fact that he is the dominant figure who guides Massala-Massala down the road of abandoning his home identity. Préfet practically runs Massala-Massala's life, which leads the latter to lament at one point: "Pour Préfet, mon opinion était secondaire. Si je disais non, que ferais-je d'autre?" (163).

Fanon, unlike Préfet, sees that race has reduced everyone to pre-determined roles devoid of any human agency. Among blacks, race has dulled social consciousness of their common history of African peoples around the world. Fanon gives the example of the child in the Antilles who, when learning about "savages," "pense toujours aux Sénégalais" (120). Africans who arrive in France want to be seen as coming from the Antilles. As Fanon's clinical studies and analyses show, the pathology caused by racism does not respect complexion, gender, privilege, or level of education. Whites, who are supposed to enjoy the power and privileges that race assigns them, are often expected to deny their emotional and biological needs that rationality deems inferior. Fanon recognizes that the ultimate victim of the obsession with the fragmenting narratives of race is humanity itself, but Préfet has decided to preoccupy himself with using racial narratives for monetary gain. He thus embodies the reality that migration to France, unlike *fadenya*, inserts individuals into histories that negate them and that are characterized by chronic discontinuities.

A history that is socially edifying is one that facilitates communion between individuals and their environment. The problem of race is that Africans find themselves forced to confirm a history in which their participation is rigidly controlled through force but are simultaneously expected to feign acting out of free will. However, their predicament is a symptom of France's own alienation that results from the desire to exclude the unpleasant realities of its imperial history from its collective conscience. It therefore appoints blacks as the scapegoat to channel away the tension between the idyllic Republic and its harsh historical legacy in Africa and the Americas.

The evidence in this section suggests that the ability to cope with the challenges of reality is inextricably linked by knowledge of and confidence in one's history. Names are crucial in affirming an individual's place in this framework, and so forced renaming necessarily creates a conflict in identity and the loss of agency. Massala-Massala, Moki and Préfet all embody different dimensions of the process by which French institutions suppress the historical and social complexity that African names represent. Consequently, Mabanckou's novel demonstrates that the oppression in immigration laws partly lies in its rendering of African identities irrelevant beyond the borders of the continent.

This situation notwithstanding, racism and colonialism are still not powerful enough to eradicate African identities. African identities and traditions have survived centuries of oppression because they reflect realities of the world, unlike racism that unsuccessfully tries to reorder the world. But if this is the case, the question arises as to why the traditions are seemingly powerless in enabling Massala-Massala and the rest of the community to see through Moki's hypocrisy and resist the allure of France. As Moudileno asks, "le pays est-il si ignorant que cela des réalités de l'expérience?" (188).

In the next section, I shall analyze the father-son relationships in order to demonstrate that the portrayal of African traditions in Mabanckou's narrative is largely inconsistent and negative, which is the inevitable result of using of satire.

### **Like Father, Unlike Son? Satire in *Bleu Blanc Rouge***

Perhaps the most promising opportunity to challenge the ideology of France as the El Dorado lies in Massala-Massala's historical consciousness and his relatively positive relationship with his father. Massala-Massala had been taught by his father to be content with the little they had and so he anticipates that his father would object to his traveling to France. He says, "Mon père n'était pas homme à se laisser caresser dans le sens du poil [. . .] Discret et bon père de famille, il nous éduquait, ma sœur et moi, dans l'esprit de nous contenter du peu qu'on avait au lieu d'aller voir ce qu'il y avait dans l'assiette de nos voisins" (93). To his surprise, his father endorses the trip by saying: "J'ai toujours pensé qu'un jour tu partirais. Loin. Loin d'ici. Loin de cette misère" (94).

His father's use of the word "misère" is surprising even to the reader, not only because of the principles cited above, but also because he equates his poverty to the fact that he had not been able to build a permanent residence or install a water pump: "Il se justifia de n'avoir jamais pu construire une maison en dur ni installer une pompe à eau" (94). Given that these were some of the material acquisitions of Moki's family, it seems that Massala-Massala's father was looking at his neighbor's plates while teaching his son not to do the same.

Another reason why Massala-Massala's father seems to step out of character is because he has generally valued family relationships over income. Before Massala-Massala and his sister were born, his mother had difficulty conceiving and one of her children was stillborn. Massala-Massala's father continued to support her by spending a significant amount of money on her medical expenses. He would not abandon his wife because "[s]a conscience ne lui aurait pas pardonné" (93). Massala-Massala's father also obliges his son to assume parental responsibilities for a child that Massala-Massala doubts is his. According to Massala-Massala, the child's mother Adeline had a reputation for having multiple sexual partners. He suspects that Adeline's claims were influenced by his impending departure for France, but his father does not allow him to abandon the child on this basis.

In addition to his modesty and responsibility, Massala-Massala's father places emphasis on truth. As his son leaves for France, he does not voice expectations of financial help. His parting words to his son are: "Sois prudent, regarde autour de toi et n'agis que lorsque ta conscience à toi, non pas celle d'un autre, te guide" (113). His father's insistence on following his conscience seems to contradict Massala-Massala's eventual decision not to write home about what he was going through in France. Just before his repatriation, Massala-Massala almost breaks his silence by vowing to himself that he would tell his father the truth and talk "d'homme à homme" (217). He also determines that he would work to take care of his family and repay the loan that his uncle had given his father for his airfare. However, he changes his mind and decides he would return to France. This lack of courage seems to contradict the portrait of his father as a courageous and principled man.



It is also difficult to believe Massala-Massala's contention that he could not return home with no resources because his family expected financial help from him. The book opens with his declaration from prison: "je le devine d'ici, tous ces yeux écarquillés, toutes ces main déployées qui m'attendent [. . .] Je suis leur seul recours" (12). However, there is no evidence of such expectations, since before leaving for France, Massala-Massala had lived under his parents' roof and had never been asked for any payment in return (37). His father's values, combined with the profound historical consciousness Massala-Massala professes, weaken his claim that his migration to France was propelled by his low self-esteem. He says: "Persuadé de n'être qu'un bon à rien, de n'avoir pas le sens d'initiatives, je me considérais comme mou, flegmatique et sans caractère qui pût résister aux vicissitudes d'une existence en dehors de mon pays" (37).

There are a number of scenarios that could explain these inconsistencies, the most obvious being that prison has affected Massala-Massala's recollection of events. Second, he could have been convinced by Moki that nobody would believe the truth about France and that he would instead become "la risée du quartier" (132). Third, Massala-Massala could simply be expressing love and concern towards his family, or asserting his identity as an adult on whom the family can depend. Moreover, one cannot ignore the role that the civilization narrative has played in making Africans abroad believe that that people in the continent are desperate for financial, moral and intellectual delicacies from Europe. Any or none of these elements could explain the fact that Massala-Massala's decisions do not conform to the image of his father, and so the reader is left unsure about Massala-Massala's father's personality or his relationship with his son. The problem does not emerge in the inconsistency itself but in the fact that Mabanckou's novel provides no

redeeming event to balance the inconsistency. This imbalance eventually leads the reader to replace sympathy for Massala-Massala with skepticism.

Another narrative element that distances the reader from Massala-Massala is the contradiction in the two father-son relationships depicted in the novel. The relationship between Massala-Massala and his father, which is arguably more affirming, is ironically less coherent than the relationship between Moki and his father. Moki and his father share their adoration for France and cynicism towards the local culture. Like his son, Moki's father makes ostentatious displays of wealth accrued from Moki's migration to France. While running errands using one of the two cars Moki bought, Moki's father shouts instructions at the driver when to honk, when to flash the signals, and even when to overtake other road users. He commands the driver not to yield to others on the basis that their cars were older than his.

Moki compensates for his lackluster father by surpassing him. The construction of the family villa had been his father's initiative which was abandoned due to the high cost of cajoling lazy workers and the theft of building materials. Moki returns on holiday and completes the villa within two and a half months. He acquires materials such as sand from the municipal mines and appeals to the egos and appetites of the lazy workers. He drives each of the workers to their doorsteps after work, and provides them with French wine. He also addresses them "mon père," which in African communities is a mark of reverence. Massala-Massala accurately observes that Moki "avait su toucher la sensibilité et l'orgueil de l'homme" (43). Moki's character closely resembles that of his father, only this time he has the added elements of charm and financial resources.

In many African cultures, the youth and elders are interdependent. The youth use their energy to support their fathers while the elders pass on traditions, history and wisdom. In this case, however, Moki's father presents a historically flawed name and legacy, but worse still, his rising fortunes are almost single-handedly dependent on his son's accomplishments. The apparent reversal of roles in Moki and his father's relationship is skewed in Moki's favor, which is unnatural especially in an African context where age is venerated. The same reversal of continuity is perpetuated in Moki's father's relationship with the elders. This time, Moki's father is the younger man imposing himself on the older men who had been patiently waiting to enter the council. His leverage was his supposed knowledge of contemporary affairs in France due to his son's residency there. The reliance on French culture artificially accelerates his ascension and overrides an age-old tradition:

Au pays, la candidature à la présidence du conseil est une affaire qu'on prend au sérieux. Des règlements de comptes entre candidats ont laissé des séquelles dans la mémoire des habitants. Selon les croyances ancestrales, les personnes âgées s'affrontent souvent la nuit par rêves interposés, chacun pénétrant par effraction dans le rêve d'un autre. La bataille est sans merci dans ce monde parallèle où il n'y a ni femmes ni enfants dans les parages. (46)

Moki's father does not penetrate others dreams according to tradition. He instead inspires fear so that the disgruntled elders cannot publicly raise their objections to his headship of the council.

But when all is said and done, the ease with which Moki's father acquires the council post still raises some doubts. If the struggles among the elders gained legendary

proportions, it seems incredible that not one single elder would continue the tradition of struggling over the post, especially in the face of flagrant injustice.

The similarity between Moki and his father contrasts with the inconsistency in the relationship between Massala-Massala and his father. The relationship between Moki and his father deals another blow when it becomes the model that inspires Massala-Massala to go to France. Massala-Massala hopes that migration will enable his father to attain the same social promotion as Moki's, and that he too can establish a taxi business in which his mother and sister would work. Behind these good intentions, one can see that Massala-Massala hopes to fashion his family in the image of Moki's that is essentially patriarchal and dominating. Moki's mother is described as a "silhouette à peine perceptible devant la personnalité marquée du vieil homme" (54) and Massala-Massala's vision for his mother and sister tends towards the same direction:

Ma mère arrêterait de s'humilier derrière un étal du Grand Marché, à vendre des arachides au détail. Elle s'occuperait uniquement d'encaisser les recettes quotidiennes de mes taxis. Elle donnerait les clés des voitures chaque matin au chauffeur. Il me faudra aussi un magasin d'alimentation générale [. . .] Ma soeur en serait la caissière. Je savais qu'ils associeraient Adeline. (106-107)

The assumption that working in the market is not prestigious contradicts the importance of the marketplace in many African societies. As Amadiume notes, the marketplace embodies not just economic activities but also social activities, especially for women. The history of African women's resistance to oppression is sometimes situated at the market when women rejected attempts to control the economic activities that threatened the welfare of households. It is therefore not clear to what extent Massala-Massala's

concerns about his mother's job are influenced by concern for his mother's welfare or his desire to emulate Moki whose stature is characterized by theatrics. This is especially so because the novel does not present any women characters who are proactive, and so the reader is not able to gauge if Massala-Massala seeks to model the women in his own image of women or whether his vision captures the women's aspirations.

Massala-Massala's attempt to mimic Moki reminds one of Fanon's concern in *Les Damnés de la terre* about the colonized envying the colonizer without questioning whether the colonizer was worth envying or not. However, since it is human nature to believe that the forbidden fruit tastes sweetest, it is understandable that Massala-Massala would want to confirm Moki's stories about France for himself.

The inconsistencies and ambiguities outlined in this section damage the plausibility of the narrative. This problem does not emerge from particular episodes but from the combination of them all. The novel reads like a series of episodes whose links are largely tenuous, which makes it share affinities with Highet's description of sequence in satire:

If they [satirical stories] are long, they are usually episodic. Although the satirist pretends to be telling a continuous story and gives his fiction a single unifying title, he is less interested in developing a plot [. . .] Therefore gaps and interruptions, even inconsistencies, in the story scarcely concern him. His characters flit from one amusing humiliation to another with scarcely any intervals of time and reflection. Seldom do they develop by degrees, as people in real novels do. They may display more of their character as the story drops them into new situations, but they do not grow. (206)

The above comments are true for *Bleu Blanc Rouge* in which people act out of character and in disregard for history and experience. Massala-Massala's father gives his blessings for his son's trip against expectation, while Massala-Massala leaves France with the determination to return. The novel does not present a coherent link between the values, experiences and subsequent actions of the characters.

Highet's comment that satire does not function like "real novels" deserves further comment. He develops this idea in the following remarks about the narrative structure of satirical novels:

Often we open a new novel and find that the first five or six chapters are devoted to introducing the characters, setting the situation, stating the main conflicts and establishing the emotional atmosphere. This is done consistently and realistically [. . .] And then suddenly, in the sixth or seventh chapter, the whole thing changes. People who have hitherto been normal are transformed into clowns, drunkards, nymphomaniacs, sadists, and characters from obsolete motion-pictures [. . .] In the ensuing chapters the characters return to their normal selves and resume their established relationships and what had been a realistic novel continues, after an inexplicable interruption, its expected course. (156-57)

The structure of Mabanckou's novel seems to confirm these observations. The bulk of the narrative in which the characters are satirized is sandwiched between two short sections entitled "Ouverture" and "Fermeture. The "Ouverture" situates Massala-Massala in custody after serving his prison sentence, having decided to recollect the events leading up to his current situation. The "Fermeture" traces his transport from custody to the airport and ends with him on the plane back to Africa a few hours after departure from

Paris. The somber tone of the opening and closing sections contrasts with the cynical and satirical tone that dominates most of the book. The 160 out of 222 pages dedicated to Massala-Massala's life before his arrest could arguably be seen as one long interruption to his apparent destiny of living on the margins of French society.

If Highet is correct in asserting that "the satirist always tries to produce the unexpected, to keep his hearers and readers guessing and gasping" (18), it would appear that the inconsistencies in *Bleu Blanc Rouge* are designed to jolt the readers into appreciating the conditions that produce Massala-Massala's suffering. Such an effect is best achieved with readers who are familiar with the realities of Africa or with the ideology behind the negative images of the continent. However, since the novel is published in French and in France, the readers are unlikely to know the realities at which the humor and empathy are directed. Moreover, since all satire does is provoke emotion, the best it can accomplish is catharsis in the readers without inspiring them to reflect on their social realities.

The question justifiably arises as to what may have motivated the author's choice to use satire to depict migration. Highet gives a number of possible reasons why writers use satire, but the one that may best apply to *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is the desire "to stigmatize crime or ridicule folly, and thus to aid in diminishing or removing it" (241). The novel seems to focus its attack on *la sape* in order to caution African youth. Unfortunately, *la sape* does not make an ideal object for satire because the young age of its adherents. Like any young person, the men involved are impressionable and have a penchant for ostentatious lifestyles. They tell larger-than-life narratives and lack the foresight usually gained by experience to refine their judgment. The French Republic

profits from the vulnerability of African youth through its political and economic policies that suppress African cultures and that subsequently lure the youth with consumer goods. To stigmatize the *sapeurs* is, therefore, to blame victims for their youth while ignoring the contextual issues.

Second, satirizing Africans in the French language in a book published in France has a boomerang effect. Rather than emerge as a criticism of French immigration policies, it allows readers to confirm stereotypes about Africans, which is what happened in the celebrated reception of Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* in 1968 (Hale 1990). Cazenave observes that the same implications arise for Jean-Roger Essomba's *Le paradis du Nord*, a novel that roughly mirrors Mabanckou's in its theme and structure but not in the satirical tone: "[C]ertains lecteurs peuvent inférer à partir du roman qu'il y a une majorité d'Africains entrés illégalement en France, que leur vie quotidienne signifie une succession de petites tricheries et d'actes frauduleux de toutes sortes" (220). Given that *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is Mabanckou's first novel, one can assume that like his young protagonists, he did not anticipate the meaning of his book in relation to the French reading public. The tragedy is that the novel did get approval from the French government and was conferred the 1999 Grand Prix littéraire d'Afrique noire. Considering the novel's largely pessimistic portrait of Africans, it is unlikely that the award was coincidental. Moreover, awards have typically been used to assert France's cultural dominance in Africa, as is evident in the reservations expressed by Kom:

L'on sait cependant que chacun des prix implique un jury de sélection et possède sans doute une raison d'être idéologique. Ainsi va-t-il du Grand Prix littéraire d'Afrique noire fondé par l'Association des écrivains de la langue française



(ADELF) pour promouvoir et récompenser annuellement la meilleure œuvre produite en Afrique noire francophone. L'ADELF est avant tout un organisme chargé de la promotion de la francophonie. (55)

The award to a book that holds Africans responsible for their hardships hints at the expectation of the French political class anxious to justify its imperial policy without being openly seen to do so, or of the reading public expecting to confirm its biases towards Africa without being accused of racism. It is, therefore, imperative that critics question the implication of book awards for African writers.

There are two distinct types of satirists, Hightet notes. “The optimist writes in order to heal, the pessimist in order to punish. One is a physician the other an executioner” (237). It appears that Mabanckou’s narrator has played both functions and placed Africans on the executioner’s block. Consequently, it is the educated African who speaks the French language, albeit in the anonymous position of the narrator, who emerges as the tragic hero in the drama of migration. The narrator is tragic because the combination of the victim’s voice with satire produces an emotional effect that contradicts the moral lessons that Massala-Massala’s position should ordinarily provide.

## **Conclusion**

In her article that attracted attention entitled “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak (1988) argued that a dialogue between the subaltern and the privileged classes was impossible because the privileged – read Western societies – are unwilling to address their class interests. Spivak later clarified that she was not saying that the subaltern was

incapable of talking, but that they could not engage in a mutual conversation with privileged classes in the West, and that Third World intellectuals in the Western world could not improve this situation because they were regarded as “native informants.” Given the problems raised by Massala-Massala’s position as the narrating protagonist, I tend to agree with Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak. In Mabanckou’s novel, the subaltern’s voice becomes problematic because it invites ridicule from those who should be held responsible for the suffering of people in his position. Yet in the midst of an unjust situation that requires change, the opportunity for the audience to laugh at characters or to empathize with the victim interferes with the tragic performance. After the audience has experienced these emotions the situation returns to what it was before. The return to “normal” contradicts the fundamental goal of tragedy, which is to spur society to restore the social balance upset by injustice. Consequently, Mabanckou’s novel proves that Spivak’s question on the subaltern is, in reality, tautological, for the nature of being a subaltern is having one’s voice and opinion suppressed in the determination of social destiny.

To give the subaltern a voice without challenging the conditions that make him or her a subaltern, as Mabanckou has done, ends up reinforcing the subaltern’s silence. Massala-Massala is caught in a vicious cycle of trying to prove his innocence, which is unnecessary because his suffering already justifies him. He is forced to give a larger voice to Moki in order to prove that the latter is responsible for his suffering, but in so doing sinks further into passivity. The narrator compounds this situation by satirizing Moki, which leaves the audience wondering at Massala-Massala’s gullibility rather than focusing on the situation that causes his suffering in the first place. Nevertheless, *Bleu*

*Blanc Rouge* clearly demonstrates the manner in which immigration laws exert control by subverting African histories and identities, thereby fragmenting the migrants' feeling of self-worth that is necessary for them to resist the allure of the mythical French El Dorado.

## Chapter 4

### Tragic Humor in Bessora's *53 cm*

The previous chapter demonstrated that the use of satire in Mabanckou's novel is to a large extent necessary due to the suffering of the protagonist. The narrator is partly compelled to ridicule those whom Massala-Massala identifies as responsible for his predicament in order to portray him as a helpless victim of circumstances. The resulting satire provides the reader with an outlet to evade examining France's institutions and laws that influence migration experiences. Bessora's *53 cm* initially seems to avoid this pitfall because its satire can be attributed to the incongruity between France's republican ideals and its implementation of immigration laws. Moreover, it establishes the continuity of racism by presenting immigration laws as rooted in the same epistemological foundation as anthropology and rationality. It links the experience of Zara, the protagonist, to that of Saartje Baartman who was subjected to indignity in France as an object of anthropological study. Baartman arrived in France from England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century where she had been taken as an object of display for her purportedly large buttocks. When she died in France at the age of 24, French anthropologist Georges Cuvier made a mould of her corpse, dissected her remains, and preserved them at the Muséum de l'Homme. He then arrived at the conclusion that the standard size for African women's hips was 791mm (Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Bessora uses these events to establish anthropology, racism and immigration laws as founded on the erroneous belief

that cultural complexities can be empirically determined through people's physical attributes.

Despite this profound analogy, Zara arrives at the absurd conclusion that she was unable to procure a *carte de séjour* because she does not possess Cuvier's prescribed measurements of black women's hips. After exhausting the bureaucratic channels to regularize her status, she alludes to Baartman and observes: "Donc la fesse fait la femme noire [. . .] Plus les fesses sont grosses, plus la femme est noire, moins elle est humaine, car elle est trop sexy" (157).

There are at least three problems with this statement. First, it juxtaposes Zara's and Baartman's experiences by dissimilarity rather than by similarity while deceptively suggesting that Zara identifies with Baartman. By establishing that her own hips measure 53 cm, she asserts that she does not qualify as a steatopygia like Baartman does, implying that she is not as sexual and therefore "more" human. When one considers that Zara is the daughter of a Gabonese father and Swiss mother, the racial dynamics render the statement even more ambiguous because they imply that she is "more" human than Baartman because one of her parents is European.

The second problem with the statement about black women's sexuality is that it contradicts the fundamental reality that Zara's failure to acquire a *carte de séjour* does not result from the fact that she is not black enough, but from the fact that she is not white. This is proved by the fact that Zara is dismissed at the immigration office that caters to citizens of the European Union when she tries to apply for documents as a Swiss citizen. She is asked by an official: "D'ailleurs, comment se fait-il que vous ayez cette nationalité? [. . .] Nous, c'est l'hémisphère Nord: on ne fait pas dans l'Organisation de

l'unité africaine, ni dans le Fond monétaire international. Allez, du balai" (138). These words articulate less what the official may have said and more Zara's awareness that within the French bureaucracy, race has more significance than one's nationality. However, the humor apparently intended obscures the reality that racism is structured so that, as Lewis Gordon put it, "a biracial child stands below whiteness and, by virtue of biraciality, in affirmation of black inferiority" (1997 66).

The third problem, which I find one of the most unfortunate in the novels analyzed in this study, is the desecration of Baartman's memory and dignity through humor. As already highlighted in the previous chapter, humor in the face of unspeakable atrocities is inappropriate because it devalues the victims even further. A statement that provokes amusement in the face of Baartman's humiliation does not criticize the perpetrators of the unfortunate action as much as it indicates that Bessora takes Baartman's suffering lightly. To make matters worse, her use of Baartman as a symbol is redundant, since Zara's own plight as a mother trying to acquire documents for her daughter to attend school already serves as a strong enough indictment of the epistemological issues with French immigration laws.

If, in good faith, we assume that Zara's or Bessora's intention was to ridicule immigration laws but not to minimize the suffering of Baartman, the question arises: how does a strong and credible premise for criticizing immigration laws arrive at an absurd and unfortunate conclusion? In this chapter, I will apply the concepts of argument and fallacy as used in logic in order to illustrate the interaction between the philosophical and social dilemmas captured in *53cm*. Douglas Walton observes that arguments are attempts to resolve issues that involve at least two parties who "have different points of view so

that the issue is open to contention, and there is some need, or would be some usefulness to attempt to settle it by supporting the point of view on either side as a claim made by one against the other” (28). Argument proceeds by each side presenting “a sequence of reasoning, a network of propositions in which some propositions, functioning as conclusions, are inferred from others, functioning as premises” (28). A fallacy occurs when one side interrupts the sequence of reasoning through gestures such as the introduction of irrelevant material or the appeal to emotion, thereby distracting attention away from the argument. Walton cautions that even though fallacy is logically unsound, it does not necessarily undermine argument, since a successful argument does not solely depend on logical coherence but also on settling the issue that makes it necessary. Under this rubric, even “good quarrels” qualify as argument because they can “bring about a catharsis whereby [. . .] hidden conflicts are brought out into the open and acknowledged by both parties” (46).

I will argue that *53 cm* can be read as an attempt to argue that rationality, race and anthropology are directly implicated in the protagonist’s frustrating adventures in France, but that the author compromises the argument by relying too heavily on fallacies that interrupt the sequence of reasoning. The fallacies come in the form of extraneous data, experiences and characters that lead to the abrupt shifts in reasoning, dialogue and events which are characteristic of satire. The fallacies seem aimed at evading responsibility for the conclusion that the suffering of Baartman and modern day immigrants is not accidental but intrinsic to the rationalist epistemology. Bessora’s novel thus manifests bad faith because it tries to prevent the reader from making logical deductions based on the evidence that it presents.

In the next section, I will demonstrate that the novel's argument about the common epistemological foundation of rationality, racism, anthropology and immigration laws employs *reductio ad absurdum*, a form of logical argumentation that refutes the opposing party's argument by deriving from it an absurd or ridiculous outcome. However, the inherent humor in this approach is deceptive in *53 cm* because the ultimate object of ridicule ends up being the victims of anthropology on whose behalf Bessora pleads, rather than the specific agents of their suffering. Unfortunately, some critics have not detected this ambiguity, and so they attribute too much significance to the humor, which in turn leads them to make statements that contradict evidence in the novel and in reality.

In the second section, I posit that Bessora's satire can be justified by Zara's situation as a mother at her wits' end, and so she pokes fun at the French bureaucracy in order to relieve the tension and express her own frustration. Her experience successfully unveils the absurdity of the French bureaucratic structure that persistently affirms everyone's rights regardless of race or ethnicity but violates these principles in practice. The personal ramifications of this contradiction could arguably explain her sense of humor. She is, as the American blues line goes, "laughing to keep from crying." However, the humor seems extreme in comparison to the situations that the characters confront, thus undermining the plausibility of the narrative.

In the third section, I will demonstrate that the novel's satire strains the reader's goodwill. Although the novel unveils the ethical and historical limits of anthropology, it refrains from asserting that the anthropologists it criticizes imposed logically untenable premises on reality, which inevitably led to the humiliation of Baartman. Moreover, the



novel makes two black characters the symbols of the atrocities committed in the name of academic study, thus sustaining the racist undertones of anthropology. In the meantime, the narrator does not point directly at the institutions, structures and historical figures that were the main agents of that injustice.

The subordination of the dignity of these characters to establishing the common foundation of racism and immigration laws tragically repeats the fallacy of race and anthropology, which is that the pursuit of ideas takes precedence over real lives. While anthropology physically used blacks' bodies ostensibly to promote research, Bessora symbolically uses them to prick the readers' conscience. Both gestures reduce black suffering from a tragic symptom of a profound human malady to a tool to edify the Western world. They also leave the reader with the unsettling feeling that the author is uncomfortable with her own African identity.

### ***Absurdity ad infinitum: Anthropology and Immigration***

The descent to absurdity in Bessora's novel begins with the title *53 cm* that essentially reduces all the questions emerging in the novel to body dimensions and particularly to sexuality. 53 cm is the measurement of Zara's hips, which is small in comparison to the 791 mm that Cuvier purportedly set as the standard size of black women's hips. The cover of the initial edition by *Le Serpent à Plumes* carries the black-and-white image of a woman's backside from the armpits to the base of the buttocks with the arms presumably raised. The torso is shaded while the buttocks are significantly lighter to match the body curves. The dominance of the body continues in the dedication

page that carries the name of Saartje Baartman, the victim of Cuvier's research that created the *steatopygia* species defined by the accumulation of fat around the hips. The combination of the title, the cover drawing and the dedication symbolize the obsession with black women's sexuality as one of the most prominent characteristics of racism in France. It also highlights the fact that the Republic, its humanist ideals, anthropological studies and immigration laws are all founded on the attempt to forcibly compartmentalize humanity according to rational criteria and empirical data.

The prominence of the body extends from the title and dedication to the opening scene in a gymnasium. The opening words are spoken by Keita, the son of Malian parents. He is described as "le gentil animateur, immense et athlétique" (7).<sup>2</sup> On the first page of the novel, Keita grabs Zara's arm and asks her: "Je suis pénisopyge [. . .] Es-tu stéatopyge?" He continues:

Tu es de race stéatopyge si, et seulement si, le périmètre horizontal de ton postérieur dépasse 791 millimètres. La stéatopygie est un caractère racial révélé par Cuvier et Mantandon, des naturalistes célèbres et réputés; il faut connaître ses classiques. Alors, as-tu les fesses assez grosses, oui ou non? (7)

The violence in this passage is verbal, physical and psychological on both Zara and the reader. Keita and Zara are strangers at this point, and so for him to physically grab her, ask her an intimate question and describe his own genital organs constitutes an invasion of privacy. Worse still, his questions inherently demand Zara's participation in the dialogue. For the reader, the appearance of the conversation on the first page is a further

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<sup>2</sup> All citations of *53cm* are taken from the *J'ai lu* edition.

shock because even before we see the complexity of the characters, we are already exposed to them discussing the intimate parts of the bodies.

This assailment of the reader continues onto the second page of the novel, where we are introduced to various “species” of humans and animals. In the workout room is “un Arabe gris cendré” and a subsequent paragraph gives a description of “un Blanc, gris cendré comme l’Arabe,” “une demoiselle olivâtre,” and “un Blanc laiteux” (9). The Arab in the gymnasium is telling the interlocutor on his cell phone that he wants a “singapora” which is “un chat de type asiatique” (8). The telephone conversation reflects not only the ubiquitous references to the human body but also the abrupt shifts between humans and animals as the topic of conversation. At one point, he says, “Merde... j’ai brûlé que 42 calories. Quoi? Mais non ma chérie! Le singapora est une race félinidé découverte par les Américains dans les égouts de Singapour; un pur-sang race hyperpure, oui” (8). Like Keita, the Arab justifies his obsession with the categorization of living beings by appealing to the authority of Western science.

The chapter on the gymnasium is followed by the chapter on the visit of Zara and her daughter Marie to the Office des Migrations Internationales (OMI) for the health check-up for foreign residents. Zara alludes to slavery by observing: “Le docteur examine tous mes millimètres; il oublie seulement de compter mes dents” (12). She later suggests the French Republic is conscious of this continuity but has tried to obscure it through re-naming: “Aujourd’hui, l’OMI ne procède plus à un examen anthropométrique, mais à un examen sanitaire” (46). The allusion to slavery, anthropology and race indicates that both French academic and political institutions are linked in their reduction of blacks to physicality and particularly to sexuality, hence the continuity between Baartman’s and

Zara's experiences. Moreover, this compartmentalization extends from human beings to animals and plants. This is evident in the fourth chapter in which Zara links anthropology to immigration laws. This time, she role plays the anthropologist and demands a cherry for its "ca't de cerisité" (19).

Zara eventually acquires a *carte de séjour*, but she cannot enroll her daughter in school because the school requires a visa for Marie. However, French laws also stipulate that children of foreigners do not require documents. Zara becomes increasingly desperate as she shuttles back and forth through the bureaucracy that issues contradictory instructions, especially since her own *carte de séjour* is approaching its expiration date. When her efforts to secure her daughter's status on the basis of her Swiss citizenship backfire, she follows the advice of her sister's friend Gwen to engage the services of SOS Racisme on the grounds that she is a victim of racial discrimination. When that strategy does not yield the desired result, she decides to pursue the officer's suggestion that she marry a French national. She goes out with Jean-Christophe Grand-Veneur, a man whom she had met earlier at a club, only to discover that he is an undercover police officer with orders to arrest her.

While these events seem plausible and coherent, the novel presents them in conversations that are logically incoherent and that often deteriorate into absurdity. For instance, when the SOS Racisme official cynically proposes marriage as a ticket to a residency permit, Zara replies:

- Comment voulez-vous que je me marie avec la tronche que j'ai? J'ai un beau cul, mais je ne suis qu'une fourmi.

- Combien de fois avez-vous muté?

- Deux...

- Et vous trouvez ça normal?

- On s'habitue à tout. Vous êtes bien une sauterelle. (162)

In the above passage, it is not clear whether Zara identifies with Baartman as the symbol of the novel's overall theme. Although she seeks to portray her body dimensions as different from Baartman's, her use of the ant as a metaphor seems to equate her to Baartman, for the constricted abdomen and a large posterior that characterize the ant's physical frame could symbolically represent Baartman in the imagination of her Western spectators. The ant thus obscures Zara's contention that she does not have large enough hips to be considered African.

The confusion in this passage is accentuated by the reference to the grasshopper. It is not clear why the narrator chooses this insect, although one could infer that Bessora seeks to demonstrate the absurdity of categorization of living things. This obscurity continues in the ensuing conversation, since the two characters continue to discuss the metaphors in such detail that the reader loses track of the concrete objects to which they refer.

Given this absurdity, it is not surprising that Zara leaves the office without formulating a concrete plan of action, but we later find out that she intends to marry Jean-Christophe. By this point, Zara is tottering on insanity. She refuses to listen to warnings from her friends that her plan is dangerous. When Jean-Christophe hesitates to reveal that he is an undercover police officer, she reads his discomfort as a sign of shame and tells him: "Mais c'est pas grave, va. Je t'aime quand même... Mon pauvre petit poulet d'amour... Ne culpabilise plus et ne t'inquiète pas: je prends ta vie en main. Tu ne me

mangeras pas, dis?” (184) This essentially incoherent conversation exasperates Jean-Christophe who shouts at her: “Je ne t’aime pas, enfin! Ça n’est pas possible! Rends-toi compte! Tu ne comprends pas? J’expulse les clandestins, moi!” (184-85). By the time the novel ends with officers entering the room, the readers are not sure if they should sympathize with Zara or if they should be relieved that she has been rescued from insanity and violently brought back to the real world.

Zara’s strange behavior seems to be aimed at mimicking anthropology and immigration laws that are often self-contradictory and absurd because they categorize animals, plants and human beings. Therefore, one would agree with Susan Ireland (2004) that Bessora’s attack on Cuvier’s classification of animal species is based on *reductio ad absurdum*. However, the problem in Ireland’s analysis is the assumption that the absurdity of Bessora’s conclusions is self-evident. She asserts that “Zara’s systematic reversal of the main topoi of anthropological discourse refutes any notion of objectivity since the reader immediately recognizes the inaccuracy of her conclusions” (10). Although this assessment is consistent with the *reductio ad absurdum*, a closer examination of Ireland’s critique reveals that the conclusions she describes as inaccurate are in fact phenomena observable in real life. For instance, she considers Zara’s remarks about “excrement on the sidewalk, and a man urinating in the street” as simply “humorous” (10), yet these things are often visible on a casual visit to major French cities. British writer Stephen Clarke is one of the writers who have captured this phenomenon. His satirical novel, *A Year in the Merde* (2005), centers on the corruption in Paris around the noticeable presence of dog excrement on the streets. Ireland also places Bessora’s evocation of the *mission civilisatrice* and “the depiction of colonized peoples

as children” under inaccurate conclusions (10), despite the fact that their inaccuracy is irrelevant since they were the ideological vehicle of colonialism that affected Africans in material ways.

Another conclusion that Ireland unsuccessfully presents as self-evident is that Bessora successfully voices “opposition to discourses of the past” with which African immigrants still contend (7). Patricia-Pia Célérier makes a similar argument when she states that Bessora cites Baartman as “un symbole de la dépossession, de l’humiliation et de l’exploitation causés par l’ère coloniale” in order to tackle “l’exploitation sexuelle et économique des femmes indigènes” (80). The critics’ assessment of the implication of Baartman’s experience is logically weak and ethically problematic. The colonial era to which they restrict it is inaccurate, since Baartman died in 1815, 70 years before the European colonial powers met in Berlin to devise the plan to partition Africa.

The use of the colonial time frame betrays an attempt to question the relevance of Baartman’s experience to immigration today. Célérier even suggests that the claims to such continuity are weakened because contemporary realities of France have significantly changed:

Bessora figure une France (parisienne) postcoloniale en transition, un espace social, dérangé, n’ayant pas encore pris la mesure de son évolution. Elle dit un monde où le vocabulaire pluriel des individus n’est plus en phase avec le lexique de la Nation qui, de fait, apparaît comme un mythe [. . .] Les choses fonctionnent comme si les réalités postcoloniales (immigration, économie globale, métissage etc.) entraînent une reconception de la notion de ‘race’ et de ses applications, mais en fait les bases épistémologiques qui informent la conduite des affaires

nationales sont restées similaires. *En-quête* de carte de séjour, Zara représente cet écart. (78, italics in original)

Célérier's argument in the above passage is not clear. She proposes that the realities of France have changed but that the people have not adopted a discourse that would reflect that change. This attempt to delink language from the reality it reflects obscures the fact that postcolonial realities cannot have brought about a "reconceptualization" of race, as she argues, if the epistemological foundation and discourse of race remain intact.

Moreover, the realities Célérier assigns to the postcolonial period –global economy and *métissage* – actually date to colonialism and slavery. Africans worked for the consumer demands of Europe – indicating the global economy – and they had offspring born of the slave masters' brutal interactions with black women – indicating *métissage*. The same applies for colonialism during which Africans went to France as soldiers or workers during and after the war, while African students married European women. Zara's history is in fact intertwined with colonialism because her parents met before independence while her father was training in France to be a colonial administrator. She, therefore, does not represent a significant departure from centuries of global racism and economic exploitation as Célérier suggests.

The critics attempt to limit Baartman's experience not only chronologically but also socially by restricting her experience to the semiotic realm. Ireland posits that Bessora performs a "type of recontextualization and undermining of stereotypes used in the novel" (12), while Célérier argues that "Zara dit un espace postcolonial [. . .] dont il est nécessaire de débrouiller les codes (primitif vs. civilisé, cru vs. cuit) pour les repenser" (79). The underlying assumption of these statements is that the problem with



anthropology was with the images of Africans that it supported or generated, and that confronting the colonial legacy requires the creation of better images of Africans or, as both scholars have intimated, “declining stereotypes.”

Both critics cite Mireille Rosello’s *Declining the Stereotype* (1998) that offers strategies by which disadvantaged social groups can respond to prejudices about them that arise in general conversation. The premise of Rosello’s study is that a stereotype is largely linguistic and technical, and so the offended parties, described as “reluctant guests,” can decline it as “a way of depriving it of its harmful potential by highlighting its very nature” (11). The problem with this approach lies in its assumption that stereotypes are necessarily harmful, when this is not always the case. Stereotypes are not problematic in and of themselves, but in the unwillingness of the user to respect the dialectics of argument. Walton explains:

Stereotyping as a part of reasoning is not in itself logically bad or fallacious. Indeed, it is a part of ordinary thinking that is necessary for good judgment in practical reasoning on variable matters that cannot realistically be pinned down or quantified in any absolute way. However, because defeasible reasoning is always subject to possible exceptions that may arise in variable circumstances, an arguer using it must be flexible, ready to revise an opinion or qualify a presumption.

(103)

Stereotypes are painful for disadvantaged social groups because the power structure necessarily eliminates the conditions of dialogue outlined by Walton. Imperialism absolves privileged social groups of the obligation to be flexible in their point of view by

conferring upon them the luxury to be ignorant of the history that would challenge or contradict the negative images.

Rosello misrepresents the problem embodied in stereotypes, especially for the ethnic groups that endure them. For Africans, Arabs and Jews, the principle ethnic groups of her study, stereotypes evoke painful histories. She acknowledges these histories in her introductory chapter but ironically expects the victims' descendants to disregard them. She justifies her argument by stating that “[s]tereotypes are like weapons: left in a drawer, they cannot kill” (26). However, stereotypes have never killed, even when they are taken out of the metaphorical drawer. It is people who kill and oppress targeted groups under the influence of leaders who propagate these images as truth and provide institutional frameworks to act on them. The deadly results of these ventures are then used to validate the same stereotypes. This circular reasoning functions in the same manner described by Gordon:

The *a posteriori* proof of the inferiority of an inferior people is that one is able to degrade them. Thus, the *a posteriori* proof that Jews deserved the Final Solution is that six million of them were exterminated in concentration camps. For blacks, the reasoning is the same. The proof that blacks are a slave race is the fact that they were enslaved. (1995b 26)

It is this dialectic between prejudice and oppression that makes social groups detest stereotypes. Consequently, declining stereotypes requires more than logical refutation. It also requires a change in the material conditions that give legitimacy to and that are reflected in stereotypes.

Rosello implicitly assumes that the users of stereotypes are often willing to change their point of view if their error is pointed out to them, even when the power dynamics necessarily absolve the users of the obligation to do so. Thus, she minimizes the responsibility and implication of privileged social groups in the material and historical realities reflected in stereotypes. She celebrates only the verbal and logical refutation of stereotypes by observing that “reluctant witnesses of stereotypes tend to learn how to reuse stereotypes in striking and imaginative ways” (9). The implication of this statement is that those who use stereotypes need not worry about the pain they inflict because their victims will bounce back anyway.

Rosello’s argument is based on the straw-man fallacy because it reduces complex social phenomena to linguistic images in order to present them as simply resulting from a misunderstanding and therefore easy to challenge through logical refutation. It is this oversimplification of stereotypes that leads Ireland and Célérier to arrive at the conclusion that Bessora successfully confronts the colonial legacy. However, applying the same framework to Bessora’s references to Baartman implies that the author disregards the humiliation endured by Baartman and turns anthropology upside down. Such a victory is illusive, however, since the institutions and social values that led to Baartman’s humiliation are still in place. Bessora makes this point through an authorial intervention in the form of a long footnote. She states the repatriation of Baartman’s remains had been requested but “le Muséum d’histoire naturelle n’en voit toujours pas l’utilité” (155). But history proved even more callous in the years following the publication of *53 cm*. In the report on the French Senate proceedings of November 6, 2001, Michel Duffour, the then *secrétaire d’Etat au patrimoine et à la décentralisation*

*culturelle*, is quoted as responding to senator Nicholas About's queries about France's delayed response to South Africa's request for Baartman's remains as follows:

Les restes de Miss Saartjie Baartman sont conservés d'une façon correcte et digne, comme tous les restes humains qui sont gardés dans les réserves du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle. [. . .] Ces pièces font partie des collections nationales, lesquelles, selon la loi française, sont inaliénables. Le directeur du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle a la charge d'assurer la conservation et l'intégrité des collections, qui constituent le patrimoine de l'humanité. Elles forment un ensemble scientifique à la disposition des chercheurs de la collectivité internationale tout entière. (*Journal Officiel* 2001)

The fact that the French minister could publicly declare that the country's concerns primarily lay in adhering to French laws, preserving the museum's collection and advancing scientific research implicitly affirms Cuvier's research almost 200 years later. It also demonstrates the extent to which the questions of human decency are alienated from public attitudes towards science and law. Nicholas About would state as much at the Senate session on January 29 2002: "Il n'était nul besoin d'une loi pour sortir les restes de la 'Vénus hottentote' des collections du Muséum – dans lesquelles il est permis de penser qu'ils n'auraient jamais dû entrer - ni pour permettre leur restitution à l'Afrique du Sud" (*Journal Officiel* 2002). Granted, politicians are infamously insensitive to human dilemmas. However, the appeal to science to justify the delay of the repatriation demonstrates that science wields enough authority in the Western world to suspend moral considerations, especially with regards to African peoples.

For almost two hundred years, Baartman was subjected to indignity by the ideological and institutional power of the French Republic and not simply by an individual anthropologist seeking to confirm his distorted views of sexuality. Célérier implicitly acknowledges this power structure by saying that “A la mort de Baartman, on donna son corps à Cuvier, le chirurgien de Napoléon Bonaparte” (80). Sharpley-Whiting also points to these institutions when she observes that Cuvier presented his findings to his colleagues, and that the Museum left her skeleton on public display until 1977. Baartman’s mistreatment is not the result of stereotypes alone but of social conditions and institutions that are still in place. Bessora cannot have successfully challenged stereotypes if this challenge is limited to refuting images and does not extend to these institutions.

*53cm* extends Baartman’s fate from the institutional realities to the philosophical foundation of anthropology and the Republic. By interweaving discourses on human beings, plants, animals and immigration laws, it demonstrates that both anthropologists and the French Republic were consumed by the obsessive desire to categorize and control the mysteries of life. The link between the treatment of Baartman and the attitudes towards living beings coincides with Christine Clark-Evans’s (1995) observation that scholars in the eighteenth century “were mystified by the problem of sexual reproduction, especially in the case of humans, and particularly by the incomprehensible relationship between women’s orgasm and conception” (119). The problem with these pursuits were that they constituted a search for the unverifiable, since, as she writes, “the question that is most completely beyond the reach of scientific epistemology is the philosophical and medical ‘why’ of women’s sexual orgasm and the relationship between their orgasm and

conception” (119). Clark-Evans’s comments are affirmed by the fact that Cuvier used Baartman to make observations on sexuality and arrive at abstract and improvable conclusions about civilization. In her footnote on Baartman, Bessora cites him as saying: “Les organes génitaux de cette femme sont particulièrement intéressants [. . .] Ceci a consolidé mes constatations antérieures qui sont que ni l’Hottentot, ni le Bochimane, ni d’ailleurs aucun individu de race noire n’a jamais apporté aucune contribution à la civilisation” (qtd. by Bessora, 155).

This historical context in which the human body is used to make conclusions about society places Baartman as a victim of an obstinate pursuit of the finite in the infinite and whose skin color provided an additional object for rationality’s unquenchable appetite. Her degradation also exposes racism and the Western intellectual heritage as inextricably linked in their extrapolation of minor details to make comprehensive conclusions about complex phenomena. From this perspective, the suffering of Africans like Baartman and contemporary immigrants appears as the tragic result of human beings’ violation of the universe through the unwillingness to accept the world that defies human comprehension and total control. The tragic heroes in this case are anthropologists who are considered intellectually sophisticated but who emerge as incapable of accepting the multifaceted nature of the world and obsessively reduce complex information into simple formulas. Consequently, Baartman’s humiliating experience becomes the symptom of not only a profound philosophical problem but also of intellectual incompetence.

The power and reasoning behind Baartman’s experience defy the attempts by Ireland and Célérier to distance it from the experiences of contemporary migrants. The

link between Baartman and immigrants cannot be refuted by deeming it archaic or symbolic, but by providing compelling evidence from the narrative or from the social context to disprove it. Ireland attempts to do so by proposing that the humor in Bessora's novels indicates the author's light-hearted approach to the historical experiences to which she alludes. She suggests that the reader should approach the novel with the same disposition. "Since Bessora's objective is to subvert discourses of the past," Ireland argues, "it is essential that her intention be recognized and that her use of literary devices such as irony not be taken seriously" (7). However, Bessora's intention is not sufficient grounds to determine whether her irony should be taken seriously or not. Peter Kivy (1979) makes a similar point when he observes that privileging the author's intent over the content and structure of the narrative is a common temptation in the reading of satire. He notes that this has been the case with Voltaire's *Candide*, to which critics have sometimes attributed the *reductio ad absurdum* argument in order to present the narrative as a refutation of Leibniz's optimism. Critics tend to assign this role to *Candide* because

[w]e want to make the best of our well-loved *Candide*; we do not want it to be consigned to the scrap-heap of the philosophically trivial. What, after all, is left of the work, to justify its reputation as a "serious" classic, if it is divested of its philosophical reputation? Is it nothing more than an amusing diversion? This, of course, is not an argument, but merely a *motive* for finding one. (213, italics in original)

Kivy demonstrates that logical refutation does not lie only in the author's motive but also in the actual engagement of the text. Similarly, Bessora's motives for ridiculing

anthropology do not provide conclusive evidence that the irony and satire need not be taken seriously.

Another reason why humor should not be automatically considered as evidence of casualness is because it is sometimes a symptom of powerlessness or even despair. As John Snyder observes, “dominance forces the dominated to adopt satiric irony as their last defense [. . .] Satire as an unstable semigenre both empowered and entrapped by ‘words, words, words’ dramatically figures the frustration of being less powerful than one wishes to be” (96). Highet has made a similar observation:

A noticeably large number of satirists have been impelled by a rankling sense of personal inferiority, of social injustice, of exclusion from a privileged group [. . .] Juvenal, Cervantes, Gogol, and Parini were all men of talent forced into careers which they felt to be useless or degrading. (240-41)

The satire *in 53 cm* hints at characters’ frustration with the harsh immigration laws and the bureaucratic obstacles to acquiring legal status in France. For Zara and her friend Keita, this frustration is accentuated by the fact that the rights and the respect accorded to French citizens seem within their reach. Keita was born in France and has French citizenship, but he remains tormented by an inferiority complex induced by racism. Keita’s trauma is accentuated by his history. His mother, whom he says is a “descendante en ligne directe de Sunjata Keita, fondateur de l’empire mandigue” (73), was reduced to working as a maid in France because her family considered her rape by a Bambara peasant a violation of their social status. Zara, on the other hand, is university educated and possesses Swiss citizenship, yet she is unable to acquire a *carte de séjour*. The novel’s humor thus indicates the characters’ discomfort with the contradiction between



their difficult living conditions and the elevated status that their fairly privileged backgrounds imply.

Whether one sees Bessora's characters as powerless or not, it is important issue to compare the novel's irony and humor to the circumstances of the characters before assessing the two narrative devices as evidence of lack of seriousness. Because the critics do not tally the humor with the living situation of the characters, it is not surprising that they voice skepticism about Bessora or Zara's powerlessness, thereby turning attention away from the reality of migration. Célérier, for instance, feels that

Zara est une bourgeoise qui, ayant *choisi* de démissionner d'un poste lucrative en Suisse, *décide* de venir vivre à Paris. Est-ce là une tentative de l'auteure de sortir l'immigré(e) de l'image miserabilité qui est la sienne? Peut-être, mais il n'en reste pas moins que, en ce qui concerne Zara, la recherche de la carte de séjour occulte le fait de son privilège. (83, italics in original)

Like Célérier, Rosello (2001) presents Bessora as financially and socially privileged and therefore unqualified to be considered as a *sans-papiers*. She contrasts Bessora with the Africans who gained fame as *sans-papiers* when they protested at the Saint Bernard church in Paris in 1996 against the government's failure to regularize their status. Furthermore, Rosello minimizes the material issues that Bessora addresses, arguing that the author's concern is about "co-existing with her own internal differences and with others' perception of her difference," in contrast to the protestors who were asserting that "their illegality can coexist with their integration" (2001 194). The analyses of both Célérier and Rosello obscure the fact that for both Zara and the *sans-papiers*, the issue

was not their identity but the French bureaucratic obstacles to their obtaining residency documents.

The contradiction in these observations arises from at least two questionable premises. First, the critics define *sans-papiers* primarily by African identity rather than by the legal predicament of migrants who are legally in France but without documentary proof. To do so, they project a demeaning and erroneous image of Africans in order to call into doubt Zara's authenticity as an immigrant. This is particularly evident in Rosello's sidebar that Zara's "privileged background [. . .] will come as a surprise to those who think they have understood the rhetoric of the *sans-papiers* of Saint Bernard" (2001 193). By referring to Zara's financial resources, they also implicitly associate African identity with poverty, yet the question of Zara having significant financial resources or having chosen to move to France does not negate the fact that she does not acquire a *carte de séjour*.

The second questionable assumption, particularly in Célérier's statement about choice, is that Africans migrate out of compulsion. However, the idea of choice needs to be qualified, because even migrants like Mabanckou's Massala-Massala who go to France on the basis of false information leave after careful deliberation and the procurement of the necessary documentation, resources and networks. Zara's choice to leave a well-paying job for France therefore does not undermine the credibility of her laments about the failure to acquire a *carte de séjour*.

The attempt to use humor as evidence of lack of seriousness or to portray Zara as too privileged to make legitimate complaints about immigration laws betrays an attempt to minimize the social context that Bessora addresses. Neither she nor the *sans-papiers*

were protesting their poverty or acknowledging their insider-outsider status; they are asserting the injustice of immigration laws, especially given that their personal and social histories were already intertwined with that of France. This historical interaction has actually been a major theme of African novels on migration since the early twentieth century. Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1964) captures the French campaign to promote its colonies among the metropolitan public through the 1931 Colonial Exhibition which, as Christopher Miller (1998) points out, was taking place against the background of protests in Paris against colonialism. Ousmane Sembène's *Le Docker noir* (1956) is about Africans who had fought for France and were meeting the country's labor needs at the docks of Marseille. Samba Diallo of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) was sent to French school because the Diallobé elite wanted to understand the success of the colonial system that was eroding its power. In all these cases, grappling with imperialism was a greater motive for migration than escaping poverty. Likewise, Zara's personal history is tied to France's presence in Gabon before and after formal independence in 1960. Her father was a colonial administrator before becoming a diplomat in Gabonese president Leon Mba's government.

In fact, one of the striking features of the critical essays is the limited attention paid to the events in the novel that take place in Gabon. Célérier does not discuss them at all. Ireland says that the references to Zara's father's experiences "provide the context for much satire" (9), while Rosello restricts her comments to the plush lifestyle of Zara's father as a Gabonese diplomat in the United States. However, Zara also examines the politics during and after the advent of formal independence. Under Charles de Gaulle, France ensured that the presidents who inherited the political structure would protect its

interests. She evokes France's reinstatement of the first president Mba following a coup d'état in 1963. She notes that Mba, Gabon's first president, "à la bénédiction de son pote Charles, et Jacques Foccart, secrétaire d'état aux affaires africaines et malgache veille sur lui" (69). The familial term "pote" is not simply stylistic; it also reflects the actual discourse of family relations that French leaders still use to describe their country's relationship with the former colonies.

The reference to Foccart is significant because he was France's most powerful administrator for African affairs for several decades and played an instrumental role in ensuring that the African political elite remained pawns of the French government. Prior to Mba's death from cancer in 1967, Foccart met Mba to choose a successor and they agreed on Albert Bongo. Foccart subsequently monitored his "training" for the job as part of France's larger effort to protect its petroleum and other interests in Gabon.

France's persistent hold on Gabon in order to safeguard its exploitation of Gabon's petroleum resources is not only Zara's but also Bessora's concern. In my interview with her, she indicated that she wrote her dissertation on the lethargy of Gabonese citizens resulting from the fact that the country's economic life is singularly structured around the petroleum industry. In 2004, she published *Petroleum*, a novel that covers French characters and business ventures in Gabon that largely exclude local communities. These factors resist Ireland's attempt to restrict the author's concerns about colonialism to the framework of discourse. Ireland states that "Bessora returns to the period of colonization in order to bring out the continuing effects of its discourses on attitudes towards Africans today" (9), implying that the contemporary legacy of

imperialism is restricted to French misconceptions of Africans and excludes material concerns.

Having shown that the concerns of migrants extend beyond poverty, identity or discourse, we can safely argue that the critics equate privilege primarily with European ancestry, and so they attempt to disqualify the social issues raised by Bessora on the grounds that her mother is European. Rosello, for instance, resorts to an *ad hominem* fallacy that essentially devalues Bessora's writing and Zara's experience on the grounds of parentage. She insists that Zara

knows that being conscious of one's mixed heritage also means being aware that one can never interpret the resulting identity as simply an addition or a subtraction. She is neither the sum of her mother and father's cultural identities, nor is she the smallest common denominator. (2001 195)

This statement is problematic because no human being is the sum of his or her parents' identities, even when the parents hail from the same cultural group or clan. Moreover, defining what Zara is not raises the absurd question of what she is, to which Rosello cannot provide an answer because no definitive answer exists. This is precisely Bessora's point in her criticism of anthropological studies that attempted to use empirical data to make comprehensive conclusions about human beings.

The contradictions in the critical essays by Rosello, Célérier and Ireland arise from two important factors. First, they adopt the restrictive framework of Bessora's novel and in so doing miss the contextual issues that inform the work. As a result, they suggest that the author's and characters' identities problematize French institutional structures rather than the other way round. Second, Rosello and Ireland assign Bessora's novel the

role of challenging anthropology and French immigration laws on the basis of the author's intention. In so doing, they minimize the epistemological issues that the novel raises. These weaknesses inherently contradict Ireland's assertion that Bessora employs *reductio ad absurdum*, because this form of argumentation would highlight the fact that Bessora refutes the rationalist foundation of anthropology and immigration laws rather than lead to the conclusion that she is simply concerned about stereotypes and the colonial past.

Despite these contradictions, it is still clear that the use of humor and the reference to Baartman provide readers with solid alibis for evading the social context of migration. Célérier does observe that Bessora's tactics are logically incoherent and emotionally overwhelming: "En effect, Zara n'exprime-t-elle pas ici le genre d'argument moralisant, racial et essentialisant, qu'elle dénonce de façon répétée et contre laquelle elle semble se construire?" (83). In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that these comments are justified. The references to Baartman are indeed redundant, since the absurdity of anthropology and race is self-evident in Zara's experiences.

### **Immigration and the Politics of (M)Othering**

For most African societies, motherhood represents the point at which they are most human and most vulnerable. As Ifi Amadiume (1997) argues, the matriarchal power structures are jealously guarded even in societies where patriarchal authority is strong. Before the advent of colonialism, she argues, matriarchy had strong social and philosophical implications. Because mothers took care of the immediate welfare of the

household, there was no concept of land ownership. The use of land and the production of food was and still is largely the domain of women. By the same token, the word of a mother was respected and her welfare was jealously guarded by the rest of the society. The attempt of colonialists to subvert these dynamics often resulted in protests from women who were angry at the suppression of their ability to adequately provide for their families. One of the more famous of such protests was the Igbo women's war in Nigeria in 1929.

From an African perspective, therefore, Zara's predicament as a mother constitutes the strongest moral, rational and emotional indictment of French immigration policies in the novels chosen for this study. While other novelists are concerned about the fulfillment of dreams or the trauma of broken promises, *53 cm* addresses the predicament of a mother whose welfare in France is directly related to that of her child. The series of rebuffs that Zara encounters in the bureaucratic channel ultimately show how racism's fragmentation of the human body is intricately linked to the fragmentation of human relationships. Above all, Zara's experience reveals that racism goes beyond the oppression of certain groups to the philosophical crisis embodied in the Charter of Human rights around which France has built its republican identity. As I shall show, the human being that the laws claim to respect is a hypothetical rather than flesh-and-blood social being.

A useful point at which to analyze the manifestation of this dilemma in immigration politics is 1974, when France banned labor immigration following the petroleum crisis of the early 70's. Until then, migrants from the colonies working in France rarely came along with their families, presumably because they could easily make

visits home since the border restrictions did not exist. As Jane Freedman (2000) notes, the ban on immigration created a dilemma because immigrants who chose to remain in France had to bring their families to live with them. France later caved in to international pressure to allow immigration for reasons of family unification.

The crisis that led to France instituting the family regroupment visa unveils the institutional compartmentalization of immigrants such that their labor, families and cultures were considered as separate entities. In other words, immigrants until then had been officially regarded as simply laborers without histories, cultures or families. This attempt to isolate labor from the totality of the human being is not unique to immigration. During slavery, members of the same family would be sold to reduce slaves to their labor and deny them the emotional and other social attachments that emerge from family relations. Similarly, Gary Wilder (2003) argues, the colonial authorities imposed taxes to induce migration and inter-generational conflict for the purpose of weakening African families and entrenching colonial rule.

The same contempt for African familial relations lies at the heart of Zara's experience. Her stint as a student in France begins when she is two months pregnant. After completing her studies, her child Marie is old enough to go to school, but Marie cannot be enrolled without a residency permit. However, French law does not require visas or residency permits for children of foreign nationals, purportedly because the Republic respects the rights of children regardless of race. An official whom Zara nicknames *baba cool* informs her that "Les mineurs étrangers [ . . . ] quelle que soit leur race ou leur nationalité, ils sont égaux" (142). Despite this position, immigration laws only allow foreign parents to bring their children into France upon proof of a stable



income. However, one cannot have an income without a job, and one cannot have a job without residency papers. Moreover, as Freedman observes, “the law forbids all regularization *sur place* [. . .] on conditions of family regroupment – the demand for residence papers for those coming to join their family in France must be made when they are still in their country of origin; once they are already in France their case cannot be considered” (19).

In practice, therefore, immigration laws require that parents be separated from their children as they apply for the visa. For Zara, this effectively translates into rendering the presence of Marie, who was born in Europe, illegal. The contradiction between the word, the spirit and the reality of the immigration laws indicates that the French Republic respects the rights of a hypothetical child with no parents, not a real child whose survival depends on an emotionally and financially stable adult. One can therefore understand the exasperation of Zara’s sister Mya who exclaims: “Merde! C’est ta fille non? Elle existe!” (74). The racial dynamics become clearer when one considers that members of the European Union do not require such visas. Another government official tells Zara that “votre enfant est clandestin si vous êtes gabonaise,” and then suggests: “Refaites-la [la carte de séjour] sur le passeport suisse: votre enfant sera en règle” (132). In other words, immigration laws discriminate by rendering African families inconsequential while respecting European ones.

After being sent back and forth between various government agencies that either deny or affirm the need for a family visa for her child, Zara is eventually informed that she could not obtain a *carte de séjour* because she was a student. The government official rudely tells Zara:

[L]es étudiants étrangers n'ont pas d'enfants. Ils viennent en France pour faire des études et rentrer chez eux, pas pour faire des enfants et rester en France. Nous n'avons plus besoin du certificat OMI: vous êtes étudiante étrangère, célibataire et sans enfants. (83)

The fact that a dismissal is unlikely to be verbally articulated in this manner demonstrates the absurdity of France's immigration laws. From the perspective of the laws, the foreign student is not a flesh-and-blood human being who, at the age of the average university student, falls in love, is sexually active and has children. French laws recognize only hypothetical foreign students, not human beings who possess certain histories and will form certain relationships.

The legal suppression of human relationships is rooted in the a-historical nature of the Republic and especially of relationship to Africa. The laws deny Zara's family history that is intertwined with that of France. Zara's parents got married during colonial rule when African students of marriageable age formed families with European women. Moreover, even though the father grew up speaking Fang and the mother German, the family speaks French. Zara was born in Belgium, educated in the United States, Gabon, Switzerland and France. The complex human and social histories that Zara and her family represent are evident in Zara's description of one of her several visits to the *prefecture*: "je dépose mon acte de naissance belge, mon passeport gabonais et ma *ca't d'identité* suisse sur la table française" (129).

Zara's failure to acquire a *carte de séjour* exposes the circular reasoning of imperial logic. While France pursues an imperial agenda in Africa, it refuses to face the real-life consequences of imperialism, one of which it is the migration of people that it

also needs in order to maintain its power. Zara's life reflects the history that the republic does not want to embrace but still obstinately perpetuates.

When a nation derives its identity from its respect of hypothetical human beings and a historical illusion, we are inevitably led to wonder if the nation is hypothetical in its very foundation. This question arises when Zara describes her two-year job at a multinational bank that pays well but that is emotionally and morally stifling. The racial politics behind the aura of financial success leads to the insufferable situation described below:

Prière de cacher la judaïté, l'homosexualité, et la noireté dans le domaine privé pour ne pas troubler l'ordre public. La Polonaise juive peut cacher sa judaïté. Heureusement qu'elle n'est pas noire; la noireté trouble forcément l'ordre public: elle se voit. Méfiance: un Noir avec une peau d'ébène et une boule de cheveux crépus sur la tête, forcément, il revendique quelque chose, même s'il n'a rien dit. Qu'il blanchisse [. . .] ou que les Mulâtres remplacent les Nègres [. . .]

Moi, je suis une *Black acceptable*.

*Black*, c'est mieux que *Noir*, ça sonne presque *Blanc*, à une lettre près.

Mais pour Juif, on n'a rien qui sonnerait *Blanc*, ou *Blond*.

Et vive la Cinquième République. (120, italics in original)

This work environment represses everybody who represents a particular history or identity that does not fall within the confines of the Republic. The republican aversion to ethnicity is captured in the anonymous designation "l'ordre public." It is essentially white and makes blacks embody the extreme end of resistance to whiteness by virtue of their very existence, or as Zara puts it, without saying a word.

The “ordre public” requires people to live in extreme denial of themselves. Whites who uphold this Manichean vision of the world are caught up in a cycle of sadism and hate because they simultaneously need to deny themselves in order to be anonymous, but are confronted by the Other who reminds them of the impossibility of such a task. The resulting violence explodes in a co-worker, the daughter of Italian immigrants, who is jealous of a beautiful Jewish Czech colleague. On one occasion, she makes the injurious remark that “Hitler avait raison...faut tous les gazer, ces sales *Juifs*...” (120, italics in original). Among those who overhear the comments is a Polish Jew who hides her identity because “elle a tellement vu sa grand-mère pleurer, que non, il ne faut pas que ça se sache” (120). No one responds to the Italian woman because “personne n’a rien entendu” (120). When Zara does react, her Italian colleague does not defend her remarks but instead asks Zara why she should care since she is not a Jew. In other words, she focuses on attacking others but will not even have the courage to stand up for herself. These dynamics illustrate Gordon’s observation that “the white body is expected to be seen by others without seeing itself being seen” (1995a 103). Zara perceives the Fifth Republic in the same light. It does not commit itself to a particular identity while criminalizing the identities of others.

These contradictions illustrate Gordon’s contention that racism is an act of bad faith in which absolute absence is assigned to whites and absolute presence to blacks. This duality traps whites in having to hide their actions in anonymity. However, since this is humanly impossible, they blame blacks, defined by their presence alone, for having seen their actions. Gordon explains:

It would seem at first that the dominant group would choose the value of Absence in such a distribution of value, since it may wish to maximize its freedom. But this does not seem to be the case in antiblack situations. Quite often, although dominant groups may wish to maximize their liberty, they may also wish to deny their responsibility in the face of such liberty. (1995a 98)

Racism is a form of bad faith in which blacks are appointed the scapegoats for actions of whites. They receive blame for observing those actions for which whites do not want to claim responsibility. A powerful illustration of this dynamic is offered in Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956), in which Toundi is persecuted for his belated recognition of the Commandant's wife's adulterous relationship even though the relationship was already public knowledge. Similarly, the Italian woman expects her remarks not to be attributed to her but seen as a given, and so she reacts when Zara indicates that she did hear her.

In the same way, the imperial project and its accompanying affirmation of human beings are designed so that France is never responsible for what it does. Africans suffer not only because the Republic is unjust but also because it seeks to suppress their suffering which stands as evidence of that injustice. This logic attributes immigrants' tribulations to their failure to follow the legal procedures to the letter, rather than to the fact that French legislators pass absurd laws or that France denies its colonial history while exploiting African resources. If freedom entails responsibility, Zara's proclamation "vive la Cinquième république" is ironic.

Racism as bad faith leads to a situation in which blacks are held responsible for what they do and for what others do. The weight of this absurdity leads to the impression

that one is suspended in the world and has no impact in it, and so Zara understandably feels that “ma vie que je gagne si bien à m’ennuyer, je sens qu’elle m’échappe, me glisse entre les doigts: c’est une vie sablonneuse [. . .] Faudrait pas que ma fille grandisse niaise, dans un cocon de poussière” (121). While on Christmas vacation in Gabon two years after working at the bank, she faxes her resignation to Switzerland and later goes to study in France. In so doing, she affirms at least two things. First, a child’s welfare does not solely depend on the mother’s economic welfare but also on the mother’s individual mental and social security. Second, Africans migrate not only in search of financial advancement but also of human fulfillment.

Given Zara’s work environment and the social history that informs her experience, Célérier’s comments about her hiding her privilege are undeserved. The question as to why Zara chooses to move to France reduces her complex history to her own actions while ignoring the implication of other social actors in her predicament such as her parents and the French empire. By the same token, Zara is justified to quit her well-paying job because of the humiliation she endured. To call her choice into question suggests that people should accept any form of humiliation as long as the paycheck justifies it. Denying individuals transcendence over space and time or their non-economic motivations for migration essentially denies their human dignity.

From this perspective, we can understand why the visit of Hermenondine Dumas, the inspector from the *Caisse d’allocations familiales*, becomes the point at which Zara crosses from ridicule into folly. During the interview on Zara’s application for family subsidies, Hermenondine asks: “Vous vous nommez Zara S... Sem... Andock; vous êtes née le 24 décembre 1968 à Bruxelles, d’une mère Suisse romande et d’un père gabonais?”

Mais qu'est-ce que vous faites en France?" (25) The brutality of this question lies in the fact that explaining Zara's presence in France would require the reminiscing of her life and that of her parents, yet Hermenondine requires that it be reduced into a simple answer.

The narrative reflects the significant impact of Hermenondine's question by placing it at the end of chapter five, after which the novel largely consists of Zara's incoherent story about her job as a "gaulologue" – an anthropologist whose specialization is the study of *les Gaulois*. From chapter six through chapter eight, the reader is treated to a bizarre account of events in which Zara role-plays an anthropologist observing the primitive *Gaulois*. She uses anthropological jargon to describe the bureaucratic process. For instance, she calls the trip to the préfecture "l'escalade du mont préfectoral" (26) and describes the center for foreign students as a place where "[d]es explorateurs multicolores pénètrent la demeure sacrée an par an" (27). She describes the *carte de séjour* – written as *ca't de séjou'* to conform to the dropping of the guttural R stereotypically associated with blacks – as a "*papier, symbole animiste chez les Gaulois [ . . . ] parfois recouvert d'écriture, une forme primitive de langage*" (29, italics in original).

These three chapters also introduce the reader to a range of characters in a largely arbitrary manner. Chapter seven centers around a conversation with Théophile, a homeless man, presumably Caucasian but referred to by Zara as an albino. The scene is at a park bench. Théophile informs Zara that the original Gauls are of a superior race while "les espèces inférieures [sont] d'origine immigrée" (35). The two characters are subsequently joined by "une jeune Indienne en tunique beige, alliage de Kate Moss et de Naomi Campbell" who goes by the name Pocahontas (37), and later by "[u]n bel homme

blanc sable” named Georges but who tells the group to call him Gérard (39). Zara, however, takes the liberty of baptizing him Watara. She concludes her narration of this bizarre chain of events by telling Hermenondine that she needs the *carte de séjour* “[pour] faciliter l’entreprise d’indigénisation de ce peuple citadogène: elle est signe de mon intégration et de mon intégrité.” The chapter ends with her question to Hermenondine: “Comment mettre en œuvre ma vocation civilisatrice?” (42).

Chapter eight continues the sequence of surreal events, following Zara through the gymnasium where she acquires a *ca’t du Gymnasium* that is “une signe d’intégration: comme la *ca’t de séjour*” (45). By this point, the events are clear to neither the reader nor to Zara herself. She goes to a club where she thinks that her entry will be facilitated by showing the gymnasium membership card and pronouncing an incantation “Ragneuh-gneuh” (48). Naturally, the bouncer is not amused and her companion Ninon, whom she had met in the park, is embarrassed. Zara does not understand their reaction because she wants to stick to her mission to acquire the *ca’t de séjour* and eventually a *ca’t d’identité vichyiste* (49). By this time, she is role-playing the anthropologist at two levels – as the speaker conversing with Hermenondine and within this conversation as the visitor to the club.

Due to this bizarre train of events, the reader is not surprised when Zara finds herself on the floor after a telephone ring snaps her back to reality. The caller is Hermenondine, who had earlier left the house. She tells Zara that she is sick and in need of help, but Zara persists in her incoherent speech about acquiring a *ca’t de séjour* and even a *ca’t d’identité ch’omosomique* (48). The chapter ends with Hermenondine hanging up. From chapter nine onwards, the narration acquires more coherence. It gives an



account of Zara's history by detailing her trajectory and that of her parents, as well as presenting the reader with the history of her families in both Gabon and Switzerland.

The diverse and haphazard events that Zara recounts in answer to Hermenondine's question are evidently intended by the narrator as humorous. However, the humor seems out of place given Zara's situation. She seems to take her quest to secure the subsidies for her daughter rather lightly, and so we wonder if she is aware of the import of her action. The fact that she loses sense of reality at the end suggests that Zara's state of mind is critical, but it is difficult to juxtapose the severity of her mental state with the comparably banal application for family subsidies.

There are two plausible arguments that one can use to tally Zara's bizarre behavior with the task ahead of her. As I have already suggested, Zara could be confronting the ambiguous and inherently oppressive situation in which she has to give a shortened version of a complex history. This task, however unpleasant, remains urgent because the welfare of her child is at stake. Hermenondine's question also constitutes a veiled assertion of power because it reveals that she has the luxury of not knowing France's colonial history while Zara is adversely implicated in that history. Moreover, since Hermenondine's job is to facilitate the disbursement of subsidies, determining the reasons why Zara is in France is not within her jurisdiction. Caught between a government official asking an irrelevant question and the urgency of establishing her daughter's legal status, Zara may have despaired upon realizing receiving the subsidies would be based less on her need and more on arbitrary considerations such as her origin. Hence we can understand Zara's remark: "Elle a le pouvoir, elle fait sa loi" (32).

On the other hand, one can also argue, as Ireland does, that “Bessora uses Zara’s daughter Marie to address this issue: as a single mother and a student with papers from several different countries, Zara does not fit any pre-existing categories” (13). Since all human beings are unique and therefore transcend pre-existing categories, I do not agree with the latter part of the statement. However, I concede that Bessora appears to be using Marie to make a point. The abrupt shifts in reasoning, changes in the subjects of conversation and the haphazard introduction of characters with diverse histories distract attention from Zara’s position as a mother and preoccupy the reader with the search for logical coherence in the narrative.

Another element that supports Ireland’s observation is the fact that the reader hardly meets Marie in the novel, and so he or she sees the motherhood less as a social relationship and primarily as a biological one. We meet Marie in chapter two when she and her mother go to the OMI office for the health check-up. Marie is generally a spectator in the drama, which Zara confirms by concluding the chapter with “Mais il [le docteur] ne délivre rien à Marie” (13). Marie appears on other visits to the prefecture, but she rarely acts or speaks. As Zara, her sister and their friends figure out how to get a *carte de séjour*, Marie remains in the background but is rarely the direct subject of conversation.

The most significant presence of Marie is in the twenty-seventh of the novel’s twenty-nine chapters, in which Zara invites a friend Bienvenu to baby-sit while she goes out for dinner with Jean-Christophe whom she hopes to marry in order to secure her residency status. Within the length of a page, the reader is treated to a disturbing conversation between Marie, her mother and Bienvenu. Marie, who is watching *The Lord*

*of the Rings*, asks her mother: “Ça existe les pays des géants Maman?” Zara replies: “Je ne sais pas. J’ai entendu parler des Massai” (168). A few lines later, we read Marie asking Bienvenu: “Es-tu fang, comme mon papi?” Bienvenu replies, “Mais non, mais Michael Jackson, oui.” Marie then comments: “Non [. . .] c’est pas vrai: Michael, c’est pas un sauvage” (168).

This conversation is perhaps the most ambiguous section of Bessora’s novel because the subject and the actors remain significant obstacles to appreciating the humor. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see the fun in a child calling her grandfather a savage, especially against the background of colonial history that justified itself by using this image of Africans. It is also incomprehensible that a mother would joke about something so serious with her child, as if that kind of ideology is not already propagated in the social institutions that Zara is trying so hard to open to Marie. As an anthropologist, Zara also knows the kind of education that Marie will be getting in school. Consequently, one can support Ireland’s argument by observing that both Zara and the narrator have sacrificed a child’s knowledge in their quest to attack an epistemological system which cannot plausibly be dismantled by a single individual’s heroics. At this point, the novel desecrates motherhood and exhausts the reader’s goodwill.

Bessora’s treatment of motherhood leaves the reader in an ambiguous situation. We initially laugh at the absurdity of French immigration laws that treat sexuality and motherhood as if they can be turned on and off like a switch. This is particularly the case in the passage that describes the encounter at the SOS Racisme office between a mother and Zara. The woman, who legally resides in France, had traveled to Morocco while pregnant and gave birth to her third child. Upon her return, she says, “la police de

l'aéroport a refusé de laisser entrer mon bébé: il n'avait pas de visa. Ils m'ont dit que j'aurais dû accoucher en France" (161). The humor here emerges from the fact that laws which separate parents from their children effectively, though maybe not literally, declare a child non-existent or expect a mother to delay labor until she reaches French soil. This is especially funny when one considers the Republic's strong affirmations of children's rights. However, the laughter soon turns to despair when one realizes that the situation is not a case of temporary insanity but of institutional practice. When Zara is arrested at the end, implying separation from Marie, the realization dawns on the reader that the Republic laughs last and probably laughs best.

Between the Republic that refuses to accept responsibility for its laws that are designed to work against Africans and a mother trying to acquire papers, the reader is left with no tragic resolution because the culprit seems too cruel and the victim is morally justified. Consequently, the reader is forced to turn to the author who builds a fairly good case on which to critique the Republic for driving a mother to insanity but undermines it by saturating the narrative with humor. The humor, while logically inevitable, raises ethical issues about Bessora's treatment of race.

### **Race, Ethics and Aesthetics**

Perhaps the most subtle contradiction of *53cm* lies in the fact that the majority of the human subjects in Zara's quest to study the culture and rites of the Gauls are not the Gauls. The few people of European origin who appear in the narrative are minor characters who, ironically, wield significant influence in the book. One is Théophile, the

homeless man who informs her “la Race et la Raison ont la même racine, Ratio. Le racisme est rationnel et cartésien, la Raison et la Race dirigent le monde; ils sont moteur de l’histoire universelle” (35). Théophile’s remarks are striking because they articulate the premise of Bessora’s argument about the common foundation of rationality, race, anthropology and immigration laws. His humble social stature is also symbolic because it shows that the adherence to rationality permeates to the lowest echelons of French society. The second character is Jean-Christophe who is responsible for Zara’s arrest. However, he is not even identified as a Gaul since his grandfather was from Indochina. There is also Hermenondine, a descendant of the French writer Alexandre Dumas whose mother was a mulatto slave in Haiti.

The brief appearance of these influential characters contrasts with the ubiquity of black characters with no institutional power. Saartje Baartman, the guiding symbol of the novel, does not exist in her own right but as a negation of what Zara is and as the ostensible reason for which Zara cannot acquire a *carte de séjour*. Keita is the other physically imposing but socially powerless black character. He is the only one born of two African parents, and he is positioned as the male Other of Baartman. He too is defined in largely negative terms, because his large penis size is supposed to be the male equivalent of Baartman’s hip size. In order to maintain this definition, he continually cites anthropologists, and so he becomes the voice through whom Bessora’s narrator informs the reader about Cuvier’s research.

It is also Keita who preempts Zara’s absurd conclusion that she is not black enough. The scene takes place at her sister Mya’s house, where Zara and Mya’s friend Gwen are examining the French statute outlawing the refusal to render service “en raison

de l'ethnie, de la nationalité, de la race, ou de la religion du demandeur" (152). Keita walks in from the bathroom as Mya wonders aloud if anyone can make practical distinctions between the different categories upon which French laws outlaw discrimination. He enthusiastically claims that he can, and as he adjusts his badly closed fly, he asks: "Ignorez-vous la race stéatopyge?" (152) He then unflinchingly explains Cuvier's decapitation of Baartman's remains, the preservation of her brain and genitals, the mould he made from her body and the eventual display of her remains in the museum. Keita describes Cuvier as "[l]e père de la paleontologie et de l'anatomie comparée" and as the one who discovered "la classification raisonnée des animaux" (153). When asked if a scale similar to the one for classifying women's race according to their hip size had been devised for men, Keita replies, "La race pénisopyge n'existe pas encore mais je vais m'y atteler: j'ai un gros sexe" (153). These comments echo the narrator's description of Keita as he emerges from the bathroom adjusting his fly. When asked if Baartman had been buried, he retorts: A quoi bon? [. . .] Les Hottentot n'ont pas besoin de sépulture: ils sont sans-âme, sans-histoire et sans-destin; ils ne sont pas des Hommes" (154).

I find this portrait of Keita deplorable and improbable. A man echoing Keita's words would at least betray irony or sadness indicating the recognition of the absurdity and injustice of his remarks. Mabanckou's Moki, whose internal alienation pushes him to adjust his physical features, betrays awareness of his alienation through his cynicism. However, Keita betrays no such emotion. He is proud of Cuvier's work and expresses pity for Zara because she does not qualify to be a steatopygia.

The reason for this portrait of Keita becomes evident towards the end of the chapter when Gwen and Zara engage in a role play to coerce Keita into admitting that

Cuvier's findings were absurd. Gwen gets a tape-measure to verify the size of Zara's hips, and pokes fun by telling Zara, "il te manque au moins 241 millimètres pour rivaliser avec la vénus stéatopyge. Es-tu bien sûre d'être de race négroïde?" (157). Zara's reply eventually turns back on Keita:

Plus les fesses sont grosses, plus la femme est noire, moins elle est humaine, car elle est trop sexy. Mais 53 centimètres, pour un pénisopyge, c'est bien. Keita, je parie que tu n'as pas à la queue les 53 centimètres que j'ai aux fesses. Ha! Ha!  
(157)

By mocking Keita, Zara distinguishes herself as more conscious than he is of the fallacy and absurdity of anthropology. To lighten this caustic criticism of Keita, she follows her comments with "Ha! Ha!" Of the many absurd remarks in the novel, this is the only one which is followed by laughter. Thus, the narrator inadvertently acknowledges the pathology behind Zara's remarks and seeks to assure the reader that Zara is "just joking." However, the degradation inherent in Cuvier's research and Keita's evocation of it obstruct the reader's appreciation of the humor.

Worse still, the narration fails to provide relief by showing that Keita recognizes his error. When the women humiliate him, he gets angry and storms out of the house, but we are not even sure if he is angry at the women for mocking him or at realizing that he is implicated in Cuvier's research. This ambiguity remains because Zara continues to ridicule him by observing, "je savais qu'il n'était pas pénisopyge" (157).

The prominence of Baartman and Keita, the former a victim of degradation and the latter of alienation, makes them, rather than the individual 19<sup>th</sup> century French intellectuals concerned, the spokesmen for anthropology in the novel. It is primarily

through them more than any other character that we hear about Cuvier and Mantandon. Keita often cites them because the illogical statements that he makes cannot be sustained on their own. This appeal to authority, also known as *argumentum ad vercundiam*, allows the arguer to influence the opinion of the opposing side by citing respected figures rather than by engaging the argument. But in Keita's case, the fallacy becomes an added form of violence because it demands acceptance of statements that one would dismiss as nonsense or as insulting were it not for the fact that they were made by anthropologists. Keita repeats this fallacy when he says, "je fais des études d'anthropologie pour lui redonner [à l'Afrique] sa dignité [. . .] Les savants blancs ont bien reconnu la civilisation black!" (75-76). In so doing, he affirms the absurdity of anthropology that sought to depict Africa as having no existence outside that which was defined by anthropologists.

The emphasis on Baartman and Keita masks the fact that Zara's knowledge of the two anthropologists was facilitated by the French education system. However, we do not see the transmission of ideas because the novel does not present Zara as a student in class but as a student searching for *a carte de séjour*. This omission is significant because it presents anthropology as a value without historical or human agents other than the victims.

Without the significant presence of French intellectuals, the narrator makes Baartman and Keita not only visible but also the vehicles through which anthropology is made visible. While Baartman serves as the unifying theme of Bessora's novel, Keita is portrayed as a man who adapts himself physically and mentally to what he perceives as the French image of a black man. This alienation is evident in the book's opening paragraph:



- Bonjour! Bienvenue au Gymnasium!

Le gentil animateur, immense et athlétique, me sourit. Il ajuste une mèche rebelle, échappée du Nylon blond de sa perruque. (7)

Keita is a bulky, smiley African man who assimilates the demands of anthropology that define blacks by body size, but at the same time he attempts to meet the ideological demands of assimilation by hiding his hair and wearing blue contact lenses. He embodies the logical absurdity of race: blacks are expected to conform to the European stereotypes that define them in order to attract affirmation from Western society and simultaneously deny their African identity in order to be accepted into French society. Meanwhile, the identity of the particular whites responsible for propagating these contradictory demands and ideals remains obscure.

This imbalance in the visibility of black and white characters in the novel is no coincidence in anthropology. Even Zara knows that anthropology was built on the scholar's artificial invisibility, or on what Gordon terms "Absence." She says to Hermenondine: "J'observe ton peuple sans interférer, car un observateur civilisé est invisible à l'œil nu des indigènes, et à l'œil habillé des citadogènes" (33). Zara also knows that this invisibility was the reason for the oppressive nature of anthropology, which she confirms when she tells Hermenondine, "Bien sûr, il ne s'agit pas de dire ce que je pense des Gaulois, mais ce que vous pensez de vous-mêmes. Telle est la grande mission de l'ethnologie. Pour cette raison, Alexandre, tu n'auras pas la parole" (33). If Zara knows that anthropology functioned by removing Western scholars from the dialectics of dialogue and presenting their views as self-evident, the question arises as to

why she attempts to engage anthropology in a dialogue when her criticism of the discipline is likely to fall on deaf ears.

It is possible that the author disregards these dynamics because she shares the inherent assumptions of anthropology. The contradiction between the hope that one will be listened to and the awareness that this may not happen is compensated for by the narrator's use of satire and appeal to overwhelming details of people's physical attributes. These stylistic features seemed designed to pound skeptical or apathetic readers into sharing Zara's point of view, which corresponds to the narrative structure of Voltaire's *Candide*. Kivy argues that the book's satire is essential because if one believes that God is divorced from evil, it is difficult to refute Leibniz's optimism or to criticize Voltaire's character Pangloss who consistently believes in God's goodwill despite the catastrophes that he confronts. Hence, the only way to challenge Pangloss is by weakening him:

We can, by bombarding him, so to speak, with the evil in the world, by, in other words, sticking his nose in it, force his belief in optimism closer and closer to the zero point, and, in so doing, put such a strain on his theological belief system that it may crack, thus impelling him to a reexamination of its a priori grounds. This is not "refutation" [. . .] it is not, that is, a logical demonstration of falsity. So let us call it instead "confounding," which will be, in this paper, a term of art. (218)

There is little doubt that *53cm* is structured in the same manner as *Candide*, since it pushes the reader to confront the absurdity of anthropology by bombarding him or her with occasions to confront the human body and defying boundaries of morality, decency and privacy. This narrative structure implicitly suggests agreement with anthropology but simply voices reservations about the practical implications. Its application to Bessora's

novel thus implies that the author does not dispute anthropology but expresses concerns about its effects on Africans.

Such an argument contradicts my earlier suggestion that Bessora uses *reductio ad absurdum* to refute the philosophical premise of anthropology. It leads to the conclusion that Bessora is not concerned with refuting anthropology, despite the compelling evidence that would support her case. It portrays the author as seeking to challenge anthropology more on the basis of empathy for Africans and less on its faulty and illogical premise. The narrative structure therefore obscures the fact that the treatment of Baartman was not accidental but a logical conclusion of the anthropologists' obstinate desire to rationally explain the mysteries of life.

If the display of Baartman and Keita's suffering is designed to provoke the readers' empathy or shame about racism and immigration laws, it is motivated by wishful thinking. If French politicians can hesitate to return the remains of a woman subjected to indignity almost two hundred years ago, it is likely that they will be more steadfast in refusing to face the inherent injustice of contemporary immigration laws. Bessora's footnote on the Museum stalling the repatriation of Baartman's remains implicitly acknowledges this reality. It thus appears that the author knows she may be speaking to a brick wall but persists in doing so anyway.

There is nothing inherently wrong with Bessora's apparent choice to be the prophet crying out in the wilderness, for if the French political and intellectual class is human enough to perpetrate injustice, it is also human enough to atone for it. Moreover, the author is not a pioneer in trying to shake the French bourgeoisie out of its philosophical crisis. François-Xavier Verschave did the same by calling on France to

assume responsibility for its actions in Africa, and so did Jean-Paul Sartre by insisting that freedom is necessarily accompanied by responsibility, and the negation of one is the negation of the other. Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1995) issued a caustic reminder to the French bourgeoisie that its obstinate pursuit of ideals and disregard for reality was behind France's participation in the Holocaust and in colonial massacres. Bessora will not be the last of the individuals who call on the Republic to steer clear of the abyss to which it seems headed, and these efforts are necessary because a disaster in France is the disaster of all human beings.

However, the pervasiveness of race is such that the truth when spoken by blacks becomes black truth. In the Western world, writing or historical experience narrated by blacks is, as Gordon notes, "locked outside of the historical and, hence, exists as neither as the universal nor as the particular" (1998 48). Racism assimilates blacks' suffering by transforming it into accidental occurrences or into proof of Europe's moral and technological superiority over Africans. In the face of this reality, the African intellectual must determine to what extent she or he will parade Africans' suffering to a public that may be reluctant to listen. From Bessora's novel, it is evident that the author felt that objectifying Baartman and Keita, despite their humiliation and alienation respectively, was minor in comparison to her larger goal of refuting anthropology or narrating Zara's experience.

This choice is ethically questionable and grossly imbalanced. Baartman, for example, could not make the choice to disprove anthropology as Zara did because she was the object of study itself. Similarly, Keita is a young man who is conscious that his French citizenship is not enough to gain acceptance, and so he seeks validation in

anthropology even when it objectifies him. Zara's problem, by comparison, is relatively simple: she wants a *carte de séjour*. Moreover, Zara does not identify herself with Baartman and Keita but positions herself against them. She portrays herself as not having hips as large as those of Baartman, and mocks Keita for not seeing the absurdity of anthropology as she does.

The ridicule apparently directed at anthropology is obscured because the humor minimizes the atrocities committed against Baartman and the alienation suffered by Keita. This result is inevitable because, as Clark-Evans observes, tragedy and satire are self-contradictory. She states that "the tragic, which is defined by its inevitability, and the satirical, which stands to be corrected and reformed by human effort are in conflict with each other" (86).

Within the context of race and immigration in France, the satire transforms the suffering of Africans from a tragic result of the anthropologists' endeavors to an error committed by the victims. In this scenario, blacks not only suffer but are also held responsible for identifying the sources of that suffering. In the meantime, the French Republic and its scholars are absolved of responsibility in their choices and actions which deliberately or inadvertently inflict suffering on Africans. These implications of satire confirm Clark-Evans's observation that "softening the criticism in satire by blaming the victim is not altogether unheard of [. . .] As unfair as this parceled out blame might seem in terms of ethics, blaming the victim, at least in part, has the lowly aim of self-censure for the artist in order to reduce the caustic nature of the satirical" (88).

The problematic portrayal of Africans leads us to consider the possibility that Zara's absurd logic about her not having the necessary hip size to qualify as black is not a

joke at all, but evidence that she considers her African parentage as standing between her and the *carte de séjour*. We are faced with the morbid realization that her humor is the laugh of a young woman who mourns her existence. Zara tramples on and humiliates those who represent the aspect of herself that she does not want to be. In this sense, she performs the same rituals performed over the last few centuries by a culture that has appointed blacks as the scapegoat for the contradiction between the ideal of rationality and the reality that defies the limits of reason. Eva Figes explains this ritualistic aspect of racism:

Our advanced civilization has tended to dispense with God and make man responsible for himself because we feel sufficiently in control of our own environment. When things go wrong our sense of outrage is appeased by laying the finger of blame on a human authority, whether it is the government or a doctor who made a wrong diagnosis. The finger of blame may be pointed with rationality, but if no obvious scapegoat or explanation can be found, if the malaise or disaster is large enough and apparently inexplicable, enlightened societies are quick enough to find an irrational scapegoat – such as a social minority, whether Jews, blacks or communists. (11-12)

The problem that we are confronted with here is more complicated than Figes explains, because the plight of blacks is not a tragedy but injustice. It results from the anti-human worldview embodied in the rationalist denial of the simple, inescapable reality that we do exercise absolute control over our own identities. In his comments on the passage cited above, Gordon states that the rationalist view of blacks is also anti-tragic, because “in such cases, there is not tragedy but blatant injustice, for the burden of bearing the

community's evils is placed upon the powerless instead of the powerful" (1995b 75). By the same token, *53cm* places the burden of refuting anthropology on its most vulnerable victims while absolving the anthropologists and the supporting institutional structures.

On the other hand, we can also argue that Bessora's persistent appeal to the suffering caused by anthropology is the affirmation of her faith in humanity. She engages anthropologists in a dialogue in order to demonstrate the errors of their ways, which is understandable since she is a member of the discipline. The problem is that anthropology did not evolve from argument but from a one-sided discourse. As Walton points out, a balanced argument ideally requires at least two actors who are committed to pursue their train of thought but are at the same time willing to adjust their argument upon compelling evidence provided by the other party (32). Anthropologists, however, excluded themselves from that dialectic. By claiming objectivity, they closed off dialogue with other cultures and presented their ideas as universally acknowledged fact. In the colonies, the relationship was sealed by the support of colonial administrators due to the relationship that Gary Wilder describes as follows: "government policies were informed by and produced by ethnographic knowledge just as ethnological science was informed by and produced administrative categories" (221). Racism is produced and perpetuated by this dogmatic view of the world that violently suppresses communities that ethnographers should have been dialoguing with. The problematic anthropological studies are not simply the result of individual scholars' errors as Bessora's novel suggests.

By adapting the framework of anthropology in order to criticize it, Bessora inevitably desecrates Baartman's memory. The *reductio ad absurdum* is not suitable in

this case because it compels her to ridicule Cuvier's treatment of Baartman in order to refute the premise of his experiment, but in so doing, she mocks Baartman as well. To avoid this pitfall, one must significantly distance the premise for Cuvier's study from Baartman. In failing to do so, Bessora missed the opportunity to prove that Baartman's suffering was a logical consequence rather than an accidental result of Cuvier's assumptions.

*53cm* exposes the problems that arise from the failure to use moral and situational factors to guide the refutation of arguments that rationalize injustice. Bessora misused Baartman by assaulting readers with the gory details of her humiliation in order to deal with extraneous themes such as contemporary immigration. The narrator's and author's tragic position provides important lessons for intellectuals today. Rather than use Baartman to provoke pity and shame, we should concentrate our energies on understanding the limitations of research and condemning our colleagues who defy them. It is Cuvier and his colleagues who bear the brunt of responsibility for Baartman's fate, and so condemning them should take precedence over provoking sympathy for her.

Bessora's treatment of Baartman is unethical because what Baartman needed was not further display but to be mourned as a human being. Baartman's suffering emerges from a profound sacrilege that cannot be reduced to a tool for appealing to readers' sympathies or to a historical specificity as Bessora and her critics have done. Our intellectual pursuits should honor Baartman's dignity that was so savagely violated, as was done during her funeral in South Africa on August 9, 2002. In his speech at the ceremony, President Thabo Mbeki said:



[T]oday, the gods would be angry with us if we did not, on the banks of the Gamtoos River, at the grave of Sarah Bartmann<sup>3</sup>, call out for the restoration of the dignity of Sarah Bartmann, of the Khoi-San, of the millions of Africans who have known centuries of wretchedness.

[. . .]

It was not the abused human being who was monstrous but those who abused her. It was not the lonely African woman in Europe, alienated from her identity and her motherland who was the barbarian, but those who treated her with barbaric brutality. (2002)

Intellectuals' failure to indict the anthropologists in the same manner as Mbeki did necessarily implicates them in the injustice that they ostensibly criticize. Their complacency calls into question the sensibility of Western-trained individuals, regardless of race and gender, to issues of human dignity. When knowledge and rational arguments are tied to the violation of human dignity, intellectuals must defy academic and artistic decorum to decry injustice, rather than engage the ideas behind the injustice in an impossible dialogue.

Cuvier's experiment was evil because by seeking to prove the improvable, it breached fundamental moral laws that every human being – even intellectuals – should respect. There are times when even those engaged in scientific pursuits must defer to the gods and temporarily abandon the precepts of reason.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Sharpley-Whiting, Sarah Bartmann was the name given to her while she was in England before being taken to France.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to determine how Bessora's novel ends up making problematic statements even though it has solid evidence that would demonstrate the common foundation of Baartman's experiences and that of contemporary immigrants. The evidence shows how Bessora successfully demonstrates that both 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and contemporary immigration laws reduce Africans to their physical attributes and suppress the social, historical and non-rational factors that play a determining role in their experiences. Both are based on a fallacy that human dignity and complexity can be rationally determined and confined.

The author compromises this profound and important statement through satire that raises ethical problems in a situation that is inherently unjust. The tragedy of this satire lies in its redundancy, for the protagonist's experiences alone provide sufficient grounds to reveal the common epistemology of anthropology and immigration laws. The satire also minimizes the tragic character of France in the contemporary context of migration, creating ambivalence that often works against the victims on whose behalf the author appeals. Consequently, Bessora's novel is a tragedy about the French Republic that violates the human dignity it claims to protect and about intellectuals who inadvertently condemn the victims of injustice because they avoid directly attacking the perpetrators of that injustice.

If *53 cm* seems in many ways pessimistic, the next chapter will turn to a narrative of romance and hope in Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*. I will argue that her novel shows how simple gestures such as loving relationships affirm the humanity of

Africans in the face of trying situations. It also demonstrates that intellectuals remain most effective in relationships with others.

## Chapter 5

### Tragic Immaturity in Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*

In the previous three chapters, we have seen that contradictions in the novels emerge from the protagonists' or the narrators' failure to integrate history into their worldview. The narrators appeal to the ideals and conscience of the French Republic, minimizing their knowledge of colonialism and migrants' experiences that disprove the agency of that conscience. The authors betray this bad faith through satire which inherently makes light of grave situations that the authors present themselves as attacking, calling into doubt the authors' recognition of the serious nature of injustice.

In Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*, we witness a similar contradiction between what people know and how they translate that knowledge into thought and action. The novel is about Malaïka, a young Cameroonian woman studying in France who falls in love with Salif, an illegal immigrant from Mali. Malaïka supports Salif and other *sans-papiers* as they launch a hunger strike intended to parallel the protest held at the Saint Bernard church in Paris in 1996. The author uses the protestors' suffering to appeal to France's conscience and sense of decency. Contrary to her wishful thinking, the public response is predictably cynical and the local media turns the protestors' emaciated bodies into a public spectacle. The strike ends with the death of one protestor and the subsequent repatriation of Salif on one of the infamous charter flights.

Malaïka does not find this intimate experience of racism and complacency sufficient grounds to question the efficacy of the Republic in respecting human dignity. Instead, she laments that the Republic has betrayed the ideals on which it was founded. She returns home to Cameroon with the hope that the system can somehow achieve better results. Her dream is curtailed by the reality of limited resources, cynicism and corruption, but she laments these vices as if they were peculiar only to Cameroon and not also behind her own tribulations in France. The question therefore arises: why does she persist in embracing the values of the Republic despite little evidence in both France and Africa that the Republic upholds justice? Why does she forgive the French Republic while being judgmental of her own country?

In response to these questions, I will argue in this chapter that Malaïka seems unable to handle the social contradictions about which she becomes more conscious while in France, and so she minimizes the issues rather than confronts them. She excuses racism as accidental rather than systemic, and blames the hostility towards African immigrants on the extreme right and its “trahison aux principes de la République” (35). This obstinate adherence to republican principles and denial of the realities that contradict them constitutes immaturity. As Lewis Gordon (1995b) explains, immaturity is the inability to comprehend the tragic nature of life, which is that the world does not exclusively follow the dictates of individual desires or noble ideals. “In a child’s world,” Gordon observes, “there is no room for tragedy because values in such a world are so serious that they pretend that they are what they are not” (81). By contrast, the adult world recognizes that values are simply a piece in the bigger puzzle of life:

In the adult world, values take on an ironic veneer. In the adult world, there are places in which justice and fairness are no longer relevant concerns. Even if it is argued that it is wrong for certain violations to occur, in the adult world such an argument is irrelevant, ultimately, if there is no will to change the fact that they still occur. (81)

Gordon's observations reflect the fundamental problem of the French Republic and of African intellectuals like Malaïka who believe in its capacity to redress the injustices that Africans confront. Both parties claim to value human equality and dignity, even though historical and contemporary realities show that these values are not accompanied by the political will to redress injustices suffered by Africans.

The immature worldview of the Republic also obscures the fact that Africans' suffering is not fortuitous but a logical consequence of these ideals. As Raymond Bett (1961) explains, racism and colonialism are informed by the myth that France is uniquely endowed with the ideal of human equality and duty bound to spread the gospel of the Revolution to the rest of mankind. This myth necessarily condemns France to consider non-European peoples as not completely human and therefore in need to be assimilated into French culture in order to be humanized. Bett succinctly captures this inextricable link between the Republic and racism:

The form of cultural imperialism which was bound to result from such questionable moralizing contained the notion of the right of a "superior" society to dominate and instruct a "lesser" one. Clearly put, the conquered were to absorb the customs and institutions of the conquerors; it was the "white man's burden" translated into the French by the word "assimilation." (30)

Given this continuity between racism, colonialism and the French Republic, one would agree with Bett that “[t]he vocabulary relating to the doctrine of assimilation and that relating to these republican ideals were the same” (30-31). Consequently, Malaïka’s hope that the Republic can respect the rights of Africans is similar to the proverbial expectation of mangoes from an orange tree.

Another element of Malaïka’s immaturity is her tendency to invoke goodwill as a means of evading the implications of her statements. She appeals to a cultural pride informed by negative stereotypes of Africans in order to portray herself as a concerned and benevolent individual. The narrator counts on the reader seeing Malaïka as a beacon of hope for a doomed continent and ignoring her implicit endorsement of the Republic and her unfairly pessimistic views of Africans. However, this maneuvering does not succeed because readers’ perceptions of the characters are informed by social reality and not solely by how the characters see themselves or would like to be seen. Consequently, Malaïka’s naiveté resembles that of a child who thinks that no one can see her because her eyes are closed.

Nonetheless, this immaturity can be traced to the Republic that invokes its innocence or the strength of its ideals in order to evade the reality that its oppressive history is transparent to the world, especially to Africans. As if to compensate for this contradiction, the French Republic promises interracial fraternity, human equality and progress to detract Africans’ attention from discrimination, colonialism and its active participation in Africa’s modern tragedies. Unfortunately, as Etoké’s novel shows, there are African immigrants and intellectuals who swallow this bait and trust the goodwill of the Republic even when their physical and social living conditions are unbearable.

The goal of this chapter is to identify the forces which contribute to this immature and ultimately dangerous vision of the world. I will propose that the French Republic curtails the development of adult sensibilities through colonialism, education and immigration laws which fragment the sexual, physical, social and intellectual dimensions of people's lives. These cultural and institutional forces prevent Malaïka, Salif and the other characters from establishing the continuities of experience over culture, time and space. Their fragmented identities work to the advantage of the Republic, because they subvert the individual integrity, social solidarity and world consciousness necessary for the characters to acquire a tragic and mature view of the Republic.

The first section will tackle the distortion of love and identity as a tool of imperialism. I will argue that French imperialism is particularly notorious for using the rhetoric of love as its guiding ideology, which it defines by negation of individual and social identities as well as social realities. In Etoké's novel, this problematic vision of love leads Malaïka to negate the continent while affirming it. Her proclaimed sympathies are intricately tied to misconceptions of African culture and her immersion in French education since childhood. This dynamic is particularly evident in her criticism of African cultures for prudishness in their consideration of sexual matters. Her faulty judgment indicates that she may not have undergone initiation as an important rite of passage that provides sex education to the youth. Her predicament condemns to her a double immaturity, both within African societies that consider the un-initiated as children, and within French republican ideology that is inherently immature and ironically deems Africans immature.



The second section will demonstrate that the Republic's suppression of non-republican and non-French identities creates a false dichotomy between reason and emotion. This dichotomy misleads individuals into distancing emotion from foresight and rigorous analysis of their social conditions. Malaika sees her role in the *sans-papiers* protest as that of providing benevolent support to Salif and his comrades, while the protestors seek to provoke sentimental reactions among French observers that are ambiguous and unlikely to be forthcoming. This miscalculation reflects negatively on Malaika more than the protestors, because as a university student she has the opportunity to study the historical background of the protestors' struggle and realize that the protestors' expectations are largely based on wishful thinking.

Malaika's failure to put her intellectual tools to use calls into doubt the value of French education to Africa and, more importantly, the foundation of the French education system itself. While African scholars such as Gadji (1990) and Kom (2000) have rightly traced the intellectual impotence of African graduates to the inability of the French education system to meet Africa's needs, they have omitted the incapacity of the French education system to prepare its graduates to meet any human challenges. Even within the borders of France, intellectuals have expressed concern about the ability of their graduates to tackle real life issues. Michel Crozier, for example, laments that the French elites are "impuissantes car, quel que soit leur engagement partisan, elles parlent ce qui apparaît maintenant à tous leurs concitoyens comme une langue de bois" (8).

In the third section, I will argue that the republican love ethic imposes another false dichotomy, this time between emotion and the corporeal. This dichotomy privileges goodwill and noble ideals over physical suffering, leading Africans to offer their bodies

as objects to prick the conscience of the French Republic. In Etoké's novel, this apparent self-immolation is contradicted by the fact that Salif refuses to consummate his relationship with Malaïka. She does not notice this paradox because her immature view of the world equates abstinence with nobility and innocence. Despite these contradictions, Salif and Malaïka end their relationship amicably by accepting the historical and legal forces against them. Their resilience represents an important element of hope, for it shows that even the power of an empire cannot quash that of human dignity.

### **Culture and the Politics of Affection**

The title of Etoké's novel, *Un amour sans papiers*, captures the interaction between intimacy, law and the Republic in contemporary immigration to France. But while it suggests that the contradictory immigration policies guide and seal the fate of Malaïka and Salif's relationship, the novel reveals that the roots of the couple's problems transcend immigration laws. Salif's deportation is just the tip of the iceberg of the larger problem of imperialism, which is its infiltration of Africans' lives at intimate levels.

This crisis is peculiar in French imperialism that distinguishes itself from the imperialism of other Western countries by its unabashed appeals to the rhetoric of love. For the last two centuries, French politicians and intellectuals have framed their country's oppressive relationship with Africa as a labor of love by proclaiming to civilize backward peoples. At the same time, they expect the colonized to ignore the inherent oppression and instead express gratitude towards France for purportedly redeeming them. The

modern legacy of this ideology is behind the theatrical nature of African and French relations as captured by Verschave below:

Quand la France s'adresse à un président africain, ce n'est pas un Etat qui parle à un autre, c'est un homme qui traite un "ami." Q'importe si l'environnement économique et politique se dégrade! Dans une atmosphère prérépublicaine se nouent des alliances interfamiliales. Leurs intrigues, qui dégénèrent parfois en confusion totale (les Giscard et les Bokassa), mêlent leurs aléas aux relations internationales [. . .] Quand cela tourne mal, on ne peut plus avoir d'autre choix que la fuite en avant. (1994 10-11)

The above passage reflects at least two fundamental principles of affection on which the French empire is based. One is the immature assumption that friendship is sufficient to overcome the prevailing conditions. On several occasions, France has persisted in supporting African dictators despite evidence of indescribable atrocities and the tide of negative public opinion. The most notorious example over the last twenty years is France's political and military support of the *Interhamwe* militias that carried out the Rwandan genocide. The other subtler principle of affection stipulates that Africa is not worthy of equitable relationships with the Western world, and so it should welcome any form of relationship with France even if that relationship is oppressive. African heads of states are particularly vulnerable to this logic because they lack a broad power base at home since the republican institution is rooted in colonial rule. They are easily flattered by France's diplomatic and political support which they not only need for their own survival, but which they also believe they do not deserve as Africans.

Although Achille Mbembe (2001) evades addressing the specific nature of French imperialism, his remarks reflect the distortion of affection that Verschave describes. Mbembe notes that the imperial love framework absolves the colonizers of responsibility for injustice by portraying them as benevolent towards an undeserving African continent. He notes: “[T]he colonial state portrays itself as a free gift, proposing to relieve its object of poverty and free it from debased condition by raising it to the level of a human being” (34-35). Under this rubric, the colonized are expected to express gratitude by “freely” giving their labor to the state. In the meantime, the state insists that it does not owe Africans anything. Mbembe notes, “The figure of obedience and domination rests on the assertion that the state is under no social obligation to the colonized and the latter is owed nothing by the state but that which the state, in its infinite goodness, has deigned to grant and reserves the right to revoke at any moment” (35).

These institutional realities demonstrate that the republican framework defines love by negation of the social and physical environment. This kind of love subsequently justifies the fallacy that the consequences of human actions are wholly dependent on human willpower and intention. It also negates human beings because it erects humanity as a goal to be pursued in order to portray France as having a head start in the race towards it. These dynamics would explain why the French Republic stubbornly portrays itself as the benevolent big brother of Africa even when it commits and supports atrocities against the people.

What adds insult to injury, however, is the fact that the Republic proclaims its innocence or goodwill towards Africans when confronted with the consequences of its actions. This behavior defies common sense and often provokes strong emotions of

anger, disbelief or ironic amusement among observers. Aimé Césaire was understandably angry and exasperated when he issued the following indictment in *Discours sur le colonialisme*: “Le grave est que ‘l’Europe’ est moralement, spirituellement indéfendable” (8). He went on to say: “La malédiction la plus commune en cette matière est d’être dupe de la bonne foi d’une hypocrisie collective, habile à mal poser les problèmes pour mieux légitimer les odieuses solutions qu’on leur apporte” (8). Césaire articulates the tragic reality that the good intentions are not sufficient grounds for preventing injustice or absolving oneself of implication in it.

In *Peau noire masque blancs*, Fanon addresses the impact of this naïve worldview on intimate relationships. He argues that because racism had set human beings on a collision course against the world and themselves, it had subverted healthy interracial relationships. As he explains in the introduction, the casualties of this superficial conflict were love and understanding:

S’il est vrai que la conscience est une activité de transcendance, nous devons savoir aussi que cette transcendance est hantée par le problème de l’amour et de la compréhension. L’homme est un OUI vibrant aux harmonies cosmiques. Arraché, dispersé, confondu, condamné à voir se dissoudre les unes après les autres les vérités par lui élaborées, il doit cesser de projeter dans le monde une antinomie qui lui est coexistante. (6)

Racism sabotages love relationships by defining blacks and whites as negations of each other rather than as human beings with inalienable dignity. It also impedes understanding because it negates the role that social and environmental factors play in human destiny. Consequently, it distorts love into a force that appreciates human beings by what they are

not rather than by what they are, or by contradicting social expectations of them that are often pre-determined by racist myths. It also promotes the illusion that all the world needs is goodwill and tenderness to resolve complex social issues. At the individual level, such love creates an inferiority complex because it hampers people's engagement with their environment. He therefore reiterates: “[L]’amour vrai – vouloir pour les autres ce qu’on postule pour soi, quand cette postulation intègre les valeurs permanentes de la réalité humaine, – requiert la mobilisation d’instances psychiques fondamentalement libérées des conflits inconscients” (33).

Fanon illustrates this powerful argument with analyses of different forms of pathology that affect both blacks and whites. He says that in Mayotte Capécia's novel, the black female protagonist who seeks to marry a white man is willing to accept any form of treatment because “[elle] se sent inférieure qu’elle aspire à se faire admettre dans le monde blanc” (48). In Fanon's interpretation of René Maran's novel, Maran's black protagonist proposes to a mulatto woman because “[i]l cherche la tranquillité, la permission dans les yeux du Blanc, car c'est ‘l'Autre’” (61). Meanwhile, white female psychiatric patients exhibited pathologies informed by the myth of the black man's sexual prowess, so that “quand la femme vit le phantasme de viol par un nègre, c'est en quelque sorte la réalisation d'un rêve personnel, d'un souhait intime” (145). In all these cases, love is informed by an inferiority complex propagated through racist myths and dehumanizing social conditions.

Moreover, since racism appoints blacks as the embodiment of negation, love is also expressed by negating them in their totality. Fanon aptly captures this phenomenon as follows: “Quand on m'aime, on me dit c'est malgré ma couleur. Quand on me déteste,

on ajoute que ce n'est pas à cause de ma couleur... Ici ou là, je suis prisonnier du cercle infernal" (94).

Fanon's analysis has been attacked as supporting misogynous ideals and ignoring the social and economic conditions in which women, both black and white, live. However, such arguments ignore the fact that his main concern was with the difficult and oppressive economic conditions that contributed to the development of inferiority complexes among characters and psychiatric patients he discusses. He asserts that "l'amour authentique demeurera impossible tant que ne seront pas expulsés ce sentiment d'infériorité" (1952 33). In his chapter on Mannoni's *Psychologie de la colonisation*, he argues that this inferiority complex is socially produced. He attacks Mannoni's attribution of an inferiority complex to African heredity while ignoring the specific socio-economic conditions that produce it. He reiterates in the chapter's concluding paragraph, "Si l'on ajoute que beaucoup d'Européens vont aux colonies parce que là-bas il leur devient possible de s'enrichir en peu de temps, que, sauf de rares exceptions, le colonialiste est un commerçant ou plutôt un trafiquant, on aura saisi la psychologie de l'homme qui provoque chez l'autochtone 'le sentiment d'infériorité'" (87). Degrading relationships are inextricably linked to socio-economic conditions; consequently, the major path to healthy relationships is "une restructuration du monde" (66). The question of identity remains central to love relationships because an affirming identity, like love, is based on a healthy interaction with one's spatial, temporal and social environment.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) goes a step further than Fanon by arguing that the distortion of intimate relationships is a deliberate imperial policy, for imperialism's most

powerful adversary is social solidarity. Through racism, imperialism fragments an individual's integrity and his or her intimate relationships with others:

Analysts of the interpersonal dynamics of racism point out that Whites fear in Blacks those qualities they project onto Blacks that they fear most in themselves. By labeling Blacks as sexually animalistic and by dominating Blacks, Whites aim to repress these dimensions of their own inner being [. . .] All of these emotions – the fact that Whites know that Blacks are human, the fact that men love women, and the fact that women have deep feelings for one another – must be distorted on the emotional level of the erotic for oppressive systems to endure. Sexuality in the individual, interpersonal domain of power becomes annexed by intersecting oppressions in the structural domain of power in order to ensure the smooth operation of domination. (171)

This scenario is the accomplishment of rationality that maintains the fallacy that reason is supreme over all other dimensions of human existence. It leads individuals to suppress the emotional and instinctual aspects of their being and societies to project the resulting collective alienation on the Other. In this framework, blacks are appointed the scapegoats who symbolize that which rationality seeks to eliminate. The resulting social trauma fragments society and facilitates social control.

This interaction between racism and the distortion of human relationships implies that an individual's alienation and difficult relationships are a strong indicator of socio-economic oppression. This view corresponds with Soyinka's argument that individual suffering is often a symptom of imbalance at a cosmic level.



From this perspective, one can argue that Malaïka's articulation of her identity is linked to her problematic perception of her relationship with Salif and is a symptom of the oppressive nature of the Republic. Her alienation seems evident from the first page. The novel begins with "Je m'appelle Malaïka E [ . . . ] née en 1972 dans un pays situé au cœur de l'Afrique centrale" (9). Malaïka describes herself as belonging to "cette nouvelle génération issue de la bourgeoisie post-coloniale" and her parents as "les enfants de la colonisation" (9). The sequence by which Malaïka introduces herself flouts the African traditional practice of identifying oneself by providing the names, clans and specific regions from which one hails. It also uses France as the foundation of identity, which is evident in the description of the parents as "appartenant à la classe des évolués, ils fréquentèrent les écoles françaises, chantèrent la Marseillaise et eurent pour ancêtres les Gaulois" (9). This self-perception is inherently negative because it minimizes Africa's complexity and reduces both the individuals and their societies to colonial domination. The links to France also hint that the novel's imagined audience is not only French, but one that would be unable or reluctant to grasp the concept of particular African identities.

The unwillingness to articulate the specific African identities paradoxically dissipates when the narration positions the characters in France. "[U]n pays situé au cœur de l'Afrique" is identified as Cameroon when Malaïka mentions her parents' return from their studies in France. The parents arrived with "les bras chargés de diplômes et la tête pleine d'espérance: ils souhaitaient construire un Cameroun fort, un pays d'avenir" (9). However, they envision Cameroon not as it is but as they hope it will be, presumably modified according to the ideas that they have learned. The legacy of this history is carried by younger generations of Africans who, like Malaïka, are born after

independence but have internalized their parents' sympathies for the French Republic. Cilas Kemedjio points to this factor in his comments on Malaïka's background and notes: "La carte postale des générations nées après les indépendances africaines est certes tributaire du matraquage propagandiste des médias qui encensent la belle France, mais elle est surtout le résultat d'une construction patiemment élaborée par la trajectoire des premières générations d'étudiants africains en France" (2003 368).

Malaïka's ethnic origins emerge once the novel locates her in France. However, she does not volunteer this information but is compelled to do so by extenuating circumstances. While walking in the streets of Lille one day, she meets Jean-Jacques Etamé, the president of "l'association des jeunes Douala de Lille." Jean-Jacques recognizes her as Douala after spotting her necklace which, she says, "je portais discrètement à mon cou car il représentait, les 'armoiries' de notre étnie, le serpent à deux têtes. *Ekélékougoum koum*, plus précisément" (13). This hesitant revelation of identity leaves the absurd impression that France is the framework through which Malaïka appreciates her own culture.

One can justifiably argue that Malaïka's trajectory of self-discovery is not unusual, since as we have already seen in our reference to *fadenya*, contact with outside cultures forms an important part of individual self-discovery. V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) makes a similar argument about Western-educated Africans who promote their own cultures through social science. He states that "one might conceive the intellectual signs of otherness not as a project of the foundation of a new science, but as a mode of reexamining the journeys of human knowledge in a world of competing propositions and choices" (79). However, the *prise de conscience* of Malaïka or Mudimbe's African

intellectual differs from *fadenya* because colonialism does not offer “competing propositions and choices” but demands the unequivocal assimilation of Western culture. Moreover, while *fadenya* culminates with the integration of an individual into the society and guarantees that individual historical relevance and longevity, assimilation and integration permanently assign Africans to the position of the Other no matter how much of the culture they assimilate.

At the heart of the reluctance to embrace ethnic identities, especially among African intellectuals, also lies the erroneous belief that the Republic offers an ideal model for Africa and that its more faithful application in the continent would resolve ethnic tensions exacerbated by colonialism. However, this logic inadvertently criminalizes African ethnicity and implies that African cultures are irrelevant to modern challenges. Kemedjio (1999) observes that faith in the republican model also betrays intellectuals’ reluctance to detach themselves from the colonial epistemological framework and their inability to carry out a profound analysis of the problems that their societies face. He argues that “[l]’identité du discours entre la propagande de la ‘croisade ethnique suicidaire’ et la rhétorique de la défense et illustration de l’idéal républicain est troublante [. . .] je voudrais y voir une manifestation d’un réflexe élitiste francophone, c’est-à-dire le réflexe d’opposer les lieux communs de l’humanisme occidental à des questions complexes et nécessitant souvent des innovations ardues” (1999 83). He reminds his readers that the republican model is not a social antidote but in fact the agent of Africa’s most pressing dilemmas, saying that “[l]a colonisation de l’Afrique, on l’oublie un peu trop souvent, est l’œuvre de la République française et non de la monarchie” (1999 84).

The republican model has in fact sustained inter-ethnic conflicts in the continent over the last few decades because of its inherent aversion to non-national identities. Under the colonial assimilation policy, the French Republic attempted to subordinate all African identities to the single rubric of “universal” values. Since no values exist independent of people and their environment, “universal” inevitably meant the values of the French Republic. On an institutional level, this ideology reflects what Bett refers to as the “French penchant for administrative centralization” that “increased with the Great Revolution when it seemed politically desirable as a means by which to stave off the reactionary forces of provincialism” (22). It is, therefore, inevitable that the African political and intellectual bourgeoisie who are adherents of the Republic attack ethnic groups under dubious claims that they do not embrace an abstract identity devoid of historical or environmental peculiarities.

The longevity of this ideology is maintained by the education system. In his study of the French elite, Ezra Suleiman (1978) observes that the obsessive need to control identity, morality and thinking was behind Napoleon’s ambition to establish an “Imperial University” which would manipulate people’s beliefs to serve the needs of the state while suppressing rival institutions that “might threaten to undo the work that the state schools were accomplishing” (19). The Catholic Church became one of the first main casualties of this policy because, as Patrick Bidelman (1982) observes, French politicians saw the Church as a supporter of the *ancien régime* with special access to women. Politicians therefore wrestled women’s education from the control of the Church, propagating an education system that would train women to adopt the bourgeois model of womanhood symbolized by the image of the “femme au foyer.” Jules Ferry, who is famous for his

articulation of France's obligation to civilize Africans, was also one of the politicians who argued that "Women must belong to Science or the Church" (qtd. by Bidelman 17). This historical precedent proves that the assimilation policy that sought to bring African cultures and identities under a universal rubric was a continuation of, rather than departure from, the republican ethic.

However, the racial dimension of assimilation assigns Africans a permanently inferior status, placing African graduates of the French education system in the paradoxical situation of being intimate strangers to the Republic. This situation is evident in the fact that Malaïka demonstrates significant familiarity with French culture but is not spared the contradictions of the bureaucratic system once she arrives in France. While still in Cameroon, she knew of the soccer clubs Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Olympique de Marseille (OM). She says that being raised in such a bourgeois family "[c]'est être initiée à la gastronomie française [. . .] C'est aussi fêter Noël avec un sapin en plastique, fréquenter les établissements scolaires français [. . .] C'est enfin prendre l'avion à dix huit ans après avoir réussi son baccalauréat, débarquer à Roissy un jour de septembre 90 et commencer une nouvelle vie" (10). When she arrives in France, she rudely discovers that the culture for which she was prepared does not accept her and that her perception of it was based on misrepresentation. She becomes a victim of the bureaucracy that demands a *carte de séjour* in order to register for university classes but simultaneously demands proof of registration in order to provide the document. Malaïka's education in Cameroon prepares her to attain adulthood within French culture, a culture which does not allow Africans to develop such a status.

However, Malaïka does not consider this contradiction as important as proving that she is free of the biases and prejudices of the French culture in which she has been immersed since childhood. She does not provide details of how she finally acquired a *carte de séjour*. Instead, she tells of an incident in which she spotted three young women in veils. She observes, “Instinctivement, je ne sais pas pourquoi, je me suis dirigée vers elles” (11). However, she immediately contradicts this claim by naively revealing that she knows the reason for her interest in the women:

Pour être honnête, il convient de vous avouer que mon esprit était pétri de préjugés contre ces jeunes filles [ . . . ] Les émissions transmises par satellites s'enfoncèrent et s'imprimèrent dans nos cerveaux conditionnés par une conception française du monde selon laquelle le voile était symbole religieux ostentatoire, un signe de non-intégration [ . . . ] Heureusement, au contact de ces trois jeunes filles, je me rendis compte qu'elles avaient juste choisi de vivre leur foi au quotidien, ni plus, ni moins [ . . . ] Je découvris que le dialogue et l'affection pouvaient faire tomber le masque des préjugés. (11-12)

Malaïka's curiosity is spurred by her desire to distinguish herself from France. However, she does so by emphasizing her different intentions rather than her beliefs. Like the Republic, she minimizes collective identities that defy the control of French culture, and does so by reducing the women's identity to personal choice. This simplification contradicts the reality that religion transcends choice because it also embodies history and social identity. Malaïka diminishes the women's identities further by calling the women “ces trois Françaises d'origines algérienne et marocaine” (12). The women are “Françaises,” as opposed to a more neutral term such as “citoyennes françaises.” Their

ethnicity is described by their point of origin rather than as a functional identity within France.

Her observations are largely based on cheap sentimentalism that does not examine the complex social forces behind the different issues that she raises. Equating prejudice to lack of affection is simplistic and erroneous because it diminishes the oppression that accompanies prejudices. Malaïka also seems to accept the already problematic concept of integration; what she challenges is the view that girls wearing the veils should be seen as not being integrated.

Malaïka speaks as though she is criticizing the republican ideal of national identity when in fact she is affirming its supremacy. Her efforts to protect the image of the Republic help her evade the reality that she has been socially raised in a cultural system that rejects her. Without challenging the moral authority of the Republic, she can pretend that whatever French prejudices she may have assimilated are so superficial that they can disappear by expressing affection for those against whom the Republic discriminates. Once she determines that she is free of anti-Muslim prejudice, the women disappear from the novel, so that both she and the reader know little about them other than the fact that the French political opinion is against what they wear. Her apparent unawareness of these implications in turn reinforces the reader's perception of her as immature.

This immaturity is once again apparent when she reduces African cultural practices – particularly music, food and parties – to outward symbols without historical significance or social agency. She tries to camouflage this reductionism by proclaiming nostalgia for Cameroon, but against her background and social realities, these

proclamations sound hollow. While in France, she says that she enjoyed Cameroonian music: “j’écoutais de la musique camerounaise, espérant noyer mon mal du pays dans des airs de *zingué* ou de *Petit Pays*” (12), which is striking given that in Cameroon she listened to singers such as Snoop Doggy Dog and Toni Braxton.

This contradiction becomes more apparent in her depiction of culturally-inspired funeral wakes. The “Association des Jeunes Camerounais de La Région Lilloise” holds a wake for the grandfather of a student. Malaïka describes the reunion as “une mascarade à laquelle prenaient part la famille du défunt et un nombre impressionnant d’amis et de connaissances” (29). She mocks the ceremony when she states that “[I]es uns s’improvisaient pasteurs, les autres professeurs de chant” and sarcastically adds, “Tous les ingrédients nécessaires à la dérision étaient présents. Mais personne ne riait, l’heure était grave” (30). Even though the participants do not laugh, it is evident that Malaïka finds the scenario amusing, hence her depiction of guests as primarily interested in the Cameroonian dishes served at the wake:

J’assistai alors à l’incessant va et vient des assiettes pleines à ras bord, des verres remplis de bière, des mâchoires en mouvement et des bouches huileuses et baveuses. La veillée mortuaire sans mort se transforma en une joyeuse agape africaine [. . .] je me rendis compte que ces veillées permettaient surtout à des Africains déphasés, affamés et en quête de rencontres, de se retrouver autour d’un mets local qui produisait le même effet que la Madeleine de Proust. (31)

Malaïka’s comparison of the wake with the famous scene in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* is inappropriate and logically problematic. Proust’s narrator belongs to a bourgeois family, and the savoring of the cake captures a moment of self-indulgence.



This situation hardly compares to a wake among African students living in France, missing their home country, and sympathizing with a friend who has lost his grandfather.

One may concede that the wake appears superficial given its geographical context in France. One may also justify the wake as an excuse for lonely African students to get together, if it had not been for the fact that the students do not organize a wake following the death of Francis, a Zairean occupant of Malaika's residential building. The residents are awakened one night by police sirens following the discovery of Francis's body. The syringe in his left arm and the gun in his right hand are read as evidence that he was involved in drug trafficking. No wake is held for him. Instead, Malaika self-righteously laments that his death "provoqua une prise de conscience dans la communauté étudiante africaine. Nos liens de solidarité se renforcèrent et chacun posa un œil protecteur sur son voisin" (51).

If the African students held a wake for Francis, this time it would have been, to paraphrase Malaika, "une veillée mortuaire avec un mort." Instead, the students take comfort in cultural pride and solidarity. Their appeal to these ideals diminishes the agency of African cultures and indicates that the youths limit African traditions to the boundaries of the continent, the older generation and the past. It also legitimizes Fanon's concern expressed in *Les Damnés de la terre* that the Western-trained African intellectual "va se laisser hypnotiser par ces lambeaux momifiés qui, stabilisés, signifient au contraire la négation, le dépassement, l'invention" (212). He argues that this contradicts the agency of culture which is in reality a tool that enables human beings to interact with their environment.

Malaïka is blind to the fact that her expression of love for African culture conforms to the racist ideology that denies Africans agency and reduces them to objects of affection. Her goodwill cannot mask her low self-esteem informed by largely pessimistic attitudes about her own people. In *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (1995a), Gordon describes how such gestures manifest bad faith:

[S]ome blacks exoticize blackness – they throw themselves into blackness so as to evade responsibility for themselves as people who have to make choices in an antiblack world. This immersion into blackness for the purpose of evasion is a possibility of everyone in an antiblack world. (117)

Racism offers both blacks and whites the opportunity to proclaim love for blacks as a way of avoiding taking a position in relation to certain attitudes. For blacks, however, this opportunity means degrading one's self. Malaïka manifests bad faith because she wants to avoid the reality that imperialism presents only two options, to accept French culture with its inherent contradictions – including Africans' demeaning place in it – or to accept African cultures with the inherent disapproval from French circles that that choice may imply. She opts to criticize African cultures while affirming her critique as well intentioned. This middle ground necessarily favors the empire whose goal is to suppress the agency of African cultures in contemporary times.

Malaïka's confidence in sentimentalism to hide her bad faith betrays a child-like view of the world in which meaning is always literal and never contextual. This immaturity denies the reality that when Africans use colonial languages in their criticism of their own cultures, they necessarily affirm the colonial ambition to suppress those cultures. Boubacar Boris Diop (2005b) makes a similar argument with regards to books

by African intellectuals that almost singularly blame African cultures for the continent's dilemmas:

Le discours afro-pessimiste donne parfois l'impression de s'adresser davantage à l'Occident qu'à l'Afrique.

Et ce n'est pas faire injure à ses auteurs que de signaler le fait suivant: leurs ouvrages ont été davantage lus à l'étranger que dans leurs propres pays. Il est même tentant de se demander si l'afro-pessimisme n'est pas l'invention d'un certain Occident. Il se pourrait bien qu'il soit une part de son héritage culturel [. . .] Dans une lettre, un ami linguiste de Niamey résume avec un brin d'amertume l'ambiguïté de la situation: "Nous disons sur nous-mêmes toute sorte de choses, par souci d'honnêteté et sans trop y réfléchir. Mais vient le jour où un Stephen Smith nous les jette à la figure et cela nous laisse perplexes: nous ne sommes plus tout à fait sûrs d'avoir dit exactement cela." (95)

Diop is referring to Stephen Smith, author of *Négrologie* which cites books by African intellectuals in its derogatory and racist arguments about the continent. His concern about the sensitivity of African intellectuals to their audiences echoes Sartre's (1948a) criticism of writers who attempt to deny that responsibility for their readers' interpretations. Sartre argues that the writer "ne doit jamais se dire: 'Bah, c'est à peine si j'aurai trois mille lecteurs' mais 'qu'arriverait-il si tout le monde lisait ce que j'écris?'" (29). Etoké's novel seems to answer this question by attempting to absolve Malaïka of her pessimism and portraying her as a well intentioned, selfless individual who loves Africa despite the chaotic world that she thinks it is. However, this portrait exposes her as affirming the negative stereotypes of the continent that she ironically laments.

The search for refuge in benevolence coincides with Malaïka's apparent belief that African traditions, unlike the Republican ideal of human equality, are irrelevant to modern challenges. This attitude is, in turn, informed by a distorted view of African traditions that is most conspicuous when she criticizes her father for not telling her about the birds and the bees. Her disapproval is spurred by a call from her father in Cameroon the morning after Malaïka and Salif meet for the first time at a party. Malaïka does not tell her father what she did the previous night, purportedly because sexuality is a taboo subject in African traditions. She explains, "Contrairement à ce qui se passe en France, où depuis Mai '68, la libération des mœurs a permis l'instauration d'un dialogue franc et sans tabou, entre parents et enfants, l'Afrique est encore marquée par une certaine pudeur qui se mue souvent en une pudibonderie maladive" (24).

This assessment is tenuous. As I intimated in my analysis of Diome's allusion to the events of May 1968, the demonstrations were a milestone in the fight against the French state control of women's reproduction more than against moral prudishness. Consequently, the role of the events in provoking frank discussions about sexuality among French parents and children is largely a matter of conjecture. Moreover, it is not clear why Malaïka's failure to inform her father about her activities the previous night is significant, since at the age of twenty-seven she presumably does not need her father's approval for everything she does. Besides, the pertinence of sex education is not evident since she and Salif do not sleep together.

Malaïka's criticism of African traditions is slightly amusing because it flouts one of the fundamental principles of sex education in many parts of Africa, which is that the information is transmitted by members of the same gender. Among the Gikuyu in Kenya,

for example, a girl's sex education is not her parents' responsibility, much less her father's. Sex education takes place primarily during the initiation ceremony, and outside the ceremony, it takes place in young people's consultations with their grandparents or their parents' siblings and peers. The situation may be slightly different among the Douala, but the idea that the responsibility of a girl's sex education falls upon her father seems out of place. Nonetheless, Malaïka blames her father for her lack of sexual experience, lamenting that "il est bien loin le jour où un père africain parlera à sa fille de la pillule et du préservatif, tellement la sexualité des jeunes filles est considérée comme un sujet blasphématoire" (28).

The tragic element of Malaïka's apparent ignorance of African sex education is its exposure of the fact that she may not have undergone initiation. According to many African traditions, this would mean that socially she remains a child, unaware of customs and philosophy that are often transmitted during initiation. Without roots in her society, her ability to construct an adult consciousness of the world is curtailed, and this eventually affects her relationship with Salif.

The serious implications of not undergoing initiation ceremonies are a direct result of the undeserved disrepute that initiation has suffered over the years. Christianity, colonialism and feminism reduce the ceremonies to physical rituals and specifically to female circumcision. Yet initiation is a crucial and complex rite of passage because it provides young men and women with opportunities to match their physical maturity with social and psychological maturity. The physical pain that accompanies initiation ceremonies is intended as a symbolic reminder that life is not devoid of pain or suffering and that this suffering can be endured in the context of social solidarity. In other words,

initiation rites represent a threshold for gaining an adult or tragic consciousness of the world. By contrast, education, especially within the Republic, encourages intellectuals to create a utopian world without pain or contradictions. This illusion effectively renders individuals socially irrelevant and burdens them with an inferiority complex. P. Masila Mutisya captures this distinction when he observes that initiation rites of passage “are more proactive than Western curricula and are oriented towards developing youths who are independent thinkers and creators; thus confidence and high self-esteem become the central focus” (98).

The condemnation of body modification during initiation is anti-tragic because it evades the reality of body pain and the fact human beings generally pursue some form of body modification as they go through puberty. Unlike African societies in which permanent marking of the body such as tattooing, piercing and circumcision is carried out during rituals such as initiation, Western societies abandon their teenagers to pursue physical adornment on their own, sometimes with tragic results. Medical experts (Selekman 2003; Stirn 2003) record graphic evidence of American youths of European descent, both male and female, who pierce rings through their genital organs. This phenomenon is uncommon in Africa and reveals the irony and immaturity of the condemnations of female circumcision.

The Western disapproval of African initiation rites reflects what Gordon calls “the body in bad faith,” for it denies the fact identity includes the body and therefore cannot be restricted to the dictates of the mind. He criticizes the emphasis on rationality as an attempt to portray “human reality as a form of ‘pure’ consciousness” and as a contradiction of the reality that human lives are “consciousness embodied” (1995a 29).

This bad faith shares affinities with racism, for as Fanon points out, “[a]voir la phobie du nègre, c’est avoir peur de la biologique. Car le nègre n’est que biologique” (1952 134). Bad faith towards the body is in turn a form of immaturity because it denies the tragic element of human existence.

Malaïka’s status as an adult who misunderstands initiation explains the continuity between her naïve ideals and her discomfort with sexuality that I shall examine in the third section. Her predicament is similar to that of the protagonists in novels by Cameroonian writers such as Mongo Beti (1957), Ferdinand Oyono (1956) and Calixthe Beyala (1987; 1988). In their works, absent or distorted experiences of initiation are often accompanied by the lack of sexual relations – as is the case with Medza in Beti’s *Mission Terminée* and Toundi in Oyono’s *Une vie de boy* – or by demeaning relations, as is the case with Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* and *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*. In all the cases, the protagonists exhibit naïve attitudes towards the social conditions in which they live and often seek refuge in friendships with European characters. Their alienation confirms that maturity requires developing an adult consciousness of human beings as simultaneously physical, emotional, intellectual and social. Malaïka lacks this holistic view of life due to her shallow roots in her African identity and her assumption of the negative identity as the Other within the French Republic.

### **A Second-Hand Emotion? Love in the Time of Migration**

The analysis so far reveals that love within the republican framework is a manifestation of bad faith. At the global level, discourses of love attempt to mask the

colonial relationship and racist ideology that inform French-African politics. At the individual level, affection is expressed as cultural pride in order to mask cultural alienation and pessimistic views towards African cultures. The same dynamics emerge in Malaïka's relationship with Salif and are accompanied by intellectual laxity that ends up being costly, especially with regards to the *sans-papiers* hunger strike.

Malaïka's relationship with Salif begins in an aura of cultural pride that is again devoid of material considerations. They meet at a club with the strange English name "Black and African Feeling" and introduce themselves as students. Malaïka says that their passion was ignited by their mutual concern for Africa which, however, sounds pretentious:

De fil en aiguille, nous nous retrouvâmes en train de parler de mon sujet de conversation favori: l'Afrique. Nous avons la même analyse. Il fallait que notre continent se prenne en main, qu'il sorte de la léthargie et du marasme économique dans lesquels l'ont plongé des dirigeants kleptocrates, peu scrupuleux et avides d'argent. (21)

The manner in which Malaïka pronounces "l'Afrique" is demeaning and slightly amusing. She speaks of it as if it was an object and not the continent from which she hails, but is seemingly unaware of her objectification because she is absorbed in her goodwill. Worse still, she is unable to see that in reality, she endorses the stereotypes of Africa while attempting to portray herself as distanced enough to diagnose the continent's problems. It is therefore not surprising that the passage cited above is followed by a sequence of the clichés propagated by the Western media about Africa such as poverty,



AIDS, high population growth rates and desperate migrants looking for better opportunities overseas.

With a debilitating self and social identity, Malaïka and Salif's relationship is destined to negate more than affirm them, a fact that becomes more apparent in their use of Western icons as terms of affection. Malaïka initially describes Salif as "mon Apollon," evoking the Greek god famed for his handsomeness (23). Salif calls her names such as "notre Jeanne d'Arc, la Marianne des Etats-Unis d'Afrique" (43-33). Meanwhile, Malaïka is pleased to imagine herself "en Amazone des temps modernes, à la conquête des Droits et de la Liberté" (43). The narcissism in these appellations is evident, for both Salif and Malaïka would like to see themselves as saviors of the continent. It also affirms the republican model because it imagines Africa fashioned within the rubric of the republic rather than within their societies' histories and aspirations.

These appellations point not only to the naiveté of Malaïka but also to the narrator's lack of sophistication. Malaïka often refers to Salif as "mon rayon de soleil" in the third person, yet such terms are usually employed in the second person and often in intimate moments. The novel employs these terms liberally, sometimes in concentrated doses that remind one of the love letters exchanged between teenagers. An example of this appears in Salif's response to Malaïka's anger at his refusal to consummate their relationship: "J'adore quand tu me regardes avec tes yeux de tigresse en chaleur. Malaïka, soleil de ma vie, astre de mes nuits, oxygène de mon esprit, déesse de mon cœur, je me consume d'amour pour toi" (52). Such speeches betray linguistic excess more than the poetry and subtlety characteristic of romantic relationships between adults.

The other weakness emerging from insufficient grounding in their own history and identity is the couple's lack of self-confidence. Salif does not tell Malaïka that he is no longer a student. He is eventually compelled to admit his situation as a *sans-papiers* when Malaïka shows up at his doorstep after secretly following him to the abandoned building in which he lives. However, the novel does not reveal if Malaïka reveals her privileged background to Salif, although she does admit to the reader that “[c]ontrairement à moi, il n’était pas né avec une cuillère en argent dans la bouche” (69).

Once Salif's background is open to the couple, Malaïka begins to see him less as the man she loves and more as a political cause. She calls him “mon chevalier” and “mon héros masqué qui dans sa misère portait le flambeau d’une bataille nouvelle” (70). It is tempting to assume that the prince Malaïka has in mind is not the popularized version of the prince charming common to Western folk tales, but a reference to Africa's own kingdoms. According to Blaise Alfred Ngando (2002), the Douala – the community from which Malaïka hails – have two main aristocratic families, the Bell and the Akwa. From the Bell clan emerge famous figures like Rudolf Manga Bell, whom the Germans hanged on August 8, 1914, for protesting the violation of the treaties they had signed with his grandfather Ndoumb' à Lobé, also known as King Bell. Following Bell's death, Ludwig Mpondo Akwa, the oldest son of Dika Mpondo (King Akwa), mysteriously disappeared after the Germans promised to crack down on those who were faithful to the Douala aristocracy rather than to their own authority (Ngando 56). Since these figures are still honored and celebrated today, one can ascribe Malaïka's image of a dream prince to her own traditions. But as Malaïka admits, Salif is a prince with no glory. He hails from a modest family and is unable to continue with his education because he has to work to

maintain himself and support his family. By using affectionate terms that contradict the reality, Malaïka tragically reveals that she sees her relationship with Salif more in terms of what she wishes it was and less in terms of what it actually is.

This separation between the ideal and the reality in love relationships is evident in Malaïka's increasing political engagement matched by a diminishing attention to Salif's plight. Together with her friends and colleagues Awa and Séraphina, Malaïka abstracts the *sans-papiers* issue to an extent that she sometimes drifts away from the concrete situation with which they are confronted. The differences in orientation are evident in the passage below. The scene is Malaïka's room, where the four characters are laying out strategies for the protest:

Assise devant mon ordinateur, j'écoutais les propositions qui fusaient de partout. Awa voulait qu'on écrive un papier sur l'ingratitude de la France à l'égard de ses anciennes colonies. Séraphina exigeait qu'on parle de la montée du racisme en France et du clientélisme des partis politiques de droite et gauche. Salif penchant plus pour un poème sur les sans-papiers. Quant à moi j'avais un point de vue synoptique qui réunissait les idées de mes trois complices. (72)

Two essential things are missing from the situation described above. One is attention to the fact that Salif requires papers. Awa and Séraphina want to discuss peripheral issues, Salif brings attention back to the *sans papiers* while Malaïka tries to take the middle ground. Her attempt to be objective and to reconcile contrasting political goals seems a little distant when one considers the intimacy that her relationship with Salif implies. The second element missing from the passage is the pursuit of a concrete achievable goal. The young people support the hunger strike of the *sans-papiers*, but they do not project what

the strike is supposed to achieve. They do not, for example, state if they want to be given residency documents that they rightly deserve.

In addition to politicizing Salif's predicament at the expense of the love relationship, Malaïka sees her role as one of providing benevolent support to Salif and his companions. The problem with benevolence, however, is that it sacrifices rigorous analysis and foresight for sentiments. Malaïka and her colleagues disproportionately rely on provoking sentimental reactions among the French observers that are at best ambiguous and at worst irrelevant. At the same time, they do not sufficiently analyze the situation they are in or calculate what their actions may achieve. The shallowness of this venture becomes apparent during the protest, for Malaïka is impressed by a few French passers-by "[qui] nous posèrent des questions pertinentes et nous soutinrent moralement et financièrement" (77). Although the moral support of these French observers does not translate into any concrete changes for the *sans-papiers*, she revels in the moralistic achievement of getting rid of the "sentiment anti-français" upon realizing that "notre jugement était faux et non-fondé" (77).

Her positive words for the French individuals contrast with her bitter remarks about the African observers: "Le mépris, l'indifférence et le rejet que nos frères de couleur affichaient à notre égard me marqua à vie" (77). When some of the Africans refuse to take the leaflets she hands out, she bursts out crying and is consoled by Salif. At this juncture, Malaïka is consoled by the person who is faced with a bigger predicament than hers. Although one can argue that Salif affirms his dignity by consoling the woman he loves, the institutional cards stacked against him make it difficult for the reader to avoid regarding Malaïka as insensitive to his situation.

But more than being naïve, Malaïka also appears immature, unable to comprehend or even engage the unpleasant realities she encounters, especially when it comes to Africans. When she tells her friend Christian about Salif's status, she is shocked by the hostility that he expresses: "Moi, je ne fréquente pas la racaille. Je suis étranger en règle et sans problème" (70). Malaïka's reaction reminds one of a Hollywood film scene in which a child runs away because she does not get what she wants:

Je n'aurais jamais cru qu'il aurait une telle attitude. Je sortis de son studio en courant, jurant de ne plus lui adresser la parole. A mon grand regret, il faisait partie de ces immigrés bien propres, ces praticiens qui refusaient d'être mêlés à la plèbe noire que sont les sans-papiers. Ces âmes bien pensantes qui comprenaient les électeurs du Front National, ces esprits fébriles qui ne voulaient pas être assimilés à des clandestins polygames qui essouffent les caisses d'allocation familiales. (70-71)

Just as in the case of her encounter with the Muslim women, Malaïka distinguishes herself by her emotional inclinations rather than by her outlook. Like Christian, she sustains the stereotypes of the *sans-papiers* as polygamous and only interested in receiving family subsidies, but seems to forget that Salif is also implicated in these stereotypes. Even if her references to the stereotypes are intended to reflect social attitudes rather than personal inclinations, this intention is submerged by her emotional tantrum.

The comparison between unsympathetic African immigrants and the Front National sympathizers functions in a similar manner. It distances Malaïka from Christian and portrays her as noble because of her intentions. However, the comparison is faulty

because Jean-Marie Le Pen's party is against all immigrants of non-European origin, even those with documents. The condemnation of Le Pen is also based on a straw-man fallacy because it is easy to criticize Le Pen since French public opinion is already largely hostile to him.

Malaïka's condemnation of the Africans' hostility to the *sans-papiers* is not only self-righteous but also simplistic. It discounts the possibility that Africans legitimately fear for their own status in France, given that the immigration laws are contradictory and are often subject to political mood swings. For migrants whose families expect resources from France, losing residency status may seem too high a price to pay for supporting a strike whose goal is not evident and whose success is unlikely. Malaïka seems unable to factor this predicament in her judgment, presumably because she does not financially support her family. In fact, her parents regularly send her an allowance, which must be a substantial amount in Cameroon given the unfavorable exchange rate of the CFA to the Euro.

Nevertheless, the main problem with her naiveté resides less in her socio-economic background and more in her failure to own the struggle of the *sans-papiers*. In Chapter One, I argued that Fanon aptly demonstrated in *Les Damnés de la terre* that the intellectual effectively participates in Africans' resistance to imperialism by realizing that she or he has a personal stake in it. Malaïka does have this stake as a young woman in love with a man without residency documents. However, her notion of love as emotion without understanding makes her equate struggle with abstract political ideals or with sympathy from French observers. She hides behind love to minimize reality and evade the lessons of history.

Like her, one protestor named Maïmouna is more interested in sympathy than in justice. She and her children are separated from her husband and their father by the contradictory immigration laws. While her demand for reunification is legitimate, she laments France's ingratitude rather than the injustice she suffers: "Mon père est mort pour la France pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale et c'est comme ça qu'on le remercie" (74). Despite the similarities in their views, Malaïka differs from Maïmouna because as a university student, she has the opportunity to study the historical background of the protestor's struggle and help them plan and articulate their demands. Her inadequate response contradicts Fanon's vision of the intellectual's role of articulating the social-historical context so that people can determine what goals are feasible and anticipate the consequences of their actions. As he put it, "[p]olitiser les masses, c'est rendre la nation globale présente à chaque citoyen" (1962 189). In the place of understanding the social context and the awkward position of other African immigrants, Malaïka seeks French sentimentality and cries when she does not obtain sympathy from Africans. She therefore misses the opportunity to challenge the protestors' confidence that their suffering will provoke the French government into action.

The cost of this misplaced confidence turns out to be dangerous and tragic. The French authorities predictably remain indignant as the protestors lose weight. But faced with public cynicism, Salif redoubles his efforts, saying, "Ils veulent des tragédies à la Saint-Bernard? Ils en auront. Nous lutterons jusqu'à la mort et nous vaincrons" (74). The victory is not forthcoming because the government ensures that the protestors do not die. It occasionally sends a doctor "[pour] vérifier l'état de santé général des grévistes, voir s'ils n'étaient pas à l'orée de la mort" (78). Eventually, Malaïka and her two friends cave

in to the suffering and try to persuade the protestors to eat, but Salif and his comrades refuse the food that they offer. The strike degenerates into a cycle in which French authorities take the protestors to the hospital, after which the protestors return to continue the strike. This time, Malaïka admits to herself that “ils crurent aveuglément que leurs problèmes seraient résolus [. . .] Portés par un rêve légitime, ils se jetèrent dans la gueule de loup” (80-81). However, she cannot intervene with reason because at this point, the protestors’ spirits are so weak that they ignore even Salif’s suggestions that they change their strategy. She says, “Ils estimaient qu’ils n’avaient plus rien à perdre” (81). The strike finally ends when Lumumba, one of the protestors, dies after stabbing himself as the French police prepare to arrest him.

The tragedy of the strike is that the people involved did not project the outcome or plan their strategy despite at least 100 years of history that prove that the Republic’s interests in Africa have never been informed by concern for people but by political expediency. Nevertheless, the French government bears the ultimate responsibility for this tragedy because, as Salif says, it continues to exploit Africa but cannot treat a few Africans with dignity. Moreover, it continues to proclaim its humanist principles but institutes laws that violate the dignity of immigrants. This anti-human ethic informs the government’s efforts to rescue the protestors from the jaws of death even though it prevents them from leading a meaningful life. In other words, the Republic only cares that Africans are breathing but not living in dignity. This situation supports my argument in the previous chapter that the Republic is founded on the conception of a hypothetical rather than a flesh-and-blood human being with emotions, histories and families.



Immigration laws informed by this thinking impose dichotomies between Malaïka and Salif's lives as students or workers and as lovers. They put Malaïka's status as an intellectual and as Salif's girlfriend in conflict. As an intellectual, she is in a position to offer the protestors a realistic vision of what they were headed for so that the protestors could carry out a more rigorous planning of the strike. As Salif's girlfriend, she is inclined to support her boyfriend at whatever cost, especially under such trying circumstances. She therefore cannot be too rational about the strike in which Salif is emotionally and physically implicated. However, the narrator does not seem aware of these dynamics and instead portrays Malaïka as a naïve woman who divorces love from the social environment in which people live.

Malaïka's inability to interpret the social circumstances of the *sans-papiers* protest also exposes the French education system as incapable of producing graduates who respond effectively to social realities. This impotence afflicts not only African but also French intellectuals. Paul Sorum (1977) notes that during the Algerian liberation struggle and other decolonization movements, a large number of French intellectuals lamented that the massacres and tortures perpetrated by France were a regrettable and avoidable consequence of France's mission to redeem Africans from Islam and "backward" African traditions. The intellectuals' "moralist criticism" of their government did not question colonialism as much as it expressed the desire "both to dominate the colonial peoples and to liberate them; their absorption would be their liberation" (23). The child-like expectation that colonialism can actually be beneficial when well-intentioned roughly mirrors Malaïka's incapacity to read the history of the French Republic and realize that it will not respond to the *sans-papiers* protest. Above all, her

hopes reveal the vicious cycle in which Western-trained African intellectuals are trapped. Having frowned on their own traditions, they are compelled to accept France's tutelage and principles at whatever cost. The tragedy of this reality is most painfully evident in the willingness of Etoké's characters to bear physical pain for the sake of the Republic but not for themselves or their own societies.

### **Let's Get Physical: Body Politics and the Republic**

The evidence from the texts suggests that the Republic represses African cultures and identities due to its aversion to non-national identities that defy its universal and humanist principles. As far as the Republic is concerned, Africans have no history, culture or identity other than that which the Republic approves. Africans who adhere to its ideals are therefore compelled to see themselves and the world through its eyes. They also ignore, diminish or deny the history of France that does not conform to these ideals, in the vain hope that the Republic will respond by treating them with the respect and dignity accorded to French citizens. In the case of the *sans-papiers* protestors, however, this blind faith encourages Africans to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice to the Republic.

The other manner in which the Republic is implicated in the outcome of the hunger strike is related to the fact that immigration laws disregard immigrants in their totality as human beings. Since the Republic erects humanity as an ideal to be rationally achieved and defines citizens by their adherence to this ideal, it is in constant conflict with the flesh-and-blood realities of human existence. This dynamic reflects the bad faith

described by Gordon as follows: “In bad faith, I deny my body as mine through convincing myself that my ‘real perspective’ is my perspective beyond my body” (1995a 36).

Since the racist ethic appoints blacks as the physical embodiment of human beings and the symbol of everything physical and instinctual, Africans who want to be treated like citizens have to suppress their bodies in order to gain access to the abstract, ideological humanity. Meanwhile, the role of the Republic is to descend from its ideological heaven and affirm the *sans-papiers* as worthy of living in France by providing them with residency documents. This dichotomy imposed between the human body and social ideals underlies the protestors’ expectation that France would respond favorably to their hunger strike. They do not change their strategy even when faced with the government’s cynicism. Salif proclaims: “J’aimerais bien crever. Comme ça au moins, ils auraient un mort sur la conscience. S’il leur en reste encore une” (78). Failing to reason that he would not be a *sans-papiers* if France indeed had a conscience, Salif appears more pathetic than brave. Moreover, he is unwilling to assume responsibility for his death, even though he clearly doubts that the French government will do so.

The *sans-papiers* and the Republic are thus engaged in a symbiotic relationship in which the former hold the Republic responsible for the death they risk while the Republic denies its responsibility for the difficulties they face as *sans-papiers*. The protestors offer their bodies for the Republic while the Republic proclaims dominance over abstract ideals, and so both parties offer that which the opposing party purportedly lacks. Gordon relates a similar dynamic to masochism and sadism when he says that “the masochist seeks to be pure flesh and the sadist seeks to be pure consciousness” (1995a 42). In other

words, both the immigrants and the Republic evade the choices imposed by human integrity by seeking to make the other responsible for their own choices.

While the French Republic can be held responsible for providing the ideological justification for this self-immolation, it cannot be held accountable for the fact that the immigrants choose to go on a hunger strike. There is no empire in the world capable of suppressing the human being's ability to choose, for as Gordon explains, even slavery "places limitations on the options over which the slave chooses, but not over the slave's ability to choose" (1995a 17). Slaves submit to or defy the conditions imposed on them, aware of the attendant consequences. However, *sans-papiers* in Etoké's novel refuse to accept that their hunger strike implicitly acknowledges the Republic's prerogative to respond to their demands.

Despite this apparent hypocrisy, the tragic imperative demands that other actors more powerful than the protestors receive blame for their suffering because they have a greater number of options. In this case, the French Republic becomes responsible for the immigrants' suffering because the protestors' choice is a logical conclusion of their belief in the moral legitimacy of the Republic and its ability to remedy their problems. This misplaced trust is in turn connected to the Republic's objectification of African cultures which makes Africans feel that since their societies offer few opportunities they have to seek refuge in the Republic at any cost.

The tragedy of Etoké's novel is that the narrator manifests a similar bad faith towards the body. Malaïka and Salif do not consummate their relationship purportedly because Salif wants Malaïka to protect her virginity. However, this view is not articulated by Salif but simply reported by Malaïka. She says that Salif "voulait que je conserve ma

virginité jusqu'à la nuit de nocé. Ma pureté serait un gage de l'infailibilité de notre amour" (51). After the strike fails and Salif moves into Malaïka's apartment, she reports that Salif "refusait de passer à l'acte. Il disait qu'il ne me méritait pas. Il se couchait à même le sol et moi dans le lit" (90).

A number of reasons make the reader justified to treat this scenario with skepticism. First, Salif's concern seems unlikely given the reality that the onus of protecting virginity usually falls on women rather than on men. The narrator may in fact bank on this expectation and so uses abstinence to portray Salif as a man whose love for Malaïka is genuine. However, equating love with abstinence or virginity with purity is problematic because it suggests that sexual relations are incompatible with profound love and strong ideals. Such a view would fit within the Republican rubric that defines human beings by their loyalties to the state and minimizes their social identities and physical needs.

In her analysis of *Vies de femmes* by Cameroonian author Zanga Tsogo, Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) has also raised concerns about the equation of abstinence with freedom. Tsogo's novel is about Dang who decides to become celibate after a number of traumatic relationships with men. Nfah-Abbenyi finds the vow of celibacy "disturbing" because the novel does not develop the character enough for the reader "to meet a Dang who has bridged the gap, a Dang who regains confidence in her body and finds new ways and possibilities of enjoying her sexuality" (84). Etoké seems to follow the same path by equating abstinence with principled commitment. This association seems designed to portray Malaïka as a benevolent woman whose support of the *sans-papiers* strike and love for Salif were pure and selfless due to the absence of physical intimacy.

Consequently, Salif's justification of abstinence seems to favor her character rather than his own.

Another reason for skepticism resides in the fact that Malaïka does not take responsibility for the abstinence. Although she voices her objections to Salif, she stays in the relationship until the end based on those conditions, and so she implicitly accepts abstinence as a proof of love. Given her erroneous views of sex education in African societies, it is possible that Malaïka is projecting her immaturity on Salif.

Another possibility is that the narrator may accept the artificial dichotomies between sex, love and ideals that produce the stereotype of blacks as sexually aggressive and emotionally repressed. As Fanon explains, "[t]oute acquisition intellectuelle réclame une perte de potentiel sexuel. Le Blanc civilisé garde la nostalgie irrationnelle d'époque extraordinaires de licence sexuelle [. . .] (1952 133). The narrator could be considered to portray Salif as one who defies readers' expectations of African men.

The narrator also seems to bank on moving the reader to regard Salif as noble and in love with Malaïka but undeserving of her. This gains symbolic dimensions when one considers that in Kiswahili and other languages of Eastern Africa, *malaika* is the word for "angel." In an informal discussion about the choice of the protagonist's name, Etoké intimated to me that she chose the name out of personal preference. However, the failure of Malaïka and Salif to consummate their relationship implies that Malaïka is an African woman who avoids physical contact to avoid tainting her pure and selfless ideals. Combined with the difference in economic background, this portrait of Malaïka makes Salif appear as the poor African immigrant blemished by his poverty, traditions and limited schooling and therefore unworthy of her. This is an essentially Eurocentric vision

that deems sexuality as an aspect of human existence that must be suppressed through reason.

Even if we concede that Salif could credibly be concerned about Malaïka's virginity, there is an inherent contradiction between his willingness to starve himself for residency papers and his refusal to enjoy passion. Moreover, the most intense physical interaction between Malaïka and Salif takes place when he slaps her so hard that her nose bleeds. The violence is ironically cathartic for the couple, because it becomes the event that releases the mounting tension between the two. The tension between them had increased following the failure of the strike. An exhausted Salif, with no resources of his own, moves in with Malaïka. The couple barely leaves the house for fear of police arrest. Malaïka's parents have since cut her allowance to compel her to abandon Salif, and so she takes a part-time job at a psychiatric hospital to supplement their income. This situation assaults the dignity of Salif even more because he dislikes the fact that he has to depend on Malaïka. Losing his job becomes the final straw before the physical confrontation.

The violence remains ambiguous because both Malaïka and the Republic have something to gain from it. It reinforces the portrait of Malaïka as a principled and selfless young woman because it serves as the catalyst for the most mature world view in the novel. When Salif slaps her, she recognizes that he is suffering: "C'était quelqu'un d'autre. Un homme marqué par les aléas de la vie, un homme brisé et broyé par une société qui ne veut pas de lui" (91). Rather than fight with him, she spends the night in her friend Séraphina's room. The next morning when Salif comes to apologize, Séraphina speaks on behalf of her friend: "Je te préviens, ne t'avise pas de recommencer sinon tu

auras à faire à moi” (92). The resolution of this conflict is consistent with Nfah-Abbenyi’s assertion that in many African societies, women have bonds and rituals that provide them with space to deal with spousal conflict. However, it does not attenuate the fact that the essentially demeaning element of domestic violence is the catalyst for Malaïka’s gaining of a mature consciousness. The Republic benefits from this scenario because its role in the tension build-up is effectively obscured.

Nonetheless, there is a redeeming element in the relationship, which is Salif’s morning jogs as a ritual that affirms his dignity. Salif describes the experience to her as follows:

*Le bruissement des feuilles qui s’agitent sous l’effet de la brise matinale, les oiseaux qui roucoulent et le soleil qui se lève, me permettent d’oublier ma triste condition l’espace d’un instant magique. Je ne suis plus Salif le Sans-papiers. Je suis tout simplement un homme qui apprécie la nature dans tout ce qu’elle a de pur, de beau et de merveilleux, ces petits coins de paradis si rare qui ont échappé à la main destructrice de l’homme, ce grand idiot! (95-96)*

In this poetic passage, Etoké articulates the contradictions of France’s immigration laws against the larger fabric of humanity and the universe. French colonial history and immigration laws have violated the destiny of human beings, which is to be free and to love. However, they have not destroyed the human capacity to find joy and resilience in the most difficult of situations. Human beings will continue to live and love despite brutality because the world and the natural environment are bigger than the force of an empire.



Unfortunately, this passage also signifies the end of Salif's and Malaika's relationship. Salif does not return home, and the worry leads Malaika to have an emotional breakdown and to require hospitalization. She bravely bears the intense pain, describing it as “[une] blessure qui s’était ouverte dans les abysses de mon cœur [et qui] me causait une douleur épouvantable. Elle saignait sans cesse, elle me torturait” (99). At this point, the reader cannot help but wonder why a country that describes itself as the home of human rights would inflict so cruel a wound on a young woman whose main crime, it would seem, was to fall in love. The reader also appreciates the naiveté of France that proposes fine-sounding ideals and well-intentioned laws but whose real impact on a personal level is profoundly painful.

The deterioration of this relationship against the background of French immigration policies provides a strong case for linking socio-economic conditions to African men's dignity and to the welfare of the women who love them. Etoké's novel challenges the dichotomy between men's confidence and women's wellbeing that is sometimes ironically perpetuated by scholars of African descent. Scholars sometimes attribute the difficult challenges women face to patriarchy but do not stipulate the manner in which social conditions subvert the development of healthy identities for men and suppress spaces that release tension arising from their relationships with women. Etoké demonstrates that these various social issues are relevant to intimate relations by depicting how French immigration laws violate Salif's dignity as a man by making him unable to provide for his family and by undermining his confidence in his relationship with Malaika.

The other problem with scholarship that places too much emphasis on patriarchy as a cause of sexism in communities of African descent is its failure to suggest healthy identities for adult men. Collins (1990), for instance, accuses black American men of adopting Eurocentric and sexist images of men and women, one of which is the image of men as protectors of women. She makes the problematic argument that the black men who seek to protect black women betray a version of masculinity in which “a slippery slope emerges between *protecting* Black women and *controlling* them” (157 italics in original). This statement betrays an inherent distrust of black men even before determining their intentions for protecting women, the reasons for which the women are being protected or even the women’s attitudes towards that protection. Moreover, even if black men are submerged in sexist ideals, this would not suppress the attraction and relationships between black men and women. Consequently, the key to empowering relationships lies in not merely appreciating the interaction between sexuality and power as Collins proposes, but in identifying and challenging the social forces such as unemployment, discrimination, poverty and draconian laws that affect heterosexual relationships.

Like Collins, Nfah-Abbenyi identifies the main beneficiary of the colonial system as African men, overlooking the important fact that imperialism deliberately fragments gender identities in order to perpetuate its power. She notes that the flexible gender identities existing in African traditions “were rigidified during colonial rule and have become part of the post-colonial heritage in African urban communities” (23), but fails to provide the specific interests that colonialists would have in suppressing that flexibility. Yet evidence exists that the colonialists deliberately planned and executed measures that

would impose these rigid identities on African women and men. In a 1906 report on education in Afrique Occidentale Française, for instance, colonial administrators proposed the teaching of the French bourgeois model of femininity and domesticity to African women so that their husbands and children would have favorable attitudes towards the colonial administration (Lemé 1906). Because Nfah-Abbenyi does not deal with such benefits that imperial power derives from fragmented African relationships, she ends up making African men the culprits of colonialism.

Nevertheless, Nfah-Abbenyi also makes the powerful argument that even patriarchy can act as a strong barrier against the excesses of men. She gives the following example from her own Beba community in Cameroon that is similar to values articulated among the Gikuyu in Kenya:

[T]wo things are said among the Beba: a man has no right to lift his hand to a woman; only women “physically” fight other women. A man who beats his wife is, by the same token, feminized. Although this feminization of physically abusive men can be interpreted by feminists as insulting to women, as “typical macho” behavior or as an oppressive patriarchal way of thinking, the fact remains that within Beba culture, women are protected from male violence by the same patriarchal reasoning and punishment. As a Beba woman I might question this option theoretically, but in practical terms, I am prepared to embrace it – the deterrence of male violence against women, against me. (1997 28)

The example cited above captures a mature and tragic outlook, because it stipulates that women’s welfare should embrace certain assertions of male dignity and pride even when they may question those assertions. A stable society with structures to release tension

between men and women is more important than affirming a principle of women's equality which is not even empirically verifiable.

*Un amour sans papiers* affirms this close link between justice and fulfilling relationships by demonstrating the impact that immigration laws have on Malaïka and Salif. Salif was not able to affirm a strong identity through gestures such as supporting his family or to relating with Malaïka in a mature way because French history and immigration laws had violated his dignity and livelihood. As he tells her, “notre bel amour sans-papiers n’a pas échappé à la loi. Notre amour illégal ne pouvait pas survivre” (110). Despite its major flaws, Etoké’s novel manages to capture the manner in which French imperial ambitions set obstacles in the path Africans whose humble goal is to enjoy life and love.

The lesson of this naïve and beautiful story is that the real challenge to oppression lies not in grand theories and sophisticated ideologies, but in protecting dignity and edifying relationships. Unfortunately, this lesson is continually being buried under increasingly sophisticated technology, political ambitions and academic studies that often make us forget that the moments we enjoy most in life are often the simple occasions when human beings live in harmony with each other and their environment. Salif’s eventual marriage to a Malian woman and the birth of his daughter named after Malaïka, “[en] souvenir de la petite camerounaise qu’il avait tant aimée” (113), provide a perfect ending for Etoké’s affirmation of the human spirit.

## Conclusion

From the evidence in the novel, it is clear that Etoké excuses injustice within the French Republic because she embraces the immature view that its intentions and humanist ideals supersede its actions. The trust in goodwill provides the writer with an alibi to avoid making choices based on what the characters see and experience. Etoké's characters expect this bad faith to be opaque by appealing to a naïve sense of purity, honor and love. Their tactics do not succeed, for as Gordon reiterates, "emotion can be an effort to delay choice [. . .] Ironically, as an effort to delay choice it is also a choice, and it thus makes the chosen aspect of bad faith more evident" (84). This bad faith is more incriminating for intellectuals who not only have first-hand experience of injustice but also the historical knowledge to articulate the dynamics of that injustice.

The theme of love and intimacy in *Un amour sans papiers* is linked to the manner in which the Republic distorts human relations at intimate levels by defining them according to negation or difference. This dynamic leads human beings – regardless of race or gender – to live in constant negation of their history, dignity and identity. For Africans, however, the added cost is the physical brutality that necessarily accompanies the rationalist and Republican disdain for the biological and social aspects of human existence. Africans who place their faith in the Republic have difficulty creating edifying relationships with each other and with themselves that could establish the solidarity needed to reject French hegemony.

Above all, *Un amour sans papiers* demonstrates the bad faith on which the Republic and its empire are founded, leading to the immature expectation of its adherents

that their words or deeds take exclusively literal meanings as long as they are well intentioned. This logic blinds the Republic to the contradiction between its ideals and the injustice that it perpetrates.

For intellectuals whose occupation is the pursuit of knowledge and who claim to promote human dignity, this immaturity is tragic. It also proves that the damage that French education inflicts on Africa extends beyond its colonial origins to the Republic's philosophical foundation. This problem cannot be solved by a faithful application of republican ideals or by love despite differences, but by realizing that, as the poet Nikki Giovanni says, "its [*sic*] wrong that we hate but its [*sic*] even more wrong to love when neither love nor hate have anything to do with what must be done" (18).

*Un amour sans papiers* thus captures the tragedy of an adult African woman who has difficulty appreciating the tragic nature of human existence because her maturity is curtailed by an anti-tragic and irresponsible Republic. Malaïka's trajectory is a product of the French Republic that obstinately pursues the impossible goal of a perfect world governed by human equality and "universal" values while denying the realities that contradict those ideals. Since it continues to deny the tragic imperative, the tragic hero of the novel is African societies that spend precious resources on paying for their youth to receive education from a system that inflicts individual and social trauma and that condemns graduates to social irrelevance.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this study, I raised a basic question: how can critics interpret African novels on migration in a manner that reflects the social conditions and real-life experiences of actual migrants? The evidence from the analysis in this study suggests that tragedy enables the critic to place the novels on a global stage and thus integrate the different socio-historical factors that influence migration. It also demonstrates that the novels capture the complex interactions between individual motivations, African traditions and French Republic's imperial ambitions influencing the tragic experiences. The intricate web of individual, social and environmental factors involved in migration disproves the El Dorado myth that depicts African migrants as victims of poverty and their own naiveté.

However, the portrayal of migrants' dilemmas also interacts with certain dynamics that influence African literature. These include the impact of French education on intellectuals' perception of the world, their socio-economic position within the imperial hierarchy and the ambiguity of writing in the French language. The writers betray discomfort with these inherently conflicting issues through the protagonists' and narrators' shifting positions. On one hand, the authors expose the alienation of the French political and intellectual elite, but on the other hand, they attempt to project the tragic hero as the poor, young, male African immigrant who feels compelled to migrate. This gesture goes against the principle that more powerful actors in tragedy suffer or that they

receive blame for injustice even when they are not direct agents of that suffering. The emphasis on migrants also becomes complicit with the French Republic's exploitation of African suffering to promote itself as a benevolent power concerned about the socio-economic destiny of the continent. The novels thus digress from tragedy as a genre in which the hero must come from the powerful class to the pseudo-tragedies in which victims are held accountable for options they do not have and for choices made by more powerful actors.

These contradictions expose the writers, their narrators and their Western-educated characters as acting in bad faith. While they explicitly refer to the injustice that France has committed in Africa for at least two centuries, they evade the logical conclusion that the injustice largely results from deliberate actions on the part of the Republic. The reasons for this ambiguity are difficult to ascertain. One could argue that human beings are often afraid of the practical implications of fighting those with whom they have shared a common, albeit oppressive, past. This is a reality that people feel in mundane situations such as breaking up with a lover or even leaving a marriage to flee domestic violence. It is also possible that the writers who have spent a large part of their childhood immersed in the French-oriented education system prefer the devil that they know to the angel that they do not know. However, as Fanon argued in *Les Damnés de la terre*, breaking away from the Republic is an emotionally painful but necessary process.

A more rational reason for the writers' apparent reluctance to condemn injustice suffered by migrants is the fact that they want to project themselves as objective observers pleading on behalf of Africans to French readers. Fanon attacks this maneuvering in the opening pages of *Les Damnés de la terre*, arguing that such efforts



are futile because those who benefit from colonial rule want power, not social harmony. There is also an element of egoism in assuming this role, for Western-educated intellectuals often flatter themselves that they are the main catalysts of change, yet social change is a collective effort and not the domain of one class or certain individuals. In addition, the economic benefits and social recognition that some African writers enjoy in France may lead them to feel that they cannot bite the hand that feeds them, or as Salie is reminded in Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, that the condemnation of the Republic by educated Africans seems hypocritical.

The price that the writers pay for trying to be objective, consistent or fair is too heavy for African countries which suffer at the hands of the unrepentant French political elite. It implies an attempt to divorce African migrants' suffering in France from specific social circumstances and, by extension, an aversion to the past. It portrays the poor migrant as the "happy slave" described by Gordon:

In the world of the happy slave, no human being is responsible for human being. Human being is bound, contained, kept at bay, and held secure as a stabilized entity that supports self-delusion. Institutions take their place in a superstructural ontology that marks the irrelevance of human being. With nowhere to go, human being loses the significance of even losing a past, and hence the present may stand supreme, or versions of the past that substantiate the present may become supreme, which only reinforces the domination of the present. The result is historical decay; history loses its significance to the governing fiction of security. (1995b 23)

By distancing African migrants' experiences from the moral implications of historical events, the writers implicitly affirm the Republic's "governing fiction of security" based on its ideals. They also render the suffering of migrants fortuitous and perpetuate the already difficult obstacle that people of African descent confront worldwide in their efforts to render their histories socially, morally and politically significant. By minimizing the legitimacy of African experience, the writers dig a knife deeper into the wound of Africa and into their own soul.

The human frailties in the novels analyzed in this study emerge from the illusion that the Western-trained African is a socially neutral actor who can criticize African societies or affirm the ideals of the French Republic without attenuating the responsibility of the French Republic for the injustices suffered by African migrants. This tragic position of the African who writes in the French language differs little from that of the academic literary critic. Regardless of our intentions to challenge neo-colonialism or to propose models of a just society, our socio-economic position as scholars in the Western academy is not socially neutral and ultimately affects the global implications of our interpretations of literature. As in the case of the writers, our attempts to minimize the contradictions between the Republican ideal and the reality of the neo-colonial era of the French Republic implicitly minimize the suffering of the African migrants on whose behalf we ostensibly plead.

The evidence presented in this study affirms that one of the ways to avoid this pitfall is to articulate the interaction between texts and the social environment in which they are produced and interpreted. As I argued in chapter one, the conclusion that certain novels call for social harmony across racial and class boundaries sometimes lacks

corroborating evidence from the novels. In addition, the issue of cultural tolerance is often peripheral or irrelevant in relation to fundamental material and cultural challenges that migrants confront.

The role of both writers and critics is to insert African experiences into history. Fanon appealed to intellectuals to perform this task when he argued, “Alors que les hommes politiques inscrivent leur action dans le réel, les hommes de culture se situent dans le cadre de l’histoire” (1961 199). For as long as intellectuals fail to see the suffering of poor immigrants as a challenge to the significance of the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, they make that suffering appear fortuitous and confirm racist ideologies about blacks as destined to suffer. As is most evident in *Un amour sans papiers*, this gesture is often accompanied by the portrayal of migrants as individuals without agency and whose only salvation lies in throwing themselves at the mercy of the government responsible for their oppression.

The effort to erect the French Republic as the principle agent on whom Africans’ destiny depends also evades the reality that the cynical treatment of Africans is not simply of fate or negative individual persuasions, but also the tragic or intended result of deliberate actions of the French elite and the passiveness or ignorance of the citizens that support them. In order for the Republic to embrace the freedom it proclaims, it must not deny its unpleasant history but assume responsibility for it, since freedom entails human beings accepting that they are endowed with the ability to choose and that they are responsible for their choices.

From the analysis of the novels, it is evident that criticism can and must incorporate moral, historical and social issues into the analysis of literature. The

framework of tragedy compels critics to place a greater proportion of the blame for poor migrants' misadventures on the French Republic, its elite and citizens. For as long as the Republic continues to be an obstacle to the continent's search for solutions to the problems left behind by colonialism, the innocence or ignorance of these parties does not absolve them of implication in the injustices instigated by their country. This is especially so because, as several critics have pointed out, the majority of readers of African literature in French reside in France, and so their expectations, interpretation and historical position form an essential ingredient in the writing and interpretation of literature on migration.

Within the contemporary ethics of diversity, multiculturalism and human equality, taking positions that favor the poor migrants and condemn Western and African elites seems unfair and judgmental. However, I have demonstrated that the current social conditions of neo-colonialism give human beings only two options: to side with the powerful or with the powerless. Refusing to make a choice, as philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Lewis Gordon insist, becomes a choice in its own right. It also manifests bad faith because it denies the tragic reality that the meaning and implication of one's position are not determined by intentions alone but also by the prevailing circumstances. Seeking to judge every actor in migration by the same standards necessarily denies the power structures that favor elites over poor and unskilled migrants. Although the ideal of objectivity discourages academics from stating their personal and political inclinations in the study of literature, the evidence from this study proves that an articulation of the biases is necessary in order to avoid ambiguous views that become tragically ambivalent in their social context and sometimes complicit with imperial ideology.

This study has also demonstrated that African values, traditions and histories still inform Africans' world view because they are the product of human interaction with the natural environment. Contrary to studies that view writers' evocation of African cultures as expressions of nostalgia, African values transcend geographical and political boundaries and are not just a tool for identification or admiration. Consequently, they greatly influence the manner in which migrants tackle the challenges they face and in which writers depict those experiences. If African cultures prove inadequate in helping migrants gain a lucid view of the world, it is not because they are irrelevant but because neo-colonialism fragments them through racist ideologies, oppressive socio-economic conditions and immigration laws that violate individual migrants' dignity.

Above all, this study demonstrates that tragedy challenges the critical practice of treating France and Africa as separate geographical and cultural entities without placing them on the same global stage. So far, criticism has tended to avoid the interactions between the two areas that continue to this day. Moreover, it does not adequately address France's continued presence and involvement in African affairs that partly fuels young people's desires to go to Europe.

Avoiding this global stage evades the reality and evidence from the novels presented in this study that identify the main problem of immigration politics today as the hypocrisy of the French political class. French political leaders take conflicting positions on immigration and do not assume responsibility for their policies. If the Republic wishes to prevent African migrants from reaching its soil, it is well within its right to do so. The problem arises in its refusal to assume the moral and material consequences of that choice. As the French elite and institutions implement oppressive immigration laws that

implicitly declare Africans unwelcome in France, they support the African political elite, reward African writers and promote French cultural and economic interests in Africa, sending the contradictory message that Africans are welcome to pursue their dreams in Europe. The role of the critic is more to articulate this bad faith and less to lament the insufficient respect for cultural diversity in France.

Besides, it is not clear whether cultural diversity and equality are desirable or even applicable in relation to African experiences and literature. The contradictions in the novels and in history that I have presented call into question the validity and efficiency of these ideals. The novels' narrative and thematic ambiguities deliberately or inadvertently affirm the symbiosis of human equality and racism, of the scholarly focus on African women and the demonization of African cultures, and of the sympathy expressed for the African poor and economic exploitation. The cohabitation of these apparent contradictions is not coincidental, but logical, historical and tragic. If all human beings are created equal, the Republic has no reason to promote equality that already exists. The Republic's insistence on affirming the obvious is inextricably tied to its violation of Africans' dignity, hence the cohabitation between the *Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme* and the immigration policies that violate it. Moreover, the novels prove that the rhetoric about humanity is also accompanied by a lack of confidence in the intrinsic value of humanity. Similarly, the support of African writers in the name of promoting the French language as universally spoken raises the question as to why France needs non-French nationals to affirm its own culture. It betrays a lack confidence, since human beings do not need their language and culture to be universally accepted for them to be tools in human endeavors. These varied moral, philosophical, social and material issues

demonstrate that the role of the critic is to highlight the human dilemmas and challenges that African novels raise rather than simply exalt the literature as a cultural peculiarity.

The most compelling justification for literary criticism to adapt itself to lived experience lies in the fact that material and historical realities eventually disprove analyses based on ideals that contradict them, regardless of how noble those ideals are. Evidence from the novels and from reality proves that Africans are becoming more aware that the French Republic has no intention of treating Africans justly despite scholars' affirmations to the contrary. Africans are also growing exasperated with the Republic's continued interference in African affairs and increasingly strict immigration policies. These sentiments have been proved by the eviction of French citizens from Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, the urban riots in Paris in 2005, the demonstrations against Nicolas Sarkozy's visits to Mali and Benin in May 2006 and public demonstrations that accompanied Rwanda's severing of diplomatic ties with France at the end of the same year. However, the Republic has not stopped behaving as it did when Bett described it as follows: "Yet, regardless of the given nature of the colonial empire and of new scientific theories, France, like King Canute, seemed to howl at the rising tide of opposition and to continue to vaunt assimilation as a tenable colonial doctrine" (22).

History will harshly judge all scholars, regardless of race and gender, if we simply call for more sincerity and vigor in the application of the principles extolled by the French Republic instead of pointing out the realities of the world that reveal the urgent need for the Republic to conduct a philosophical and moral self-critique. This task is critical because the increasing tensions seem headed for a meltdown that will be costly on all sides. The impending disaster is reflected in Gordon's following remarks:

For just like the oppressed, when all is said and done, the oppressors are human beings. The tragic scapegoat who bears the burden of the sins of colonialism, then, is the human being itself. In this regard, the oppressed and the oppressor converge as sufferers during the period of liberation. (1995b 79-81)

The role of intellectuals is to capture the calamity where human beings seem headed and that cannot be avoided by simply boasting of progress and human rights. For now, it seems that Africans bear the larger cost of the sins of imperialism and neo-colonialism, but as recent events show, this situation cannot be sustained for much longer.

Consequently, it would be more useful to appeal to the French elite's reactive instincts of self-preservation rather than to the nobility of abstract ideals.

These moral and philosophical issues demonstrate that the greatest strength of the novels by Diome, Mabanckou, Bessora and Etoké lies in the opportunity they provide for self-criticism and reflection that may lead readers to influence meaningful change in the world. It takes a great deal of honesty and courage to share one's conscious and unconscious thoughts with the larger society, and so the authors have made a valuable contribution by sharing their perspectives with the readers. The best way for us as literary critics to complement the writers' endeavors is by fulfilling the role of the audience implied in literature, which is to allow the novels to facilitate our reflections on our interactions with the universe in which we live.



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