ABSTRACT

REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRATION IN OUSMANE SEMBENE’S LA NOIRE DE..., ALAIN MABANCKOU’S BLEU, BLANC, ROUGE AND MWEZE NGANGURA’S PIECES D’IDENTITES

by A. Goldman

This thesis, written in English, seeks to analyze literary and cinematic depictions of post-colonial migration. The work is an examination of three fictionalized accounts from subsequent time periods by Ousmane Sembène, Alain Mabanckou and Mweze Ngangura. Despite their diverse approaches to depicting characters’ experiences of displacement, each author notably presents a dichotomy between the host country and the home country. By analyzing how the colonial mentality is codified in cultural and economic illustrations of this binary, this thesis seeks to prove that Sembène, Mabanckou and Ngangura’s depictions of the migrant experience can be viewed as representative of evolving global dynamics of inequality that define the Franco-African relationship. By contextualizing the characters’ experiences in this way, this thesis brings a new perspective to current debate surrounding migration.
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A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

by A. Goldman

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2019

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This Thesis titled

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Has been approved for publication by

The College of Arts and Science

and

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Introduction

From the high-profile refugee crisis to publicized debates on push and pull factors of new arrivals at the Southern border, we are constantly inundated in the U.S. with discourse on migration. The situation is just as contentious across the Atlantic: in France, where between 200,000 and 400,000 people (predominantly from the global South) are estimated to be living without documentation,¹ the struggle to control the narrative surrounding migration is an indispensable part of the social and political psyche. This narrative can be quite critical, as indicated by Marine Le Pen’s success in the 2017 national elections despite remarks comparing immigrants to parasites, the Assemblée Nationale’s push for toughened restrictions on the asylum process in July 2018, and the fact that 57% of French people feel that there are “too many migrants” in their country compared to a global average of 46% who held the same opinion.² Despite backlash against these forms of exclusion from groups across the country that view them as violations of human rights, there is one point of view that is usually absent from the narrative: that of the migrants themselves. This is the perspective that I wish to explore with my thesis.

According to the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM), a migrant is defined as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.”³ Under the broad umbrella of the term “migrant” also fall several sub-categories. A refugee, for example, is a migrant who has been forcibly displaced from his/her home country and who equally possesses the right to remain in the host country for as long as an imminent threat to his/her life or livelihood persists in the home country. An asylum seeker is someone whose request for refugee status has not yet been accepted, while an undocumented migrant, to give another example, is an individual who inhabits a host country without legal authorization. In this project, I focus primarily on depictions of voluntary undocumented migrants whose reasons for leaving represent common pull factors of migration in real life: economic opportunity, a more “comfortable” lifestyle (by Western standards) and family reunification.⁴ To streamline the scope of this project, I have also chosen to concentrate on depictions of migration from the region of West Africa, whose former colonial ties with France (as I will demonstrate below) are still pertinent.

By engaging with these real-world trends from fictional perspectives, this thesis explores how the authors of each respective work perceive the migrant experience from the point of view and experiences of their characters. To answer this question, I chose to analyze three different depictions of undocumented voluntary migration to the European Francophone environment. Each work dates from a different time period in post-colonial French history and advances chronologically, my rationale for which is to trace any sort of evolution of factors influencing

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⁴ International Organization for Migration, 2019.
this experience. Engaging with post-colonial concepts (which I explain in more detail throughout the thesis) such as Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory, Frantz Fanon’s juxtaposition of “blackness” and “whiteness” and its implications, neoliberal theory and globalization applied to these three depictions of displacement, I found that each presents an economic and cultural binary between the host country and the home country that resembles different manifestations of oppression dating from the French colonial era. By analyzing how this colonial mentality is codified in cultural and economic illustrations of this binary, I wish to prove that Sembène, Mabanckou and Ngangura’s respective depictions of the migrant experience can be viewed as a commentary on evolving post-colonial structures of inequality that define the Franco-African relationship.

The first chapter explores the film *La Noire de...* by Ousmane Sembène, a renowned Senegalese author and filmmaker. Produced after Senegalese independence, the film follows a young Senegalese woman named Diouana who – much to her initial excitement – is taken in by a French family in Senegal and brought back to France to work as a maid. In my examination of the film, I argue that Sembène’s interpretation of Diouana’s isolating experience with her French hosts can also be contextualized to offer insight into the environment of Françafrique, a term coined to describe the neocolonial economic and cultural inequity that characterized Franco-African relations from the 1960s until 1989, when France shifted to policies of disengagement in Africa at the end of the Cold War. I develop a similar argument in the second chapter, which analyzes Alain Mabanckou’s first-person novel *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge*. My commentary discusses the story of Massala-Massala, an African migrant with a dream of making it in France in the 1990s. I argue that *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* engages with a late millennial context, illustrating key concepts of neoliberal theory and Wallerstein’s notions of core and periphery. The third and final chapter also addresses a work set in the 1990s, but one that possesses a slightly divergent perspective of the migrant experience. In this chapter, I analyze the film *Pièces d’Identités* by Congolese filmmaker Mweze Ngangura. The movie recounts a Congolese village chief’s journey back to Belgium for the first time since 1958 to search for his long-lost daughter Mwana. While I acknowledge that Ngangura still illustrates a clear binary between Europe and Africa in cultural and economic terms that show isolation, I contend that Ngangura’s film is a more nuanced view of this dichotomy than the one that I explore in the previous two chapters. To prove this point, I make the conceptual link between *Pièces d’Identités* and Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of “third space.” A concept that views the cultural binary between the colonizer and the colonized in a new way, the “third space” offers not necessarily a dichotomous relationship between Europe and Africa, but rather a relationship that yields a sense of liminal identity for people who move between the positions of colonizer and colonized. This liminality contributes to a unity that conveys Ngangura’s more optimistic vision moving forward, one that suggests how differences between the two worlds – and the sense of displacement for migrants between them – can begin to be reconciled.

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I. “Françafrique” : Neocolonialism and Inequality in *La Noire de*

Alors, ça ne suffit pas de marcher sur les colonies.
Il faut encore qu’on piétine les colonisés!

An Uncertain Future?

June 23, 1958: This is where author and director Ousmane Sembène situates us from the first line of his short story as we follow in the footsteps of a local magistrate and a medical examiner arriving at the scene of a suicide. Just as we anticipate that we are at the cusp of piecing together the event behind the chaotic scene of photographers, journalists and bereaved women huddling together in solemn comfort, the author indicates that we are also at the crossroads of an uncertain future for the French colonial project. In the both the short story and film versions of *La Noire de…*, Sembène chronicles the journey of a young Senegalese woman intoxicated by the idea of moving to France to work and begin a new life for herself. Chosen because of her silent demeanor amongst a crowd of eager young women waiting on the streets of Senegal to try to win the favors of the wife (Madame) of a French colonial officer (Monsieur), Diouana begins this new life by working as a maid for a white French family. However, after actually arriving in France, she realizes that her life there will never be as enthralling as the one that she had imagined. By the end of the short story and the film, Diouana’s bitter disappointment pushes her to commit suicide in the bathtub of her French employers. Although it is unclear exactly which position Monsieur held in (post-)colonial Senegal, we learn in one scene – which takes place in the dining room while Diouana silently serves the couple and their guests coffee – that the family lived in Senegal and that Monsieur profited in some capacity from France’s dealings there. Given Diouana’s host family’s involvement in the French state’s dealings with Senegal, Sembène naturally encourages us to associate the relationship between Diouana and her family with the relationship between the French state and its former African subjects.

It is probably no coincidence, then, that Sembène dates this story in the month immediately following a series of armed *Pied Noir* attacks urging the French state to heighten measures to suppress the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale. Indeed, General Charles de Gaulle’s return to power after a twelve-year hiatus in May 1958 marks not only the end of France’s tumultuous Fourth Republic; it can also be perceived as the beginning of the end of French colonial presence in Algeria. During a visit to Algiers after accepting the *Pieds Noirs*’ appeals to return to the presidency, Charles de Gaulle gave a speech that affirmed not only his empathy for the *Pied Noir* population’s frustration and intentions, but also a revolutionary vision for the future of Algeria:

Il n’y a qu’une seule catégorie d’habitants : il n’y a que des Français à part entière… avec les mêmes droits et les mêmes devoirs. Cela signifie qu’il faut ouvrir des voies qui, jusqu’à présent, étaient fermées devant beaucoup. Cela signifie qu’il faut donner des moyens de vivre à ceux qui ne les avaient pas. Cela signifie qu’il faut reconnaître la dignité de ceux qui ne l’avaient pas. Cela signifie qu’il faut assurer une patrie à ceux qui pouvaient douter d’en avoir une… Nous

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allons le montrer, pas plus tard que dans trois mois, dans l’occasion solennelle où tous les Français, y compris les 10 millions de Français d’Algérie, auront à décider de leur propre destin.⁷

As De Gaulle took the reins in Algeria, he therefore also encouraged standards of democratic civil liberties that left the question of the future of French control in the region an ambiguous one.

Although this moment may have represented a change for people around the world looking hopefully to another successful decolonization, Sembène’s cinematic version reworks his original short story. Whereas the short story places us two years before Senegalese independence, in a moment where the post-colonial order could have gone either way, the film reflects pessimistically on the post-independence relationship between France and Africa. Made in 1966, Sembène’s film version of La Noire de… uses Diouana’s isolated experience with her French hosts to offer insight into neocolonial economic and cultural inequity that characterized Franco-African relations at the time. As the first ever feature film produced in Africa by an African filmmaker, Sembène’s foray into cinema is a noteworthy reversal of measures – such as the Décret Laval of 1934⁸ that sought to discourage Africans from honestly representing their lives as colonial subjects.⁹ As a critical examination of contemporary relations between France and Senegal at the time, Sembène’s inaugural effort in cinema has been applauded by film scholars and audiences alike. Rachel Langford views the film as a benchmark for “a point of decisive change in the relationship of images between Africa and the West”,¹⁰ while Jonathan Rosenbaum asserts that “it’s at this point where African cinema begins.”¹¹

“C’est beau, la France” ?¹²

Sembène perhaps most notably demonstrates the neocolonial relationship between Africa and France through one of the most prominent features of neo-imperialism: profiteering. Sembène’s following of Marxist philosophy is evident in his assessment of the relationship between Africa and the West as it unfolds through Diouana’s journey. Just as France’s colonial project in Africa was an exploitative system to control the means of production, Marxist neo-

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¹⁰ Langford, 13.


¹² Quotation from the film as Diouana arrives in France and Monsieur drives her to his and Madame’s home.
imperial theory contends that as we expand this model to the post-colonial international system, less developed countries (usually former colonies) will also be exploited by more developed countries. The fundamental building blocks of this international system are, naturally, the tenets of global capitalism. To understand how Sembène tracks this evolving relationship in *La Noire de*, we need look no further than the title itself. The preposition “de,” without a noun following it, leaves the meaning of the phrase up for interpretation. This noun could be one of two types: a location, to imply the origins of the black girl in question, or a person or entity. If our first impressions lead us to interpret the title as the second option, this title would imply that the black girl belongs to someone or something. Before we even watch the film, therefore, we understand that the girl in question may also be a possession or a commodity that can be owned and sold.

This relationship is also present through Diouana’s profession in France. When she first arrives at the home of an unnamed “Madame” and “Monsieur” along the Côte d’Azur, Diouana is ecstatic at the idea making a fortune, bringing clothes back to Africa for everyone and having the liberty to go wherever she pleases. While she performs her house tasks, she relishes in the hope that Madame will take her out to the city where she will buy pretty dresses, shoes and beautiful wigs. However, as the film continues, her gleeful exclamation of “Je vais en France!” from the beginning is replaced with grievances that she was only hired to work as a maid and nanny for the family. Diouana’s status as a migrant domestic worker is representative of a global trend involving the migration of women from the “Third World” to “First World” countries to free first-world working women from the burden of keeping the household. In their book detailing the new role of the “Global Woman” in a post-colonial climate, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild write:

> The lifestyles of the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife’s traditional role – childcare, homemaking and sex – from poor countries to rich ones… In an earlier phase of imperialism, northern countries extracted natural resources and agricultural products – rubber, metals, and sugar, for example – from lands they conquered and colonized. Today, while still relying on Third World countries for agricultural and industrial labor, the wealthy countries also seek to extract something harder to measure and quantify…”

In the same way that natural resources were extracted to enhance the economy of the colonizer, Diouana’s journey to France to provide service as a domestic worker also holds up the European household without any benefit to her. Evolved from the colonial practice of exploiting natural resources to contribute to the budget of the French state’s economic expansion, Diouana herself as a new resource that cooks and cleans behind the scenes and, as she laments throughout the film, never sees the money that she has earned. Meanwhile, the household members and their white friends enjoy her cooking and take her presence for granted, as though her sole purpose were to serve as a commodity at their disposal.

What is more, as Diouana becomes fed up with the pattern of working without the benefit of getting to spend her wages outside as Madame had initially promised, Madame angrily responds to the escalating tension between herself and Diouana towards the end of the film by proclaiming to her husband that Diouana is an “ingrate.” Madame’s position not only

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demonstrates her ignorance regarding her harsh treatment of Diouana, but also suggests that Madame believes that she has been helping Diouana. This warped vision of service is evocative of the ideal of a “civilizing mission” propagated by the French colonial regime. Just as France’s colonial subjects were required to pay for the service of the French who supposedly sought to elevate their civilization through policies such as a law from 1900 mandating that colonial police and other forms of social authority would be funded by the colonies themselves, Madame’s reaction to her maid’s dissatisfaction suggests that Diouana should somehow be appreciative of her own mistreatment. Therefore, although the relationship between the two regions no longer consists of the colonial regime’s political monopoly over resources or explicit references to a civilizing mission, the iniquitous exchange in which her French hosts benefit from Diouana’s uncompensated services, and the expectation that she be grateful for this exploitation, suggests a similar colonial mentality replicated in a new form of economic disparity.

Not only does Diouana’s work leave her distressed and disappointed, but it also proves detrimental for the people in Senegal whom she has left behind, just as the extraction of natural resources during colonialism left underdeveloped countries in a state of economic distress at the time and in the post-colonial era. At the end of the film, after Monsieur goes back to Senegal to return Diouana’s meager belongings to her family following her death, the final shot shows the face of a child as he looks on in apparent distress. Sembène does not grant us any details about who this child is, but given his resemblance to Diouana’s little brother whom we meet during a flashback in the beginning of the film, we can assume that he is part of her family. The look of bewilderment on the boy’s face reflects Ehrenreich and Hochschild’s affirmation that through global care chains like the one we witness through Diouana’s journey, the children in Third World countries are neglected and left with what Speranta Dumitru deems a “sense of injustice.”

This neglect and “sense of injustice” extend beyond the labor market. As the child watches Monsieur walk to his car to leave Senegal just as easily as he came, Sembène implies a similar neglect of Africa by France. By focusing the camera on the face of the African child, Sembène may comment on stereotypical colonial depictions of Africans as children for whom France needs to care. For example, through his quotation of a French colonial officer’s affirmation that “if a young child [the African colonies] is allowed to stand on his own legs too soon, it will be easy for him to stumble and fall,” William Cohen argues that one form of legitimating French control over its African subjects was by infantilizing them. By bringing the viewer (literally) face to face with a child whom Monsieur carelessly abandons, Sembène seems to imply an infantilization of the African. If we view this scene within the broader context that these characters represent (Monsieur as the French post-colonial regime and the boy as the face of an abandoned Africa), we can see that Sembène seems to indict France’s lack of accountability for its (post-)colonial exploitation of Africap.

Although absent from the short story version, the carved wooden mask featured throughout the film version also serves as a symbol both of Diouana’s exploitation as a migrant

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in France and of France’s neocolonial economic exploitation of Africa. After Madame chooses Diouana amongst a crowd of young women to work as her maid, Diouana purchases what appears to be a traditional African tribal mask from her young brother and offers it as a gift to Madame. Before Diouana actually gives the mask to her, Sembène shows Diouana wearing the mask and encircling a woman carrying water on her head while joyfully singing “j’ai du travail, je vais en France!” Aside from serving as a telling illustration of Diouana’s naïveté, the sequence evokes the traditional intention of masks like this one. An indispensable staple of traditional Sub-Saharan African society, tribal masks carry a plethora of religious and social meanings that vary depending on the region from which they originate. In the West African countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, Benin, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, masks also possess a metamorphic power during ritual ceremonies. As he/she performs a vigorous song and dance, the wearer supposedly transforms into the persona of the mask that he/she is wearing. By positioning Diouana in a similar situation with the mask as she dances around the village woman, Sembène fuses our perception of Diouana with the mask. Given that the mask is completely black and later shown against a white wall, once in Monsieur and Madame’s possession, Sembène uses this scene as a means of foreshadowing the cultural consequences of Diouana’s relationship with the family. Diouana is no longer Diouana: rather, at this point, she simply becomes the titular character “La Noire.” That is to say, in associating her with an all-black mask, Sembène foreshadows the extent to which Diouana is seen solely for her blackness and her status as a possession in the eyes of her white hosts.

The fact that Diouana gives the mask to Madame, then, is particularly symbolic. Just as incarnating the spirit of the mask yields a responsibility to communicate with the tribe’s ancestors, a similar sense of obligation arises with traditional gift-giving, as the sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu confirms in his book Le Sens Pratique. As Langford argues in her examination of Bourdieu’s study: “According to Bourdieu, gift economies rest on an open recognition of what Ricoeur terms “soi-même comme un autre”: that is, they rest on a recognition of the other as an ethical subject having equal value to oneself.”

Diouana’s already-established association with the mask supports this interpretation of an exchange as giving oneself to the other person. In following this logic, we can understand Diouana’s giving of the mask to Madame before she embarks for France as a metaphor for what Sembène perceives to be Diouana’s experience as a migrant in France: she literally puts herself and her culture into the hands of her French hosts. This self-sacrifice, however, is not reciprocated by Madame and Monsieur. As Diouana leaves the room after giving Madame the gift, her husband enters, examines the mask and muses “il a l’air authentique, dis donc!” The host’s preoccupation with the item’s authenticity could be interpreted as indicative of Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of the value of “authentic” objects in the modern era. In his essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” Benjamin writes:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was

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18 Langford, 18.
subject throughout the time of its existence (…) The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. 19

The processes of mechanical reproduction, which diminishes the value of “authentic” objects, can be understood in terms of a distinction between gift economies – such as the ones mentioned by Bourdieu – and monetary economies. Unlike the personal quality attached to objects such as what we see with Diouana’s gift to Madame, Benjamin’s description of the ease with which these objects are replicated and lose authenticity makes direct reference to contemporary modes of production that apply not just to works of art, but to all man-made objects. Written just about two decades after the end of the Second Industrial Revolution around 1914, Benjamin’s essay addresses earlier “standard[s] of technical reproduction”20 such as Taylorism and Fordism. While the former sought to streamline the division of labor between human and machine, the latter introduced the concept of the assembly line into systems of mass production. 21 With a focus on increased rapidity and systematization of the way in which products are made, these two systems reflect the idea that human time and labor can be predicated on the same scientific principles of efficiency that dictate how machines work. The overarching principles of “mechanical reproduction” that Benjamin references, therefore, take personalization, authenticity and craftsmanship out of the picture. Instead, these two modern systems of production demonstrate an overarching prioritization of principles of efficiency and systematization over craftsmanship.

Benjamin contends that this obsession with the authenticity of objects such as the mask stems from a sense of lacking created by the “universal equality of things,” or a phenomenon in which individually-crafted products are usually indistinguishable from mechanically-reproduced ones. Sembène mirrors this environment in the scene after Diouana gives the mask to Madame; Monsieur’s immediate preoccupation with the authenticity of the mask that has just been given to his wife indicates that the couple lives within a system of exchange that erodes this situatedness in time and space and, therefore, devalues it. However, instead of treating the mask as an object of veneration because it is hand-made and of considerable cultural significance, Sembène presents a different view of artifacts at this particular moment. Monsieur simply places the mask on a shelf near the wall amongst the other tribal decorations that the couple has collected throughout their time in Africa. When Sembène cuts to a scene of the couple and their friends enjoying “authentic African cuisine” in their dining room sometime after Monsieur and Madame have left Senegal, we see that the mask simply hangs on the starkly-painted white wall as a museum piece for the couple’s dinner guests to absent-mindedly admire. Therefore, just as Diouana’s individuality and identity are reduced to her blackness, the mask is subject to a similar fate: it is treated like an artifact in a museum that can be given, bought or otherwise appropriated without any accountability to its original owners and cultural context..

By setting this film against the backdrop of post-independence Franco-African relations in the 1960s, Sembène probably seeks to depict Diouana’s struggle as a representation of


20 Benjamin’s terminology.

economic exploitation between the two regions. Instead of maintaining influence over Senegal through a constitution as it had before Senegal officially gained its independence in June 1960, France held its grip on its former colonies by economic means. Despite De Gaulle’s presentation of the recently-formed Communauté Franco-Africaine as a supposedly equal power relationship that was “inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing,” the economic relationship between the two regions negates this view and instead demonstrates a de facto neocolonial relationship. Through the disbursement of subsidies known as “official development assistance” designed to fund agricultural exports similar to colonial cash crops such as peanuts before independence, the inexpensive profit ultimately came at the detriment of Senegalese prosperity. The dependence of the Senegalese economy on exporting agricultural goods to France – its single largest trading partner – left the country particularly susceptible to drought, which devastated its economic stability. This “official development assistance,” therefore, was not an act of altruism to encourage a more resilient Africa, but rather an assurance that this cycle of dependence would continue in favor of French profit. Thus, just as the possibility of a Bordieusian sense of mutual respect between giver (Diouana) and recipient (Madame) is trumped by an unequal power relationship, the possibility of a “mutually reinforcing” or equitable economic relationship in the midst of decolonization is squelched by the continuation of global systems of inequity.

The fact that Diouana tries desperately to reclaim the mask by taking it from the wall and keeping it at the end of the film can be understood as a sort of rebellion against exploitation. Following a period of resignation in which her lost illusions of France become so unbearable that she refuses to leave her room or comply with Madame’s orders, Monsieur confronts her and assumes that she wants money for her work (“Tu veux quoi? Tu veux ton argent?”). His impression that a solution as simple as money will fix the situation further proves that, for the French couple, Diouana is just another commodity to them, whose services can be bought and sold. While Diouana lets the money fall through her fingers as Monsieur places heaping amounts in her hands, Madame notices that it was Diouana who had the mask the whole time. In a culminating moment at the end of the film, Diouana rises from her servile position on her knees and furiously reaches to take the mask out of Madame’s hands, determinedly declaring that it belongs to her. What ensues is a scuffle that bears a striking resemblance to Diouana’s first dance with the mask at the beginning of the film, when she first learned that she had obtained a job in France. The camera remains still while the screen alternates between Diouana and Madame as they – both gripping the mask – move in a circular motion that resembles Diouana’s celebratory dance with the mask around the local woman and exclaiming “c’est à moi!”

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23 Fall, Alassane. United States and France’s Relationship towards West African Francophone Countries (Senegal): Foreign Policy, Cooperation and Conflicts. University of Kansas.

have already established that the mask is a symbol of Diouana, we can infer that Diouana’s struggle to reclaim the object also symbolizes her attempt to reclaim her identity from the possession of her French hosts.

A Matter of Black and White

Through Diouana’s stay in France, Sembène demonstrates the extent to which the colonial mentality is present in cultural relations between France and an independent Africa. That is to say, the way that Sembène illustrates Diouana’s isolation from her French hosts accentuates cultural differences that characterize post-colonial relations between the two regions.

One telling depiction of Diouana’s cultural alienation from her French hosts is the director’s usage of voice-over for all of Diouana’s dialogue. For example, as Diouana prepares her belongings in her room towards the end of the film, she laments that « ce masque est à moi… plus jamais Madame ne me dira quelque chose, jamais plus Madame ne me dira ‘Diouana, fais-nous du café,’ jamais plus Madame ne me dira ‘Diouana, prépare-nous du riz!’ » While the white characters in the household move their mouths to match the sound that the audience hears on the screen, Diouana’s patterns of speech create an unsettling contrast. Through Diouana’s repetition of the phrase “plus jamais…” the increasing volume at which she says it, and the increasingly shaky timbre of her voice, the sound of the film communicates a sense of anguish and frustration. However, the images of this sequence are quite different from the impression created by the soundtrack. As Diouana proclaims this strong sentiment, we witness her calmly preparing a suitcase. Her measured movements and blank facial expression imply a sense of restraint and normalcy that does not match up with the pained and unstable voice that we hear. This contrast creates a tension between sound and image that violates what film scholar Mary Anne Doane describes as an integral “unity” between these two elements as they are incarnated by one body.

Although one may argue that Diouana’s voiceover is different from her physical posture due to the fact that the voiceover is a means of conveying Diouana’s inner monologue and personal thoughts, Doane contends that a voice disconnected from the physical body (as manifested through a voice-over) still maintains a certain “irreducibility in the spatio-temporal limitations of the body.” 25 That is to say, although the voice and the body may physically be separated on screen, a voice will still be naturally associated with an accompanying body. For example, as Diouana’s tone of voice becomes more and more frustrated while she packs her bags, we would expect that her body would mimic this anguish through forms of expression such as gestures or facial expressions. Given that Diouana’s body does not match the voice that we hear on the screen, Sembène disrupts the unity between the voice and its probable source. In fact, despite extensive inner monologues, Diouana is rarely shown speaking. By the end of the film, Diouana refuses to respond to the commands of her white hosts. By breaking the synchronization between a voice and its body, Sembène creates a sense of colonial silencing. The cleavage that Sembène presents between Diouana and her white hosts, then, constitutes an act of “othering.” By creating a division between Diouana and her white hosts, in which Diouana is their “other,” Sembène introduces a colonial dichotomy between the two groups of characters.

This dichotomy is enhanced through the literal juxtaposition of black and white objects throughout the film. Diouana wears a white dress with black dots, the black mask hangs against a starkly-painted white wall, and the film itself is shot in black and white. This visual simplicity is also mirrored by a sense of cultural reductionism associated with Diouana. In a scene at the

beginning of the film, one of Monsieur and Madame’s white guests requests to kiss Diouana, claiming that “je n’ai jamais embrassé une nègresse.” The film’s dichotomous separation of Diouana and her white hosts, may also symbolize cultural differences between France and Africa. This cultural separation, according to Frantz Fanon, is predicated on a racial dichotomy that fuels colonial relationships between colonizer and colonized. Influenced considerably by the Hegelian model of dialectic, Fanon asserts in his work *Peau noire, masques blancs* that “blackness” and “whiteness” are two opposing concepts in colonial thought. Although he considers in great detail how this dialectic can be deconstructed at the end of the book, he clearly acknowledges that it exists in the chapter “L’expérience vécue du noir”. There Fanon relays an encounter with a stranger who noticed him on the street and exclaimed “Tiens, un nègre!” Despite what Anjali Prabhu describes as the promising sensation of “légereté” and freedom from objectification that Fanon feels after this recognition as a human being, his realization of the fact that he is only recognized as a “nègre” yields the following reaction: “Mais là-bas, juste à contre-pente, je bute, et l’autre, par gestes, attitudes, regards, me fixe, dans le sens où l’on fixe une préparation par un colorant. Je m’importai, exigeai une explication… Rien n’y fit.”

Similar to the imagery of Diouana’s black mask sitting rigidly against the white wall subject to appropriation by her French hosts, Fanon’s blackness has a fixedness in his description of it. Indeed, just as Diouana is pigeonholed as a “négresse” for her white hosts, Fanon attributes a similar phenomenon to the white person’s gaze. Sembène arguably sees post-colonial Franco-African cultural relations through a lens similar to that of Fanon, that is, he sees a racial binary as producing an unhealthy sense of “otherness” there. In other words, through Diouana’s cultural exclusion as a black migrant worker, Sembène demonstrates the extent to which colonial views of race and culture still persist in contemporary forms of exchange between the two regions.

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II. Neoliberal Migration in *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge*

As Ousmane Sembène foreshadows in *La Noire de...*, the French empire officially collapsed in 1962 with the liberation of its last colonial stronghold, Algeria. However, as we have already explored in the first chapter of this thesis, the mentality defining France’s relationship with its former colonial subjects has by no means dissolved. Instead, it has been transformed. With the continued rise of an international market system and industrial economic growth during France’s *trente glorieuses*, the heightened need for labor to fuel this system generated a wave of state-sponsored migration. However, after the global economic crisis of 1973 impelled the French state to curb growing rates of unemployment by ending its migrant labor programs, a dramatically different approach to guest workers was put in place.

As Jean-Marie Le Pen’s far right *Front National* gained leverage in the early 1980s, after its foundation in 1972, and the French government created the zero-tolerance Pasqua Laws in 1993, systems of economic and cultural exclusion dating from the colonial era did not dissipate. In this section, I wish to further my exploration of socio-economic relations between France and Africa through a reading of the 1998 novel *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge*. Just as Ousmane Sembène illustrates a continuation of the colonial binary in new forms immediately following independence, Congolese author Alain Mabanckou underlines a similar mentality throughout *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* that has evolved with contemporary global relations. In the novel, Mabanckou chronicles the journey of protagonist Massala-Massala, an undocumented migrant whose hopeful illusions lead him to France under the wing of Charles Moki, a veteran “Parisien” who is worshipped in their hometown for his supposed success in Paris. Through his depiction of Massala-Massala’s experience in France, Mabanckou suggests that paradigms of exclusion during the colonial era did not disappear with the fall of the French empire. Rather, they have become forms of economic and cultural inequality in an increasingly globalized world.

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27 French for “thirty glorious years,” a term coined to describe the period of immense economic growth following reconstruction from World War II until the global energy crisis in 1973.


29 In 1945, the French government established the *Office National d’Immigration* (ONI) to recruit migrant labor to accommodate the need for workers in the country’s rapidly-increasing industrial sector. However, the majority of migrants who formally underwent this formal process were European migrants. The rest (from the Maghreb, West Africa and the Indies) were predominantly undocumented. (Castles, Stephen. “The guest-worker in Western Europe: an obituary.” *The International Migration Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1986, pp. 761–78).

30 A series of laws proposed by French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua that enforced stricter immigration measures for foreign graduates accepting positions from French employers, families awaiting reunification, and foreign spouses. This illegalization of what were formerly lawful means of entry yielded an increase of populations known as *irrégularisables*, asylum seekers who could not legally be deported, but who were not eligible for legal residency status, either. Information retrieved from: Guiraudon, Virginie. “Immigration policy in France.” *The Brookings Institute*, 1 July 2001.
Navigating the “Global Social System”

Not all of these forms of exclusion derive from the reinforcement of cultural colonial borders. Other prominent sources of inequality that Mabanckou features in his novel reflect a shift in global ideology during the 1980s and 1990s most commonly referred to as neoliberalism. Although the state played a considerable role in France’s post-war economic development during the trente glorieuses, Monica Prasad of Northwestern University affirms that through measures such as abolishing price controls, privatization of industries and the deregulation of global labor markets in the 1990s, the once-interventionist French state underwent a “neoliberal revolution” similar to that of the United States and Great Britain. 31 In viewing Massala-Massala’s experience as a migrant in France through a similar socioeconomic lens, we can see that Mabanckou would support Prasad’s view. That is to say, the socioeconomic relationship between Massala-Massala and the people with whom he interacts in France is indicative of dynamics that defined the neoliberal global system.

In order to understand exactly how Massala-Massala’s own origins are characterized in this system, let us return to his description of the illusion that prompted his journey. Once again, while reminiscing on his and his fellow migrants’ former vision of France, Massala-Massala affirms that: “Un seul mot, Paris, suffisait pour que nous nous retrouvions comme par enchantement devant la Tour Eiffel, l’Arc de Triomphe ou l’avenue des Champs Élysées. Le rêve nous était permis…” (Mabanckou, 36).

The protagonist’s repeated usage of the subject “nous” to represent himself and other migrants like him is particularly noteworthy here. The pronoun “nous” intrinsically implies a sense of collectivity. Here Massala-Massala explains that before his departure for France he shared a dream about the country with other young Africans in his community.

However, Massala-Massala also acknowledges that it will take hard work to succeed as Moki does in Paris:

La France, à mes yeux, n’était pas un bon refuge pour les loirs ou les escargots. Je l’assimilais à un monde où les horloges étaient en avance et où il fallait sans répit rattraper le temps, seule solution pour vivre. Elle avait besoin d’individus agiles, avertis et débrouillards comme Moki. Des bouillants. Des individus vifs, prompts à rebondir face à une situation inextricable, avec la célérité d’un moustique d’étang. (Mabanckou, 38)

Through Massala-Massala’s emphasis here on what is required of les individus, we can infer that he expects to find himself in a French society that is governed by a sense of individualistic effort.

The cleavage between modern, fast-paced French society and Massala-Massala’s home in Africa is characteristic of neoliberal thought. The French environment that Massala-Massala describes, in which individuals are governed by the demands of time and incentives (“rattraper le temps, seule solution pour vivre”), demonstrates the extent to which the language of efficiency and neoliberal thought characterizes the perspective of the young would-be emigrant from Africa. Indeed, it is worth noting that the individuals described in this vision of Paris are particularly evocative of a typical homo economicus. Latin for “economic man,” this

characterization of human beings refers to rational actors who are capable of acting in their own self-interests to acquire resources and, as Massala-Massala says, “survive.”

In presenting this contrast between a modern, fast-paced society and Massala-Massala’s home in Africa, Mabanckou maps global processes in a way that resembles Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory. In his book *The Modern World System I*, Wallerstein defines a world system as:

> A social system… [whose] life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an organism, in that it has a life-span over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others.\(^{32}\)

In Wallerstein’s conception of this “global social system,” the adhesive structure that facilitates global processes are neoliberal economic institutions. The “conflicting forces” to which Wallerstein alludes in this passage situate developed “core” societies with respect to poor “peripheral” societies. The former maintain the potential to control and exploit the latter.\(^{33}\) Given the fact that the “core” is made of regions such as Europe and North America that boast of high GDPs and technologically-oriented means of production, while the “periphery” refers to regions of the world dependent on more labor-intensive means of production that contribute to what Wallerstein deems an “unequal exchange” between the two, the relationship between core and periphery necessarily gives rise to political problems of imperialism and hegemony.\(^{34}\)

Mabanckou explicitly evokes this lopsided dynamic in the global division of labor with an echo of colonial ideology as Massala-Massala talks of his determination to succeed in France:


Moki, “the Parisian,” is associated with France, and Massala-Massala, the *débarqué* (as the others call him after he arrives in Paris), represents their *pays natal*. Massala-Massala’s vow to work “comme un nègre” recalls the colonial policy of forced labor on plantations in West Africa for the profit of the French colonial régime.\(^{35}\) He introduces a teacher/student metaphor to describe his relationship to Moki: by describing himself as an “élève” who seeks to learn from his “maître,” Massala-Massala places himself in a subservient position that evokes colonial metaphors from the early 20th century. As cited in Samya El Mechat’s commentary on law


\(^{33}\) Wallerstein, 1974.

\(^{34}\) Wallerstein, 1974.

professor Arthur Girault’s pivotal *Principes de Colonisation*, one of the first contexts in which we witness this metaphor is when Girault outlines the principles on which much of France’s colonial policy would be based:

Il est bien évident qu’on ne peut appliquer immédiatement à une colonie dans l’enfance des règles complexes qui ne peuvent convenir qu’à une société déjà formée. Chaque colonie se développe lentement suivant une évolution progressive et il suffit d’observer les différentes transformations de notre législation coloniale pour voir comment naissent et grandissent successivement les différents organes des sociétés civilisées. 36

By describing the progress of the colonies in terms of child development like “enfance,” “développer,” “naître” et “grandir,” Girault associates the colonized society with fundamental stages of human development. This link between early child development and African society suggests that it has yet to grow to a capacity that we associate with later stages of personal development. By presenting the colonized in this way, Girault seems to offer a teleological view of civilization that considers French society to be the pinnacle of development. Through Massala-Massala’s description of himself as an “élève” who works to rise to Moki’s level, Mabancou suggests that Massala-Massala’s attitude towards succeeding in France has its origins in this colonial mentality, whose ultimate standard is a French way of life dependent on exploiting others occupying a peripheral position.

La “Langue de Maupassant” 37

The standardization of the French language is a prominent cultural testament to the idea of sociopolitical belonging.38 As Eugen Weber affirms in his book *Peasants Into Frenchmen*, the French language played a formative role in developing cultural unity for French citizens.39 With the rise of industrialism and other “forces of modernization” 40 that began to take hold of France’s agrarian regions in the last two decades of the 19th century, French was used as the *lingua franca* amidst various regional dialects.

The French language, therefore, serves not only the inevitable need for communication during the work day, but also stands as a symbol of cultural homogenization and national belonging. However, instead of portraying the French language as an opportunity for inclusion, Mabancou predominantly depicts the French language as reinforcing a cultural dichotomy between France and the most recent generation of people who seek to belong there. In describing


37 The French language as it is described by Massala-Massala and his community.


his own motivation to travel to France, Massala-Massala frequently recounts Moki’s returns to their pays natal. During one of Moki’s visits in particular, Massala-Massala relates the following:

Nous admirions sa manière de parler. Il parlait un français français. Le fameux français de Guy de Maupassant, auquel faisait allusion son père. Il prétendait que nos langues étaient prédestinées à mal prononcer les mots. C’était une suite inintelligible du fironfon naspa, du petit-nègre d’ancien combattant présomptueux et collectionneur de médailles. (Mabanckou, 63)\(^{41}\)

Through Massala-Massala’s allusion to French as the language of Guy de Maupassant, he makes a reference that works as a mode of cultural exclusion against him and his compatriots. As one of the most prominent writers of the 19\(^{th}\) century amongst the likes of Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert, de Maupassant was acclaimed for his use of literary naturalism in short stories intended to depict the realities and disillusionments of French social life. By associating the “real” French language with such a staple of the French literary tradition that also deals with events from a history that is uniquely “French,” Massala-Massala seems to imply that the French language belongs to a unique history and sense of tradition that those who come from elsewhere cannot share.

In addition, Massala-Massala’s claim that “nos langues étaient prédestinées à mal prononcer les mots” in French suggests a culturally-engrained differentiation of peoples that is evocative of colonial administrations. A form of anthropological inquiry centered around the idea that physical characteristics could be classified to determine certain traits or capacities, cultural determinism played an influential role in shaping colonial policy in French West Africa (AOF). \(^{42}\) French colonial authorities initially sought to recreate West African societies in the image of post-revolutionary France. However, in her reading of colonial policy motivated by the studies of anthropologists such as Maurice Delafosse in early 20\(^{th}\)-century West Africa, Ruth Ginio affirms that ethnographic research at the time reached the conclusion that inherent qualities of West African traditions and customs rendered it impossible to completely assimilate this society into a French way of life. \(^{43}\) By claiming that the African tongue is physiologically incapable of speaking with a “French” pronunciation, Massala-Massala echoes the idea that Africans are incapable of conforming to the French idea of civilization.

Frantz Fanon puts this notion into the broader context of colonial trends characterizing cultural relations between Africa and France in Peau noire, masques blancs. In describing Fanon’s perception of the “epidermal” \(^{44}\) character of race and language, even for individuals with a better mastery of French than the perceived abilities of Massala-Massala’s community, Thomas Drabinski writes: “To be black and speak with perfect diction is still to be black… There


\(^{43}\) Ginio, 2002.

\(^{44}\) Term from Drabinski, 2019.
is no escape from the epidermal skin. Embodiment frames linguistic performance and limits its significance.\textsuperscript{45}

By having some African characters snobbishly suggest that African biological characteristics and cultural traditions prevent some or most Africans who have not migrated to France from speaking a \textit{français français}, which is held by them to be far superior to African French, Mabanckou ultimately presents the French language and its regional differences as symbolic of a cultural divide that still persists between France and Africa. Mabanckou underlines this distinction by contrasting the diction of African French to “French” French. As he describes his community’s pronunciation of French words, Massala-Massala affirms that “Nous ne parlions donc pas le vrai français avec notre accent de rustre, un accent brutal, sec et heurté” (Mabanckou, 63).

Through his use of words with harsh sounds such as “rustre” and “brutal,” Massala-Massala presents an unpleasant vision of African French pronunciation. What is more, by describing this style as “brutal,” “sec” and “heurté,” Massala-Massala gives a vision of the people pronouncing these words as lacking the sort of refinement that he (or rather, initially, that Moki and his father) associates with \textit{le français-français}. In describing the French language spoken in France Moki explains, in Massala-Massala’s retelling, that true French speech is grandiloquent, using “les gros mots”, which he defines in a peculiar way: “Il faut entendre par là tous ces mots qui caressaient agréablement l’oreille et qui étaient susceptibles d’émerveiller l’auditoire” (Mabanckou, 63).

In describing how Moki, whom the community in \textit{le pays} perceives as a true Parisian, represents proper French speech, Massala-Massala distinguishes it from the French pronunciation of people in \textit{le pays}. Through the contrast between, on the one hand, words such as “brutal,” “sec” and “heurté,” and on the other hand, “caresser” and “émerveiller” Mabanckou suggests a hard linguistic separation between the two cultures, allowing him to illustrate how the colonial cultural binary persists and is replicated through Massala-Massala’s and Moki’s experience and attitudes.

In addition to representing the French language as enabling a form of cultural exclusion that reinforces the binary division between France and Africa, Mabanckou also shows just how deeply the colonial cultural dichotomy has been codified by Massala-Massala and his community through his description of Africans speaking French with an “accent de rustre” and as a “suite inintelligible de firofonfon naspa du petit nègre d’ancien combattant” (Mabanckou, 63). The description of Africans as incomprehensible and dunce-like tokens of former colonial soldiers suggests a means of “othering” that relies on old colonial stereotypes that contrast the “civilized” European and the “barbaric” or buffoonish African. By having Moki describe his own people in this way, therefore, Mabanckou demonstrates even more powerfully the way that the colonial cultural distinction between the “civilized” European and the “barbaric” African still informs the contemporary relationship between France and its former subjects.

Mabanckou furthers this demonstration of the extent to which Massala-Massala replicates the colonial mentality through his evolving imagination of France. As Massala-Massala reflects on his initial impressions of what he thought his voyage would bring, he portrays France as … ce pays lointain, inaccessible malgré ses feux d’artifice qui scintillaient dans le moindre de mes songes et me laissaient, à mon réveil, un goût de miel dans la bouche… Un seul mot, Paris, suffisait pour que nous nous retrouvions comme par

enchantement devant la Tour Eiffel, l’Arc de Triomphe ou l’avenue des Champs Élysées. Le rêve nous était permis…. (Mabanckou, 36)

Through the evocation of France (with a particular focus on Paris’s stereotypical tourist destinations) as a distant idea that “shines” and leaves a “taste of honey” that lingers in the protagonist’s mouth, Mabanckou not only conjures up a sense of leisure and wonder with enchanting words such as “scintiller,” “rêve” and “enchantement,” but he makes this ideal sensual. Through these physical manifestations of Massala-Massala’s illusions, perhaps Mabanckou seeks to demonstrate the impact of the “French dream” on migrants like Massala-Massala. That is to say, this dream not only functions as a “pays lointain” that serves as a source of fantasy, but also as a concrete, visceral source of inspiration for those such as him.

The image of fireworks traversing the protagonist’s mind is also particularly noteworthy here in that it sets up a metaphor of darkness and light woven throughout the novel. Given that fireworks are generally set off at night, Massala-Massala’s comparison of his own mind to the dark backdrop of the shining source of light from France implies that he associates the former with an ignorance waiting to be illuminated. This visual contrast returns later in the novel when Massala-Massala describes the trip to France as a voyage that takes place all through the night before they finally reach Paris “aux premières lueurs de l’aube” (Mabanckou, 119).

Mabanckou’s association of the home country with darkness and ignorance and that of Paris with light is evocative of the initial rationale for colonizing Africa known as the mission civilisatrice. Derived from the idea of the white men’s burden and propelled by cultural dichotomies between “black” and “white” and “savage” and “civilized,” the “civilizing mission” to colonize Africa was the result of a perceived responsibility to educate the African people and teach them the refined ways of a supposedly superior – French, in this case – culture. 46 As suggested by the natural temporal transition between night and day in Massala-Massala’s description, the expansion of French power in Africa was described as “un phénomène naturel de dislocation et de prolifération des organismes vivants” that sought to “étendre les lumières de la civilisation française.” 47 Through this link between the mission civilisatrice and Massala-Massala’s descriptions of the difference between his home country and France, I argue that Mabanckou demonstrates that a colonial mentality – albeit in a new form – remains present as a motivator and symbol of contemporary migrant experience. Similar to how the “lights of French civilization” also blinded many to the cruelty of colonialism, Massala-Massala’s belief in an illuminating “French dream” ultimately sets him up for bitter disappointment. By the end of the novel, Massala-Massala finds himself in prison after he is caught selling metro tickets on the black market for Moki. In one of the last scenes of the novel just before being deported back to his home country, Massala-Massala laments that “Ma France était celle-là. Celle de la nuit. La nuit des pensées. La nuit des vagabondages. La nuit des murs. Où était la lumière ? Par où passait le soleil ?” (Mabanckou, 204).


In his remarks, Massala-Massala offers a vision of France that starkly opposes the hopeful image of France as a series of fireworks illuminating a night sky. France is no longer the source of light that penetrates the darkness; rather, through Massala-Massala’s affirmation that his France is “celle de la nuit,” France now becomes the darkness. Through the way that Massala-Massala portrays this, he communicates a sense of hopelessness. With the image of a vagabond, Mabanckou suggests yet again a sense of precariousness and instability associated with the young migrant’s life in Paris. In addition, given that a wall serves to keep out unwelcome elements from a certain territory, such as a city, Massala-Massala’s association of Paris with walls symbolizes his feelings of isolation and exclusion from French society.

In addition to depicting the relationship between Massala-Massala/the pays natal and Moki/French society as a neocolonial relationship arising from neoliberal values, Mabanckou explores the effects of this relationship on Massala-Massala and the migrant experience. One of the principal effects of migration that Mabanckou explores through Massala-Massala is deculturation. To witness this, we need look no further than the structure of the novel itself. The book is divided into two parts, a border of sorts that separates “Le Pays” and “La France.” We follow Massala-Massala as he traverses the border between his home country and France, and we also move from “Le Pays” to “La France” as we read the novel. “Le Pays” is exclusively composed of Massala-Massala’s memories about his home country, while “La France” explicitly describes his experience in France. After Massala-Massala’s arrival, Moki and the rest of the community refer to him as le débarqué, a denomination that is particularly reductive for readers after we have already gotten to know Massala-Massala in “Le Pays.” In Le tragi-comique, la migration urbaine et la couleur glocale dans Bleu, Blanc, Rouge, Petr Vurm quotes sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad on the migrant’s loss of his/her former self, which he describes as a form of cultural bereavement imposed by the host society:

… Qui néglige les conditions d'origine des émigrés : d’une part, comme si son existence commençait au moment où il arrive en France, c’est l’immigrant – et lui seul – et non l’émigré qui est pris en considération, et d’autre part, la problématique, explicite et implicite, est toujours celle de l’adaptation à la société d’accueil.48

This description, which aptly explains Massala-Massala’s affirmation at the end of the novel that he has become merely a shadow of his former self, envisions each migrant as possessing a sort of double identity, an alienation from self as he/she occupies a double existence between that of émigré and that of immigrant. The construction of the émigré produces a more holistic vision of the migrant as an individual attached to the life and circumstances that he/she leaves behind. If taken in isolation, the immigrant is solely identified by his/her foreignness to the host culture, a person whose existence outside of his/her ability to assimilate to this new society is relatively unimportant. As our view of Massala-Massala shifts from émigré to immigrant between the two parts of the book (le Pays Natal and La France), Mabanckou illustrates how the codification of the colonial mentality in modern Franco-African relations is a source of auto-isolation for those who find themselves moving between the borders of the two spaces.

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III. Un beau souvenir complexe : Hybridity in Pièces d'Identités

Un beau souvenir ne peut être que complexe. J’aimerais bien que l’Afrique puisse jouer ce rôle-là : quand on investit dans la culture, on investit dans les futurs, et cet investissement dans le futur, c’est ça qui nous aide à faire le lien entre notre passé, notre présent et notre futur. 49

In an interview with the European Union’s African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) cultural development organization, filmmaker Ngangura introduces a pronounced vision of cinema as a means of highlighting African identity. As ethnic civil conflict in Ngangura’s home country of the Congo reached its apex and prompted a surge in requests for asylum in Belgium in the late 1990s, 50 the 1998 release of his film Pièces d’Identités was particularly timely. The film follows the journey of Mani Kongo, a Congolese nobleman of sorts who looks fondly on his country’s colonial occupation, as he travels to Belgium for the first time since the 1950s in search of his estranged daughter, Mwana. Although Ngangura does not neglect to depict Mani Kongo’s culture shock as he navigates modern Belgium, the film refuses to display the dichotomous stereotype of a class divide between the African and the European that we explored here in the first two chapters. through Ousmane Sembène’s La Noire de... and Alain Mabanckou’s Bleu, Blanc, Rouge. Rather, Ngangura adopts a more nuanced approach to tackling the issue of assimilation in a globalized Europe. Through his usage of visual devices and symbolic gestures that convey a unique combination of both contrast and continuity, Ngangura depicts postcolonial Congolese migrants as occupying a “third space.” This “third space,” in turn, contributes to a sense of unity that conveys Ngangura’s vision of how formerly broken relations between the two worlds – and the sense of displacement for migrants between them – can begin to be mended.

Identified by theoretician Homi Bhabha as “a way of describing a productive space of new forms of cultural meaning,” the idea of a third space in postcolonial studies draws on a sense of cultural hybridity. 51 In other words, the “third space” fuses the cultural binary between the colonizer and the colonized; interactions between the two do not always necessarily yield a culture clash, but instead produce “an indeterminate space of in-between positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of colonial structures and practices.” 52 By depicting his characters in this “third space,” Ngangura

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49 Interview de Mweze Dieudonné Ngangura. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzeM_XjVAhQ.


52 Bhabha, 1994.
modifies the dichotomous colonial narrative and diversifies our perspective with a more complex set of tensions that clearly draw a link between, in Ngangura’s words, past, present, and future.

Ngangura establishes this liminality as it applies to the Congolese people right from the very beginning of the film. After a series of frames featuring a lush African landscape of the countryside accompanied by an extradiegetic voice singing about the flight of a “sacred bird,” Ngangura quickly cuts to an establishing shot of a structure that is directly followed by an image of Mani Kongo, dressed in his traditional Congolese royal garb, as he wistfully recounts his first experience traveling to Belgium in 1958. Through this direct transition from a seemingly-untouched landscape to a traditionally-dressed Mani Kongo, we are led to associate him with a traditional, bygone way of life. In the following scenes, Ngangura replaces the image of a “sacred bird” evoked by the singing voice in the previous shot with the image of an airplane as Mani Kongo and his companions arrive in the city to go to the airport. That is to say, the director transitions from a landscape with a voice in the background singing in an indigenous African language to a bustling cacophony of cars, shops, and people rushing around in Western dress.

Through this juxtaposition, Ngangura showcases a liminal place between two worlds even within the space of the Congo. In exhibiting this dichotomy between the bustling, modern city and its traditional surroundings from the very beginning of the film, Ngangura seeks to tell his audience that the opposition between tradition and modernity can exist not only between the Western colonizer and the African colonial subject, but also within “third-world” society itself. This view of life in the “periphery” ultimately provides a much more nuanced view of the relationship between core and periphery than the one that Sembène and Mabanckou present.

Ngangura also recounts this tension through Mani Kongo’s individual experiences before leaving the African continent. As Mani Kongo and his friends sit outside of the airline office dressed in a mix of traditional African clothes and Western dress, a young man and woman exit the office and pass the older villagers. The young woman, strutting in a black mini-skirt, high heels and sweater, gestures to her friend (dressed in a sports jacket with a basketball logo on it) and exclaims “Whaou! En direct du village!” As she approaches the men to touch Mani Kongo’s headdress, his companions block her from doing so because it is forbidden for women to touch his “royal fetishes.” While Mani Kongo is part of a generation that still holds onto certain elements of tradition, as illustrated by his mix of clothing and his regard for what his traditional clothing represents, the young people with whom he interacts have completely embraced Western style. In this scene, Ngangura adds further nuance to the post-colonial dichotomy by pitting not European against African, but rather one African generation against another. Through the friction between these two generations, Ngangura illustrates a clash between two conflicting sets of customs and principles; not between African and European, but between divergent segments of Congolese society.

What is more, the young woman’s fascination with these “village people” implies a sense of exoticism that we would generally associate with European colonial powers fetishizing traditional clothing and artifacts. However, in this exchange, the traditional African is exoticized by the more “modern” African. As Mani Kongo later heads towards the gate to catch his flight to Brussels, traditional headdress and scepter in hand, one of his advisors warns him: “n’oubliez pas qu’au pays des blancs, certains sont plus ou moins noirs et d’autres sont plus ou moins blancs.” In the same way that the younger, more Western generation clashes with the older generation,

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Mani Kongo’s advisor reiterates the nuance between Africans: one is not exclusively white or exclusively black and can possess qualities of both cultures.

In addition, the airline office in question, seen in a shot just before Mani Kongo’s interaction with the young Congolese woman, belongs to the corporation Sabena. Founded in 1923 and formally known as the Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne, Sabena was the national airline of Belgium that flew people and supplies to and from the Belgian Congo. By displaying this recognizable insignia of the Belgian Congo, Ngangura suggests a neocolonial replication of history that relies this time not on military force or racist propaganda, but rather on a certain globalized commercialism to which Mani Kongo has yet to be exposed. By situating Mani Kongo and his village friends outside of the Sabena office while the young woman and her friend are shown to have been inside of it, Ngangura frames the primary postcolonial tension not as a contrast between the former colonizer and the colonized, but rather as a cleavage between two generations of Africans, one comfortably occupying a globalized, neoliberal environment, and the other still adhering to conventions of the past.

The Link Between Past and Present

Although I will continue to demonstrate how Ngangura advocates for a conceptual “third space” between Europe and Africa, I contend that the director still makes it a point to recognize modern patterns of cultural and economic colonial exploitation and their effects on Mani Kongo and Mwana as migrants. Indeed, as Mani Kongo arrives in Belgium, Ngangura encourages the audience to identify him more and more as a former colonial subject. Ngangura then uses these snapshots of Belgium’s colonial past to create a clearer picture of Belgium in the present. For example, immediately after showing black and white footage of a Congolese subject laying a wreath at a statue of King Leopold II, the infamous ruler of the Belgian Congo, Ngangura cuts to a shot panning across the tree-lined streets that lead to the Atomium. Originally constructed under the direction of King Baudouin of Belgium, the monument served as a symbol of the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair. What is most noteworthy about this festival in particular is its status as one of the last World’s Fair exhibitions to feature a “human zoo.” Congolese subjects were brought to the fair to occupy a mock African village where they were forced to dress in primitive clothing, stand behind a bamboo fence and eat bananas and peanuts that were thrown at them.

According to sociologist Tony Bennett, this display also allowed the colonial state to showcase a certain hierarchy of stages of production. This social schema most widely proliferated during the Industrial Revolution, which is also noted as the first prominent appearance of global capitalism. By substituting the Western-style suits most commonly produced en masse that we see in the footage with more typically primitive clothing, the objective of these “human zoos” is to situate African colonial subjects at what Bennett describes as the “lowest levels of manufacturing civilization; reduced to displays of ‘primitive’ handicrafts and the like, they were represented as cultures without momentum”. Perhaps to mirror the


image of subservience of the man dutifully laying a wreath on King Leopold’s statue, Ngangura also chooses colonial footage that positions the camera below the Atomium. From this perspective, the viewer is forced to look up to see what appears as a looming, domineering structure before which we feel quite small by comparison. By purposefully including this particular sequence of footage, Ngangura features a contrast between perspectives that denotes a sense of inequality or an uneven power dynamic on which the viewer finds himself/herself at the more vulnerable end. As a result, it is likely that Ngangura uses this sequence to urge the viewer to remember that the 1958 exposition was not only a celebration of modern ingenuity, but also an emblem of Belgium’s colonial domination. By hinting to his audience that the Atomium is a symbol of oppression before the characters realize it themselves, Ngangura encourages the viewer to see past the faulty illusions of civilization and progress to which Mani Kongo has fallen victim and to consider the pertinence of colonial power as a model for the Belgian/Congolese relationship.

This attempt to remember the exploitative nature of Belgium’s colonial past through flashback is interwoven with Mani Kongo’s migrant experience in the present. Contrary to Mani Kongo’s speculation on the plane, it is as if Ngangura means to say that not much really has changed since 1958. As the camera continues to pan down the street towards the Atomium, the old black-and-white footage slowly changes to a colorized version of the same shot until we are eventually brought back to a color shot of the Atomium. Through his use of different color gradients to transition seamlessly between black and white shots of the structure in 1958 and its colorized image in the present, Ngangura brings together these two temporalities in one unified sequence. This merging together of both past and present exemplifies what Paul Connerton describes as the experience of anamnesis. A theoretical device intended to “make the audience feel as if they are in both places [the past and the present] at the same time,” anamnesis in film is most closely associated with the practice of collective memory. By allowing Belgium’s and the Congo’s shared colonial pasts to resurge upon Mani Kongo’s present situation, it is possible that Ngangura also engages with this practice of collective memory by encouraging his audience to remember and recognize Mani Kongo’s current trip to Belgium as a consequence of this past.

Ngangura further displays this colonial past in a present context through Mwana’s troubles with the authorities. Mwana is the beloved estranged daughter of Mani Kongo who has lived in Belgium from a young age. We soon learn that Mwana is at the mercy of Jefke Schengen, the chief of police in Brussels, after recently being released from prison. Despite her supposed high level of education and her protests that it is unacceptable in her family, Jefke issues her an ultimatum. She can either keep her carte de séjour and take a job dancing at a club to be his eyes and ears in the search for a culprit that he is currently pursuing, or she will return to jail. After Mwana reluctantly agrees to take the job and help Jefke by serving as his eyes and ears, her transformation is striking. A shot of the poster advertising her show strips Mwana of the modest, Western clothing that she wore in the previous scene and replaces it with an aboriginal-looking grass skirt and black bikini top. The poster is also adorned on all sides with bananas and leaves that look like they are from some sort of tropical species of tree. To finish off the advertisement, a caption at the bottom reads “Nouveau spectacle, danse exotique.”

What is more, upon closer examination of the poster, we see that Mwana’s makeup-free face has been replaced with dark eyeshadow, airbrushed features and flowing blonde dreadlocks. This sexualized spin on the primitive stereotypes evocative of human zoos ultimately suggests the persistence of colonial representations of Africa in the present. With her job dancing in a bar, Mwana is not only subject to colonial forms of racial appropriation as an African migrant; she also falls victim to exploitation as a young woman in modern Western society. The fact that this exploitation comes at the ultimatum of an authority figure called Schengen is also significant. A group of 26 European states that have abolished passport and border control, the Schengen Area was created with the intent of facilitating the movement of peoples across borders. Therefore, by associating the exploitative police investigator with such a symbol of European integration, Ngangura illustrates that Mwana’s status as a migrant in the postcolonial era demonstrates the extent to which this exploitation not only originates in Europe’s colonial past, but also portrays an incongruous relationship between France and Africa in the present.

Ngangura extends his commentary to explain how this experience also contributes to a loss or a fracturing of identity. During a scene in the middle of the film which Mr. Jos, the owner of the Katanga bar, offers Mani Kongo some money for his traditional accessories (or “fetishes,” as he calls them), Mani Kongo first takes offense at his offer, reaffirming that these articles of clothing are indispensable symbols of the African dynasty that he is a proud part of. However, Mani Kongo decides to accept Mr. Jos’ offer. In an exchange that more closely resembles a sale instead of an act of benevolence, Mr. Jos lends Mani Kongo the money on the condition that Mani Kongo leave his beloved headdresses with Mr. Jos. If he is able to repay him for the money that he borrowed within five days, he will be able to reclaim his possessions. However, after this exchange, Mani Kongo, now clad in a neutral, Western-looking suit, laments that he is no more than a nomad while Mr. Jos is left to profit.

This exchange also recalls a messy history associated with the bar’s namesake. Despite Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s vision to keep the resource-rich Katanga province as part of a unified Congo during its transition to independence in June of 1960, the region officially seceded from the rest of the country the following month under Moise Tshombe. 58 Although the Congo was officially independent at this time, the secession of the Katanga province allowed Belgian corporations and foreign mining enterprises to keep their monopoly over the region’s profitable natural resources. 59 Therefore, through Mani Kongo’s act of handing symbols of his identity over to the owner of the bar, Ngangura encourages us to view Mani Kongo’s experience as one that is indicative of the corrupted autonomy of Africa and its economic exploitation by Europe.

This scene can also be interpreted as commentary on Mani Kongo’s cultural treatment by Belgian society. Described by Remi Clignet and R.N. Egudu as a practice of “abandon[ing] African speech, dress, customs and religion and way of living,” assimilation is a means of securing social equality in the host society. 60 However, despite the fact that Mani Kongo now has the funds that he needs, having abandoned his possessions he now sees himself as a sort of

vagabond who belongs to neither Africa nor Belgium. Through Mani Kongo’s transformation from a popular and convivial village chief in the beginning of the film to a transient and isolated figure, Ngangura exemplifies the self-alienating potential of completely abandoning one’s origins to belong in the host country.

Mani Kongo’s transplantation in Belgium prompts him to face the past in a way that he had not back in the Congo. As Mani Kongo daydreams yet again of his welcome to Belgium in 1958, he meets another character divided between two identities. Dressed in traditional African clothing and singing in a rap, hip-hop rhythm that she dreams of returning to “Mother Africa,” Noubia (or the “Black Renaissance”) approaches Mani Kongo. Born in Belgium with a soul that, she claims, resides in the depths of black Africa, “Noubia” calls to mind the ancient African region between modern-day Egypt and Sudan. Besides its status as one of Africa’s earliest cultural, economic and architectural epicenters, Nubia was also a prominent gateway between the Mediterranean region and the rich natural resources (such as gold and ivory) in the Sub-Saharan region. 61 Ngangura reflects this sense of in-betweens with his personification of Noubia. Indeed, we can view this prophet as a symbol of liminal identity; she is a mystical combination of both African tradition (exemplified by her chant) and Western culture (shown through rapping). Ngangura further demonstrates this metaphor with a traveling shot of Noubia’s feet, which presents an unusual mix between a long, traditional African robe and a pair of leopard-print high heels. Through the juxtaposition of these elements, Ngangura suggests that Noubia represents not only a hybridity of identity between the two worlds, but also the promising potential of looking to one’s origins to navigate this in-betweenness.

The acceptance of interlaced pasts is also present at the end of the film as the characters deliberate their futures. This future, for Ngangura, involves a resolution of broken parts from the past: Mwana, her boyfriend Chaka-Jo, and Mani Kongo ultimately decide to return to the Congo. Contrary to the beginning of the film when Mwana’s ability to stay in Belgium rested in the hands of the police officer, she now chooses to return voluntarily. Chaka-Jo, who also happens to be the son of Jefke Schengen and a Congolese mother, follows his new love’s initiative to return. Through Chaka-Jo’s arrest and subsequent liberation while looking for his passport to leave with Mwana and her father, Ngangura further demonstrates this new sense of empowerment. As Chaka-Jo sits in the police car with the police officer, it is ultimately the proclamation of his decision to return to the Congo that inspires the police officer to set him free. After the plane carrying the three characters has left, we learn that the police officer actually fathered Chaka-Jo during his stint in colonial Congo. It is ultimately Chaka-Jo’s declaration of his wish to return to the Congo with Mwana that leads the officer, his father, to lift his arrest and let him exit the police car where they were speaking. Through a shared sense of authority between the father (the colonizer) and the will of the son (the formerly colonized), Ngangura imagines a situation in which the dynamic characterizing relations between the former colonizer and formerly colonized more closely resembles one of equal autonomy.

This optimistic sense of agency and reconciliation is further illustrated through Mani Kongo’s assurance to his daughter on the plane. When Mwana expresses her resolve to Mani Kongo to open a clinic, Ngangura offers an optimistic vision of the way that these respective pasts can be reconciled to build the future. Indeed, Mwana’s father reassures her that although she does not have a medical degree from Belgium, she will be the first to take over a role that has always been reserved for a medicine man in their village in the Congo. Through the fusion of

modern ideals with those of a history and tradition that are uniquely African, Ngangura creates yet again a sense of hybridity between two worlds to envision a more equitable relationship.

Lastly, Ngangura presents a final moment of closure with the montage of images featured before the credits begin to roll. As we see the white airplane carrying the reunited father and daughter in the sky, its form slowly turns into that of a bird of the same color that is flying in the same direction. We can infer that Ngangura alludes back to the motif of the “sacred bird” in the beginning of the film. In drawing this cyclical parallel between the journey of Mani Kongo and the flight of a bird, Ngangura implies that the migrant’s journey to Belgium is not one of displacement, but rather a valuable diversion leading back home. In addition, by fusing the sense of tradition associated with the song about the sacred bird from the beginning of the film with the modern image of an airplane, Ngangura further demonstrates the shared past between Europe and Africa not as solely a source of inequality, but one of new possibilities.
Conclusion

Through literary and cinematic analysis of Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de...*, Alain Mabanckou’s *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* and Mweze Ngangura’s *Pièces d’Identifier*, I have sought to prove that each work’s depictions of the post-colonial migrant experience can be viewed as a microcosm of evolving global structures of inequality that define the Franco-African relationship. As we have advanced through different chronological moments and perspectives that center around a distinct binary between both worlds, we found that each work’s interpretation of its main characters’ experiences reflects overarching global trends. Moving from the rise of Françafrique in the 1960s to the apex of neoliberal cultural ideology in the 1990s, we looked at the colonial roots of these structures of inequality and their effects on the stories’ characters. By analyzing the characters’ experiences in this way, this thesis, as Ngangura encourages, forges a link between past and present that contextualizes contemporary debates surrounding migration. When we accept the displacement (both voluntary and involuntary) of peoples as representative of this past and present, we can begin – as first president of Senegal Léopold Senghor suggests – to “s’ouvrir à l’autre.”


Interview de Mweze Dieudonné Ngangura. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzeM_XjVAhQ.


