NATIONALISM'S DISCONTENTS: POSTCOLONIAL CONTESTATIONS
IN THE WRITINGS OF MARIAMA BÀ, ASSIA DJEBAR,
HENRI LOPES, AND OUSMANE SEMBÈNE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

From its beginnings in the 1920s, literature in French from Africa has been set against a backdrop of struggle and indelibly marked by conflict. Indeed, over the course of these last 80 years, whether striving for the creation of new independent nations or participating in nation building, francophone writers from Africa have been catalysts for both social and political change through their contributions to this body of literature. The first half of its history, including the decade immediately following independence, through 1970, is a period described by scholars as both nationalist, and celebratory. Nationalist, because primarily influenced by a desire for independence from colonial rule; and celebratory, because of the concerted effort among writers and other intellectuals to ignite a sense of pride in all things African: culture, history and race. With the fall of European colonial empires and the creation of new, independent states in the 1950s and 1960s, this body of literature underwent a major period of transformation consisting in a dramatic change not only in the tone, focus, and themes chosen by its authors, but also in their social and political preoccupations. Scholars acknowledge this shift by characterizing the post-independence literary production in francophone Africa as belonging to the post-nationalist, critical phase. The focus of my dissertation concerns
the ways in which writers of the second-generation use a new *écriture* to contest anti-colonial nationalism as it is embodied in the writings of the previous generation. Second generation writers have been particularly critical of the first generation’s celebration of tradition as pure, harmonious and infallible, and recognize the power of some traditions to repress certain members of society: members of particular castes and women for example. Issues concerning politics, gender roles in society, the reality of racial and cultural hybridity and class locations were now too obvious to ignore. Social justice, freedom of speech, women’s rights, equality of chances, an end to corruption, a centralizing and authoritarian post-colonial state, are all themes, which began to appear in the writings of this new generation.
To Mikaël, Anabelle, and Maximilien
To my Mom and Dad
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INTRODUCTION

From its beginnings in the 1920s, literature in French from Africa has been set against a backdrop of struggle and indelibly marked by conflict. Indeed, over the course of these last 80 years, whether striving for the creation of new independent nations or participating in nation building, francophone writers from Africa have been catalysts for both social and political change through their contributions to this body of literature. The first half of its history, including the decade immediately following independence, through 1970, is a period described by scholars as both nationalist, and celebratory. Nationalist, because primarily influenced by a desire for independence from colonial rule; and celebratory, because of the concerted effort among writers and other intellectuals to ignite a sense of pride in all things African: culture, history, and race. Indeed, as Christopher Miller explained in his work, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* (1998), nationalism in Africa during the pre-independence period “refers not to affiliation with a particular state, but simply to any form of resistance to colonialism” (120). This was essential, because the colonial system, driven by greed and justified by self-proclaimed European superiority, had been systematically eroding the identities of colonized peoples since its inception. Albert Memmi (1985) and Franz Fanon (1952) both discuss the negative effects of the colonial
system and its racism on the self-image of colonized peoples, consequences which anti-colonial nationalism countered.

Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor saw literature and literary production, particularly poetry and theatre, as a means of encouraging Africans around the globe to embrace their blackness and to begin reclaiming their identities, an essential step in the decolonization process and the political struggle for freedom. They called this celebration of African identity, Negritude. Aimé Césaire first used the term “negritude” in his work *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939). Finally realizing that “l’Europe nous a pendant des siècles gavés de mensonges”, Césaire came to believe “[qu’] aucune race ne possède le monopole de la beauté, de l’intelligence, de la force” (29). He affirmed his blackness by saying, “ma négritude n’est ni une tour ni une cathédrale, elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol” (23). Through this poem, Césaire put the colonial system on trial, testified, with indignation, to the physical and moral degradation of his people, and found it guilty, along with all of its accomplices: racism, the police, and schools. *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* celebrates the possibility of a spiritual return to Africa that would permit the people of the Antilles to own a past and an identity that preceded slavery and the demoralizing reality of their daily lives. Similarly, D.T. Niane and Bernard Dadié celebrated Africa’s rich oral tradition by adapting short stories, fables, and epic tales into written form. Under colonial rule, griots, guardians of history, and traditional values, charged with passing these stories from generation to generation, became increasingly rare and Africans, especially those in urban centers, were beginning to forget. As Niane explained, “L’Occident nous a malheureusement appris à mépriser les sources orales en
matière d'Histoire; tout ce qui n’est pas écrit en noir sur blanc étant considéré sans
fondement” (Niane 6). He also criticized Africans who discounted the validity of African
oral tradition by saying, “Aussi même parmi les intellectuels Africains il s’en trouve
d’assez bornés pour regarder avec dédain les documents parlants que sont les griots et
pour croire que nous ne savons rien ou presque rien de notre passé, faute de documents
écrits”(6). Indeed, these adaptations serve as a reminder to Africans of their rich
heritage, and force Western readers to question the myth of an entire African continent
devoid of history and civilization predating Western exploration and colonial conquest.

Camara Laye and others have used autobiography to destabilize colonial power
by lending a voice to those previously silenced. To this end, his works, like others of his
generation, needed to be written with the Western reader in mind and were made
accessible to them by explanations, glossaries, and footnotes unnecessary for the African
reader. Laye’s novel, L’Enfant noir (1953), conveys his disillusionment with Western
science and the colonial school, and questions stereotypes labeling the village backward,
and the villagers ignorant, uneducated, superstitious and uncivilized. He and other
writers of this period knew that until colonized peoples rejected the beliefs they held
about themselves and about those in power, there would be no hope of ending colonial
occupation and no reason for independence. Césaire, Senghor, Niane, Dadié, Laye, and
many others chose the pen as their weapon against the demoralizing and destructive
colonial machine, and in doing so they also chose their audience: African intellectuals
and Europeans. They responded to Western claims of racial superiority and ignited the
desire for independence among intellectuals by building a sense of the larger African
community based on a celebrated and shared history, common traditions, similar cultural and religious values and a proud racial heritage. Their tone was celebratory, nostalgic, and rebellious, and while varied and rich with African imagery, was still reflective in style and form of their European education. In his work, *Nouvelles Ecriture Africaines: Romanciers de la seconde génération* (1986), Sewanou Dabla, showing agreement with other critics, concluded that many of the writings from the first generation were reminiscent of “le réalisme balzacien” (Dabla 14). He found that “la linéarité des récits [était] fortement inspirés de l’autobiographie” and their novels were based largely on “le manichéisme simpliste qui oppose l’enfer de la modernité à l’édén de l’existence traditionnelle du village” (14).

With the fall of European colonial empires and the creation of new, independent states in the 1950s and 1960s, this body of literature underwent a major period of transformation consisting in a dramatic change not only in the tone, focus, and themes chosen by its authors, but also in their social and political preoccupations. Scholars acknowledge this shift by characterizing the post-independence literary production in francophone Africa as belonging to the post-nationalist, critical phase. Of course, the criticisms of the post-nationalist era are not completely absent in the earlier phase. In fact, Christopher Miller posits that Niane’s adaptation, *Soundjata* (1960), is also a veiled critique of the Guinean President Sékou Touré, who quickly proved to be a tyrant imprisoning Niane and later forcing him and others into exile. While arguably present here, however, post-nationalist preoccupations remained secondary at best in the nationalist era, and have only emerged as the central focus with this new generation.
Like their earlier counterparts, writers beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present used poetry, plays, and the novel with the same goal of improving their world both socially and politically. However, because the idealism associated with the end of the colonial era and the dawn of independence had disappeared, the result was a certain distrust of the narrative of liberation of the nationalist phase. In the preface to Dabla’s work, Gérard da Silva explained, “Les indépendances n’ont pas comblé l’espoir de plusieurs décennies, elles ont provoqué la désillusion, le cynisme, la colère, le silence”(8). Indeed, while effective in helping to bring colonization to an end, writers from the first phase were now subjected to criticism, especially concerning their adherence to the notion of Negritude, which now seemed outdated and exclusivist in nature. Writers of this new generation voiced skepticism concerning the viability and usefulness of one monolithic African national cultural identity as proclaimed by Negritude. Critics argued that although an important component of the early phase, Negritude defined African identity almost entirely in racial terms based on binary oppositions put forth by Europeans. As a result, it met with mixed responses from the African community, with some harshly calling it just as racist as Western colonial discourse and no longer sufficient to express the diversity of African culture both past and present. Post-independence Africa was much more complex. No longer were the promises of liberation and the prospects of nation building enough. Issues concerning politics, gender roles in society, the reality of racial and cultural hybridity, and class locations were now too obvious to ignore. Social justice, freedom of speech, women’s rights, equality of chances, and putting an end to corruption in these centralized,
authoritarian post-colonial states, are all themes, which began to appear in the writings of this new generation.

The focus of my dissertation concerns the ways in which writers of the second-generation use a new écriture to contest anti-colonial nationalism as it is embodied in the writings of the previous generation. Not surprisingly, post-nationalist writers possess a sense of nation and national identity that differs significantly from that of the nationalist writers. One important difference between the two groups is the role of Negritude. Indispensable during the struggle for decolonization and independence, Negritude defined both self and nation in racial terms primarily through its celebration of Africa and African identity, thereby promoting one constructed Pan-African identity. While it certainly had its place, Negritude has been generally discounted in the post-independence era. It is criticized for being only skin deep, unable to resolve the realities of independence: national protectionism and discrimination. Additionally, second generation writers have been critical of the first generation’s celebration of tradition as pure, harmonious, and infallible, and recognize the power of some traditions to repress certain members of society: members of particular castes and women for example. This new generation is particularly critical of those who would manipulate tradition, under the guise of celebrating it, for their own benefit, a theme that returns repeatedly in the writings of this generation.

Scholars have been studying this group of writers, but only since the mid-1980s. Until then, most critical energy was expended on the study of the nationalist writers. In 1986, two important critical works were published that signaled a shift in focus—
Sewanou Dabla’s, *Nouvelles Ecritures Africaines: Romanciers de la seconde génération* (1986) and Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves’s groundbreaking work entitled, *Ngambika: Studies of Women In African Literature* (1986). Dabla’s was the first to identify and discuss a shift in style and theme among West African francophone authors in the late 1960s. Dabla explained that as early as 1962, with Charles Nokan’s novel *Le Soleil noir*, a change in style and theme was emerging. However, he notes that it was not fully appreciable until 1968 with Amadou Kourouma’s, *Les Soleils des Indépendances*. *Ngambika* discusses works by male and female authors from around Africa: Francophone, Anglophone, Muslim, Christian, Animist, North African and Sub-Saharan, and concerns both the “perspective and characterization” of women in African literature (vii). Until the publication of *Ngambika*, little had been written specifically about women writers and their work. In fact, most studies continued to focus on representations of women in novels by male authors. Still, as Christopher Miller points out, of the book’s 18 chapters, only 5 are entirely devoted to female authors, 2 of which are concerned with francophone author Mariama Bâ—the only one included in the book and the person to whom it was posthumously dedicated (*Theories* 257).

By 1990, the critical scene had continued to progress. Mildred Mortimer’s work, *Journeys Through the French African Novel* (1990), focused on “the importance of orature to African writing, the distinctions between men and women’s journeys, and the literary bonds across the Sahara (Maghrebian and Sub-Saharan fiction)”(1). That same year saw the publication of Christopher Miller’s *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (1990). Commandeered during the 19th century as
a way to legitimize racism and racist ideologies “scientifically,” anthropology had all but been abandoned as a tool by scholars of African literature when Miller was writing this book. Provocative, Miller embraces the proper use of this science positing “that a fair Western reading of African literatures demands engagement with, and even dependence on, anthropology”(4). He notes that anthropology is already present in African literature, visible in the form of footnotes, parentheses, and character-to-character explanations, all in order to provide the reader with necessary cultural information. However, Miller’s insistence on the use of anthropology to the apparent exclusion of other resources (historical and sociological for example), coupled with his treatment of African literature as somehow inherently different from other literatures from which the reader is culturally, physically, or temporally, separated is problematic. In addition, he pushes readers to question the word “universal” as it appears in critical discussions of African literature, because of its Eurocentric implications. Miller’s criticism of the word illiterate in discussions of Africa stems from these questions of universality. As he points out, “[i]lliteracy is a ‘scriptocentric’ term—it presupposes writing as the norm, and the absence of writing as a flaw” (68-69).

Kenneth Harrow’s work Thresholds of Change in African Literature: The Emergence of a Tradition (1994), seeks “to elaborate a model of African literature” by studying change and the process of change as a literary tradition emerges. Taking a different approach than Dabla, Harrow identifies and examines different literary tendencies of writers from the 1950s and early 1960s to the 1990s (literature of témoignage, literature of revolt, and literature of oxymoron), and draws connections
between them. In 1997, Obioma Nnaemeka’s, *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, identity, and resistance in African literature*, explored how woman, identity, and nation are narrated within the traditionally marginalized context of woman and mother. Contributors use feminist theory to study African literature in general, and works by African women writers in particular. Most recently, Renée Larrier wrote *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean* (2000). Larrier’s cross-cultural approach makes her work distinctive from other valuable scholarship available today concerning French-speaking African women writers. She examines women and orality, representations of women, transmission of knowledge, empowerment through cooperation and finally, gendered historical voices.

While some studies are centered on one geographic region, ethnic group or language (Dabla, Miller), others cross linguistic, geographic, religious, and cultural boundaries (Mortimer, Davies, Larrier, Fanon).\(^1\) While I find both approaches to be equally valid, I have also found that the latter still seems to require some degree of justification despite the fact that, already in 1990, Mildred Mortimer made an excellent case for trans-Saharan links and the importance of cross-cultural awareness. Even as recently as August 2002, scholar Hélène Tissières’ article, “Maghreb—Sub-Saharan Connections” appeared in *Research in African Literatures*. Hers is a thorough and convincing case that may succeed in ending this common, yet artificial division of the African continent. In line with the cross-regional/cultural approaches above, my

\(^1\) In his work, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon perceived the common division between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa to be founded on an unspoken, but obvious racism. He said, “On divise l’Afrique en une partie blanche et une partie noire. Les appelsations de substitution: Afrique au Sud ou au Nord du Sahara n’arrivent pas à cacher le racism latent.” (122).
dissertation will examine the work of authors from different geo-cultural regions of francophone Africa: Central Africa (Congo) in the case of Lopès, West Africa (Senegal) in that of Bâ and Sembène, North Africa, the Maghreb (Algeria) in that of Djebar. While these authors cannot represent the diversity of the African continent, their inclusion in this dissertation will allow me to share a wider vision of it. However, my choice of authors is not only based on a desire for geo-cultural/regional diversity. First, I chose these authors after considering their écriture. Free of the realism that dominated the writing of the first generation, the authors of this generation have pioneered innovations in style, from language use and intriguing prefaces, to the choice of titles and even variations in typography as studied by Sewanou Dabla. This selection has also been dictated by the fact that these authors have, to my mind, best expressed the issues associated with the new generation of francophone writers: hybridity (racial, ethnic and cultural), plurality (multilingual/cultural societies), the failures of the post-colonial state, as well as caste, class and gender issues. Finally, I considered the overall historical significance of the author. Mariama Bâ, for example, was the first female francophone writer from Sub-Saharan Africa and is counted among the most important francophone African authors of all time.

This dissertation is organized into three chapters. Chapter One will be devoted to a discussion of the theoretical and critical writings on the intersection between nationalism and culture in literature in general, and will serve as the theoretical and historical backdrop for the rest of the dissertation. Beginning with theories of nation and nationalism, I will discuss the fundamental link connecting literature and nationalism,
and explore the origins of national consciousness, explore the characteristics of nationalism: homogeneity, myth of origins, cultural purity, a mythical view of the past, ethnic oneness, and essentialism. As Benedict Anderson explained, it is ultimately print media (the novel and the newspaper) and capitalism that are at the heart of nationalism and the origins of national consciousness. Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) and *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (1998), Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (1990), and others will guide my reflection. From this theoretical discussion, I will narrow our scope of interest to anti-colonial nationalism. Using such texts as Miller’s *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* (1998), Memmi’s *Portrait du Colonisé* (1985), Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), and others, I will propose elements of an answer to these questions: What was its role? What were its roots? What was/is its importance? Here, I will also discuss Camara Laye’s novel, *L’Enfant noir*, as a prototypical example of the nationalist theory discussed above. It will provide a better understanding, by way of a contrast, of how the “new novels” depart from their predecessors. This will bring us to the heart of our problem: the critique of anti-colonial nationalism. In it, we will study some of the critiques that have been formulated against anti-colonial nationalism, what Fanon calls “the pitfalls of national consciousness.” Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), and others will be
important in guiding this discussion. Through their works, we will discover that anti-colonial nationalism has indeed contributed to the rise of religious and nationalist fundamentalism, and neglected the realities of linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious diversity present within a nation. It has also contributed to political corruption through the perpetuation of the colonial system, to social and economic exploitation by the national elite, each contributing to political and economic instability. The following questions will act as a guide during this phase of our analysis: What are/were the pitfalls of anti-colonial nationalism? Whom has it excluded? Where has it gone wrong? How have francophone authors contested or disputed the claims of nationalism since independence? What have these authors specifically protested in nationalism? It is by striving to answer these questions and by discussing the theoretical and critical writings on the intersection between nationalism and culture in literature in general that I hope to create a broad picture of the forms of critique concerning anti-colonial nationalism.

Chapter Two will pit modernity versus tradition, including gender and class considerations, and will focus primarily on political corruption and on the contestation of the wholesale acceptance of traditions at the expense of members of the society, most notably women through the study of two authors from Senegal: Ousmane Sembène and Mariama Bâ. They present the reality and permanency of modernization, and also question the non-critical acceptance of all aspects of traditional culture. They expose the manipulation of traditions for personal or political gain and call for an end to the propagation of those cultural practices that harm any member of their society. In other words, they contest the misuse and abuse of religion and traditional culture in order to
artificially perpetuate the façade of national unity. These authors protest the realities of social and political corruption, and the silencing and repression of women in the context of traditional society. In this chapter, I will study Mariama Bâ’s first novel, *Une si longue lettre*. A letter to a friend, or a clever reply to Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*, it was one of the first to be written by a female writer from Sub-Saharan francophone Africa. In it, she addresses universal themes of love and family, and takes a provocative look at marital practices in West Africa such as polygyny. In addition, she addresses social issues connected with family life: the realities of premarital sex among young people, divorce, and personal choice, a rare concept for women in “traditional” African cultures. Like Sembène and others, Bâ addresses the issue of the misuse and manipulation of tradition. *Une si longue lettre* is also a fictional exploration of the importance of education in the modernization process and a call to all women to end their silence. Finally, Bâ asks tough questions about the obvious absence of women in public life and offers real solutions to this dilemma. For example, she proposes a move toward a solid, unified nation based on the family unit and rooted in the couple. I will also study, *Le Dernier de l’Empire* by Ousmane Sembène. He criticizes the political and economic state of affairs in West Africa after independence. While he chose not to specifically identify the country represented in the text, presumably because it was meant as a metaphor for any country in West Africa, there is ample evidence, as shall be shown, that the novel refers to the author’s own homeland of Senegal. It is a critique of the political machine in place, the manipulation of traditions and superstitions for political and economic gain, the
West’s presence and influence on the African continent, and the Negritude movement, thinly disguised as “Authénegfricanitus”.

Chapter Three will examine the plurality, hybridity, and créolité of post-colonial identities through Henri Lopes’s Le Chercheur d’Afriques (1990), and Assia Djebar’s Les Nuits de Strasbourg (1997). Basing our discussion on the definition of créolité elucidated in Éloge de la Créolité (1989), written by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, and drawing upon Edouard Glissant’s work, Poétique de la Relation, we will explore the ways in which these novels infuse orality into a new type of écriture, promote collective memory over official, colonial history, find beauty in all things, accept the diffracted reality of post-colonial identity, and conquer the French language, inhabit it, and transform it into something new. Le Chercheur d’Afriques explores the post-colonial search for identity and finds freedom in its multiplicity, in its créolité. Rejecting the notions of racial and cultural purity and pan-African identity proclaimed by Négritude and embodied in the writings of anti-colonial nationist literary production in francophone Africa, Lopes shows these notions to be myth in the post-colonial context where the fabled “return to origins” is impossible, and where modernity, hybridity, and créolité are reality. In a reply to Camara Laye’s autobiography, L’Enfant noir, Lopes’s text resembles an autobiography. It is a young man’s search for identity that lays in the space between his African mother/Mother Africa, and his authoritarian, yet absent, French father. Moving his readers back and forth between the Africa of the 1930’s and the France of the 1950’s, Lopes’s non-linear narration is reflective of his protagonist’s hybridized, Creole self. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Les Nuits de Strasbourg
explores the plurality, hybridity, and créolité of post-colonial identities as they are
formed and informed by overlapping memories, transnational maternities, and the
multiplicity of languages in contact resulting from the colonial conquests and wars of the
19th and 20th centuries. Through this novel, Assia Djebar exposes these identities in
multiple ways, refusing to reduce them to one simple national, ethnic, religious, or
linguistic definition. Indeed, within Les Nuits de Strasbourg, Djebar’s creates a modern
space where hybridity, transnationality, and multilingualism is the norm, not the
exception. Even the city of Strasbourg can neither be contained, nor defined by national
borders. In the end, Djebar succeeds in showing us how Alsace and Algeria have merged
and emerged into a new creole entity: Alsagérie.

Nationalist ideologies have taken different forms and have produced a variety of
new ‘discontents’ found throughout the literature of the post-independence era. The
authors presented here have focused on only a few of these, expressing their frustration
with the system in place through their novels. As long as freedom of speech is not
realized, as long as women are silenced, as long as hybridized identities are not accepted
and continue to be deemed marginal, and as long as tradition and superstition harm the
very people they were initially meant to protect Mariama Bâ, Ousmane Sembène, Henri
Lopès, and Assia Djebar and others will be catalysts for change just as were their first-
generation counterparts. Anti-colonial nationalism certainly had its place in the post-
independence context, but given the force of those who contest it today, we must ask
ourselves the following question: What can ever reassure a government desperate for
cultural, religious, and linguistic purity, that tolerance, celebration, and acceptance are
necessary to reach the real goal, which is national unity? The response I will offer to this question will constitute the conclusion to this dissertation.
CHAPTER 1

History and Theory of Nationalism in Francophone Africa

So much has been written on the subject of nationalism that I feel it expedient to begin my project by defining this notion, along with the following terms: state, nation, nationalist sentiment, national consciousness and national identity. This portion of our discussion will also include an exploration of the origins of national consciousness, an examination of the characteristics of nationalism and finally, an acknowledgement of a fundamental link between nationalism and literature. Once we have established a solid foundation, we can then focus specifically on the type of nationalism that emerged in colonial Africa, called anti-colonial nationalism, and we can attempt to discern its roots, its role and its significance to the movement toward independence and decolonization.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I will use the 1953 novel, L’Enfant Noir, by Camara Laye to illustrate the importance, some would even argue the centrality, of nationalism to francophone literature from the 1920s to the early 1970s. Finally, I will end this chapter with an exploration of the backlash against anti-colonial nationalism that has appeared in the years following the end of official colonial rule and the creation of new independent states in Africa. Indeed, former colonial empires continue to wield great political and cultural influence in these independent states and have retained a certain amount of their
power due, in large part, to economic factors. This unofficial continuation of colonial rule is called neocolonialism. Subsequent chapters will deal more specifically, with how this reaction is manifested in post-independence literature from francophone Africa through the study of relevant texts I have selected.

**Theories of Nationalism**

What is nationalism? With a bit of reflection, the multiple dimensions of this seemingly simple question begin to appear, making it difficult to know precisely where to commence our discussion. Fortunately, others have gone before and graciously offer us a point de départ. Writing some 20 years ago, Ernest Gellner explained in his book, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), “Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner 1). A good beginning, yet I am impelled to clarify elements of this definition and to raise a few additional questions in order to broaden our understanding of this notion. I would like to start by defining what Gellner calls “the political and the national unit.” The “political unit” to which he is referring is the state. It can be defined as an autonomous political entity that is delineated geographically with precise borders and is duly recognized by the international community. Other words commonly used interchangeably with state are country and nation. While the former poses no problem, the latter might cause some confusion, because nation, as I will employ the term for the remainder of this chapter—the “national unit” referred to by Gellner—is altogether different from nation in the sense
of country or state. This nation, or national unit, can be defined as a community of people bound by ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and/or religious ties, and shared beliefs about their common history.

At this point, I find myself compelled to comment on one particular aspect of the preceding definition. I have said that the community of people that makes up a nation is bound together by shared beliefs about their common history. That is not to say, however, that they necessarily share a common history. What is projected as a common history is often a construct. Renan highlights this process of construction in his 1882 speech in which he said, “Forgetting, I would go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (Renan 11). In a similar vein, Eric Hobsbawm, in his work, The Invention of Tradition (1983), asserted that “even historic continuity had to be invented” and gives the example of peoples “creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity” (7). They do this he says, “either by semi-fiction […] or by forgery” (7). He further explains that the “nation” is a comparatively recent historical innovation and asserts, “modern nations […] claim to be […] rooted in the remotest antiquity” (14). In fact, nationalism claims that a nation has a God-given or natural right to political sovereignty largely based on that nation’s history. It also claims that nations are natural—a notion first articulated formally by eighteenth century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). Today, both of these ideas persist despite numerous arguments against them.

Hobsbawm’s work challenges his reader to rethink the truth of history and the reality of traditions, particularly as they relate to the nation. As you will agree, the
importance of his assertions rests in their ability to undermine the notion of history as sacred and consequently, to shake this long held belief that nations are natural, or even God-given. Seamus Deane agrees. In his introduction of *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, he demystifies the nature of national origin by saying, “Once the origin is understood to be an invention […] it can never again be thought of something natural” (Eagleton 17). Timothy Brennan also explored the “myths of the nation” in his essay, “The National Longing for Form,” from *Nation and Narration* (Brennan 44). Like Hobsbawm, he questions the infallibility of a nation’s history and views it as myth. Brennan proposes using all of the meanings of the word myth “as distortion or lie,” “as mythology, legend or oral tradition,” “as literature” (44). All of these, he says, “are present at different times in the writing of modern political culture” (44). Along with created, invented, forged, lie, and semi-fictional, I will add the word “imagined” to our discussion of the nation. It has been associated with the nation since Benedict Anderson called it “an imagined political community” in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) (Anderson 15). Anderson continues this thought by saying, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the community” (15). Together, these words, and the scholars who used them, shatter the ever-present illusions that nations are natural and that their history is absolute truth. They remind us that, no matter how real they become, nations are constructed, created, imagined, and invented. Simply put, they are rooted in fiction.
Returning to our *point de départ*, I would argue that nationalism carries along with it a powerful emotional attachment to one’s nation. More than a simple political principle, nationalism is the unifying force that incites individuals who make up a nation to collectively feel pride, anger, contentment, joy, etc… as a direct result of events or circumstances that affect the nation. These emotions, Ernest Gellner explained, are produced by disaccord or harmony between nationalism’s political and national components. He defined this “nationalist sentiment” as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment” (Gellner 1). One wonders how this “political principle” is satisfied and what might happen when it is not. You will remember nationalism holds that the political and the national units must be congruent. It may seem simple, but the fact is, within a given state there can be one or more nations. In such cases, sometimes, one national community becomes dominant due to a series of factors and seeks to assert its identity as the national identity. It may also be the case that members of a national community find themselves spread out across two or more states. And while it is entirely possible for states with multiple nations to exist and to thrive when its groups live together in peace (as in Belgium with its Flemish and Walloon communities), we can find many examples where this is simply not the case. The Basque separatist group ETA comes to mind, as does the violent Chechen conflict.
At different times, for a variety of reasons, and to varying degrees, a community of people may feel the need to protect and/or to assert their national identity.\textsuperscript{1} Benedict Anderson explains that nationalisms are often the result of feelings of exile and that a person or a group of people has no need of imagining their identity unless, of course, it is questioned by the presence of another person or group.\textsuperscript{2} These feelings of exile and this need to “imagine” one’s identity often stem from feelings of frustration that emerge when a nation, for example one which exists within the borders of a given state, is underrepresented politically within said state. The nation in question may simply wish to have fair political representation, or it may even wish to become politically autonomous. As Anderson said, “nations dream of being free […] the gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state” (Anderson 16). But, because the state’s interest lies in self-preservation, unrest may occur. This is one of the problems faced by many contemporary African states, one recent example being Côte d’Ivoire. After President Houphouët-Boigny’s death in 1993, there was an attempt by ‘to construct’ an essential Ivorianess or “ivoirité” by “falsification de l’histoire, diffusion de stéréotypes (‘nous’, Ivoiriens 100% ou Ivoiriens de souche multiséculaire, par opposition à ‘eux’, Ivoiriens douteux et Ivoiriens de circonstance) et désignation de l’ennemi (les Dioulas), propagande massive…” (Deffontaines). In essence, the concept of “ivoirité” has

\textsuperscript{1} In his book, \textit{Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience} (1997), Kwame Gyekye explains, “national identity refers to the principles of collective belonging, to the set of characteristics by which a nation can collectively define itself and be distinctively recognized” (Gyekye 113).

\textsuperscript{2} Anderson cited Wole Soyinka’s famous ‘dismissal’ of Négritude in the context of its relevance to his own discussion concerning exile and identity formation. Soyinka said, “The Tiger has no need of Tigritude. In other words, Tigritude appears necessarily only at the point where two uncertain beasts mirror themselves in each other’s exiled eyes” (\textit{Spectre} 44).
excluded the Muslim peoples from the North of the country setting them apart as not being truly Ivorian and has caused considerable on-going unrest in Côte d’Ivoire.\(^3\) Already in 1970, Frantz Fanon pointed to racially motivated internal conflicts in Ivory Coast saying,

> En Côte d’Ivoire, ce sont les émeutes proprement racistes antidahoméennes et antivoltaïques. Les Dahoméens et les Voltaïques qui occupaient dans le petit négoce des secteurs importants sont object, au lendemain de l’indépendance, de manifestations, d’hostilité de la part des Ivoiriens. Du nationalism nous sommes passés à l’ultra-nationalism, au chauvinism, au racisme. (Damnés 118).

Generally speaking, the outcome of this type of struggle varies depending on numerous factors including, but not limited to, the tenacity of the national group, and the extent of their demands. The result may be the dissolution of the state. If it is not dissolved, it may be for one of two reasons: first, the group gained sufficient concessions to satisfy its national instincts, or second, the group was repressed to the point of submission. There is also a third possibility. A state might succeed in forging a new national identity that is composed of whatever national groups make up the state. Kwame Gyekye explained the motivation that fuels this phenomenon. What gives rise, he said, “to the search for national unity, national culture, national integration [is the] awareness of the disintegrative force that could be released by the failure to deal effectively with the problem of fusing the diverse ethnic elements into a new and vibrant political whole called ‘nation’ ” (Gyekye 78). This possibility is also supported by Edouard Glissant’s

\(^3\) According to Belgian sociologist, Benoît Scheuer, the concept of ‘l’ivoirité,’ begun by the clan of Houphouët’s successor, Konan Bédié, in part to block the rise of the latter’s political opponent, Allassane Ouattara, has the potential to cause ethnic cleansing similar to those in Kosovo, Bosnia and Rwanda. Scheuer says prevention of such a tragedy is possible, “mais tout porte à croire qu’elle n’intéresse pas les décideurs occidentaux. Et, depuis qu’il a pris le pouvoir, Laurent Gbagbo n’a jamais condamné le concept de l’ivoirité.”
idea, found in his text *Poétique de la Relation*, that group’s identity could be strengthened through said group’s efforts to prove, through myth or ‘revelation,’ their legitimate ownership rights of a particular territory. He said, “L’identité se gagnera quand les communautés auront tenté, par le mythe ou la parole révélée, de légitimer leur droit à cette possession d’un territoire” (Glissant 25).

Remembering that nations are inventions and rooted in fiction, it stands to reason then, that a new nation may indeed be created through fiction and by extension, literature. Many scholars acknowledge this link and it will be important for us as we continue this project. Timothy Brennan focused on literature’s role in the construction of cultural fictions, the basis of a nation. He explained, “nations […] are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (Brennan 49). In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson asserted that print media, especially newspapers and novels, along with capitalism have played a “decisive role” in the construction of national identity and commented that they are ultimately responsible for “imagining” the nation. In a later book, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (1998), he explored more fully the role newspapers have played in the spread of nationalism, saying, “a new grammar of representation came into being with the newspaper […] this was a precondition for imagining the nation” (*Spectre* 34). It is here that Anderson also discussed the nation as it relates to the novel, saying, “The nation would continue to serve as the natural if unspoken flame of the novel, and […] the novel would always be capable of representing, at different levels, the reality and the truth of the nation” (334).
Although nationalism manifests its nationalist sentiments through literature (poetry, drama, the novel), song, dance, cinema, and anything else that might serve the function of protecting and asserting a given national identity, it is literature that plays a particularly important role in the legitimization of the nation. By articulating the fictions of national origin, it works in tandem with nationalism to create nations, national identities and to express nationalist sentiment.

Now, as we prepare to move beyond our point de départ, I would like to recall some of the assertions we have made concerning nationalism. Primarily a political principal, nationalism is emotionally charged. Desiring homogeneity, ethnic oneness and cultural purity, little can stop it from erasing, eradicating or marginalizing the other, most often through fiction or force, when the other stands in the way of the national group’s self-determination. Nationalism’s fictions solidify a “divine right” of nations by creating myths of origin rooted in some ancient past. A perfect example is D.T. Niane’s prose adaptation of the Soundjata epic, Soundjata, ou l’Epopée Mandingue (1960). In it, Niane’s griot, keeper of this epic tale, not only traces Soundjata’s divine lineage directly to the Prophet Mohamed, but also confirms that Soundjata’s extraordinary and mystical birth came to pass exactly as it was prophesied. A unifying force or a disintegrative power, nationalism can secure peace or create war. Nationalisms even have the power to break up empires, colonial empires. In fact, it was during the colonial period in Africa that a particular form of nationalism emerged called anti-colonial nationalism. A direct result of the racism as well as the unequal distribution of power and resources inherent in

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the colonial system, anti-colonial nationalism had a significant impact on the independence movements and the political struggle for freedom in Africa, defining them and catalyzing the decolonization process. In our next section, I will focus more specifically on this type of nationalism. It is my belief that by shedding light on the colonial experience in Africa, we will be able to discern the roots of anti-colonial nationalism, to understand its role and to appreciate its significance to the project of independence.

The Theoretical Case For Anti-colonial Nationalism

You have all heard of the African personality, of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up, we shan’t need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.⁵

With our attention turned toward colonial Africa and to anti-colonial nationalism, we are struck by the complexity of the former, and the relative simplicity and incredible power of the latter. Indeed, anti-colonial nationalism had one goal, to end colonial rule. Christopher Miller said it best in his book Nationalists and Nomads. According to him, nationalism in the context of colonial Africa was merely “any form of resistance to colonialism” (Nationalists 120). However, in order to reach the common goal of

⁵ Chinua Achebe “The Novelist as Teacher” (1965) in Morning Yet on Creation Day, pages 71-72. (italics mine)
independence, anti-colonial nationalism had to succeed in uniting multiple groups of people into one “national” unit. This would be no simple task given the fact that colonial conquest and the colonial system systematically destroyed the cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic and racial identities of entire groups of African peoples. In his book, Beyond Empire and Nation: Postnational Arguments in the Fiction of Nuruddin Farah and B. Kojo Laing (2004), Francis Ngaboh-Smart affirms this idea saying, “Europe realized its presence in Africa through a massive displacement of the African’s cultural memory, leaving the latter with no alternative but to evoke or assert his or her past and subjectivity,” hence the need for unifying myths (100). Remembering that it was the colonist who insisted on the binary opposition positioning Europe, Europeans, white skin and the West above Africa, Africans, Black and the Orient (or non-West), it should come as no surprise that Africans found themselves forced to deconstruct that very opposition, turn it around against the colonizer and celebrate those qualities deemed inferior by them. In this way, they were able to claim for themselves an identity that, while perhaps just a myth, was nonetheless other and fundamentally different. This was essential to decolonization because, until the beliefs colonized peoples held about themselves and about those in power were undone; until the ideas and myths by which the West legitimized its domination of Africa were dismantled, there would be no hope, no reason for independence. In his essay included in Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature (1990), Terry Eagleton affirmed the notion that “a subject that thinks itself complete has no need to revolt” (Eagleton 37). He also defended anti-colonial nationalism’s politics of difference explaining, “the politics of difference or specificity is […] the right of a group
victimized in its particularity to be on equal terms with others as far as their self-
determination is concerned” (30).

It is important to understand that the mechanics of nationalism work in essentially
the same way for anti-colonial nationalism, only the terminology changes. Indeed,
similar to states, the former colonies in Africa, while not autonomous, were also political
entities with precise geographic borders recognized by the international community.
Indeed, the international community sanctioned the division of the African continent
during the Berlin Conference of 1885, never taking into account borders that already
existed on the continent. The process of carving Africa into small, manageable units was
carried out solely for the purpose of equitably distributing pieces of it to various
European colonial powers in an effort to diminish fighting between them and to raise
economic profitability of the colonial enterprise. As a result, the colonies that eventually
emerged from this division contained multiple “national” groups, and in many cases
groups could also be found across borders in several neighboring colonies. Later, when
the European colonial empires crumbled in the 1950s and early 1960s, these colonies
served as the basis for independent African states. Understandably then, if Africans were
ever to find the strength to end colonial rule, they would have to put aside their
differences and find unity in something more than just their colonial condition.

Anti-colonial nationalism was born, in part, from a reaction to colonialism’s
racism. Albert Memmi exposed the link between colonization and racism in his book,
Portrait du Colonisé, Portrait du Colonisateur (1973), finding racism’s roots in the
rapacious economic machine that was the colonial system. What began as economic, he
claims, quickly became social, theoretical and racial. Economic conditions were ideal for the colonizer as there was little competition from others for administrative positions and there was an enormous amount of exploitable and accessible labor power and natural resources (Memmi 37). As expectations lowered, the obvious mediocrity of the colonial system did not go unnoticed and, as a result, the colonial administration continually lost its best administrators. Memmi said, “la colonie ne peut retenir les meilleurs” (72). Moreover, the money coming from the colonizing nation tended to dry up as more money was extracted from the colony. Memmi explained, that as a general rule, “on y gagne plus, on y dépense moins” (34).

Outraged by colonial exploitation of the African continent and peoples, Aimé Césaire fought back in his book, Discours sur le Colonialisme (1955). He maintained that the colonial machine in fact destroyed viable and harmonious economies and replaced them with ones that only benefited the metropolis and brought malnourishment and disorganization to those colonized. Césaire also attacked the foundations of so-called European and Western civilization. Asserting that one cannot be civilized if one takes part in colonization, he argued that colonization “decivilized” the colonizer (Césaire 11). He even went so far as to say that colonization brings “infection, poison and gangrene” to Europe (11). According to Césaire, no one should have been surprised when Hitler’s Nazism began to take over Europe, because, before being the victims of Nazism,
Europeans were its accomplices. They closed their eyes to it, even legitimized it, because until Hitler, its doctrine of hate was only applied to non-European peoples (12).

Albert Memmi also argued that Africans were unfairly characterized by the colonizer in a totalizing and reductive manner, and continued by explaining the debilitating psychological effects this caused. Like Memmi, Frantz Fanon addressed the psychological and physiological effects of racism on Africans in his book, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952). The result of repeatedly hearing that the African is in someway less that the European is the internalization of these racist ideas. He said, “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Said 237). One response to this, Fanon asserts, was an attempt on the part of Africans to “whiten” themselves, because whiteness was held up as the ideal. Camara Laye’s account of his departure from Kouroussa found in his 1953 autobiography, *L’Enfant noir*, gives us an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. He explained that griots, standing on the quay, showered him with sincere words of praise.

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6 Mahmood Mamdani outlines this bloody history in his article, “A Brief History of Genocide” published in *Transition* (2001). Mamdani places German geneticist Eugène Fischer in the Herero concentration camps once located in what is today, Namibia formerly German Southwest Africa. There, Fischer experimented on the Herero prisoners as well as on the half-German children born to Herero women, arguing “that the Herero ‘mulattos’ were physically and mentally inferior to their German parents” (Mamdani 32). Mamdani goes on to explain Fischer’s undeniable link with Nazi German saying, “Hitler read Fischer’s book, *The Principle of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene* (1921), while he was in prison. The Führer eventually made Fischer rector of the University of Berlin, where he taught medicine. One of his prominent students was Josef Mengele, who would run the gas chambers at Auschwitz” (32). But Mamdani does not forget other colonial powers. He says, “The history of European colonies is rife with massacres and forced marches, conscript labor and expulsions. Colonial powers often stopped at nothing to subdue their restive populations; “annihilation” was always an option.” (32).

7 Frantz Fanon, “le colonialisme s’oriente vers le passé du peuple opprimé, le distord, le défigure, l’anéantit” (*Dannés* 256).
for his academic accomplishments saying, “Déjà tu es aussi savant que les Blancs!” , “Tu es véritablement comme les Blancs!” (Laye 162). This response, however, was problematic. Indeed, Léopold Senghor asserted, “assimilation was a failure,” explaining, “we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out our black souls” (Irele, “Négritude or Black Cultural Nationalism” 344).

Assimilation out of the question, Africans could not let the systematic destruction of the identities of innumerable groups of people continue forever; resistance was inevitable. The only viable option was to fight back with the pen, exposing colonialism’s atrocities, rejecting its racism and reclaiming ownership of a newly celebrated African identity. This was done primarily through a “literary and ideological movement” called Négritude (Irele, “Négritude—Literature and Ideology” 499). Defined as “L’ensemble des valeurs culturelles et spirituelles des Noirs; prise de conscience de l’appartenance à cette culture spécifique,” the movement proclaims the pride of the black peoples with regard to their unique, even opposite identity from that of the white race: old, logical, and oppressive. (Petit Larousse en Couleurs 674). Theorized and articulated in Paris by 3 young poets, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Senghor, the Négritude movement encouraged Africans around the globe to embrace their blackness and to begin reclaiming their identities by defining for themselves exactly what it meant to be African. Although many elements contributed to the development of this movement, Abiola Irele, in his article, “Négritude or Black Cultural Nationalism,” maintains, “the determining factor which provoked the black counter-offensive and gave it validity was the revision of the
image of the black man in modern anthropology” (342). Indeed, Irele says, by the
1920’s, the Western scientific community was beginning to change its negative discourse
concerning Africans and their societies. This, he says, was due to “the development of a
scientific method and an objective approach, and the consequent evolution of the concept
of ‘cultural relativity’, [which] led western ethnographers to a broader outlook and a
more sympathetic view of non-western cultures” (342). In turn, this lent “scientific
authority to the growing sentiment that the African cultures had been seriously
underestimated, with prejudice to the black man’s human worth” (342). He also credits
the “Negro renaissance in the U.S.A. [as being] of capital importance in the development
of négritude” (335).

Central to our discussion of anti-colonial nationalism, Négritude, Irele explained,
was “the only really significant expression of cultural nationalism associated with Africa”
(321). Edward Said, in his work Culture and Imperialism, explained that decolonization
is actually composed of two phases: armed resistance and cultural resistance. However,
before armed resistance to the colonial power can occur, the people must begin with
cultural resistance, in other words, they must begin to assert their own national identities.
He observed that this is principally done through the use of literature, and explained that
the novel became “the method colonized people used to assert their own identity and the
existence of their own history” (Said xii). He also said, “the grand narratives of
emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and
throw off imperial subjection” (Said xiii). In fact, it was a sentiment shared and often
articulated by many colonial writers. For example, author Chinua Achebe said, in his

With the roots of African nationalism firmly planted in the fertile soil of African literature it should come as no surprise that this type of nationalism manifested itself in a variety of ways in works of francophone writers from the 1920s through 1970. These writers chose themes such as celebrating the nostalgia of the African, pre-colonial, past, questioning or contesting the colonial ideologies and revolting against colonialism. Often they used autobiography as a tool to lend authenticity to their works. As I have mentioned, I have chosen the 1953 autobiographical novel, *L’Enfant Noir*, by Camara Laye to illustrate the importance, some would even argue the centrality, of nationalism to this first generation of francophone literature. However, before discussing Laye’s work in detail, I would like to comment briefly on the following remark made by the author as he reflected on his work: “Je ne pensais qu’à moi-même et puis, à mesure que j’écrivais, je me suis aperçu que je traçais un portrait de ma Haute Guinée natale” (Laye cover). Laye’s observation reminds us of Fredric Jameson’s article, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” published in *Social Text* (Autumn, 1986) and
seems, at least in part, to support its thesis. In it, Jameson asserts that every text produced in the third world must be read as a national allegory.

[W]hat all third-world cultural productions have in common and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world [is that] [a]ll Third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or should I say particularly when, their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson 69)

While few would likely concede that all third-world texts are allegorical, we do know that Jameson was not the first person to highlight the correlation between the nation and literature. In fact, you will remember Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Timothy Brenan, Ernest Gellner and others have demonstrated the indispensable role played by print media, newspapers and novels, in the construction of nationalisms, national identity and the modern nation all over the world. Edward Said even said of Yeats, that he is “the indisputably great ‘national’ poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering under the domination of an offshore power” (Said 69). That is why I am particularly interested in how Jameson’s ideas might relate to francophone literature written in Africa during the pre-independence period.

I would, however, be amiss not to explore two other areas of controversy surrounding Jameson’s article. First, I will address the validity of the term, “third-world,” as it is used by Jameson and question the existence of “third-world literature.”

Jameson presents his definition of the term, third-world, as one that is solely based on an economic model reflective of the Cold War: the first-world is capitalist and aligned with

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8 Of course, the world has been divided in different ways. One common division opposes North—“les pays industrialisés,” and South—“les pays en voie de développement.” Edouard Glissant gives insight to the economic realities of this division in his book, La Poétique de la Relation, by slightly modifying the traditional description of the South, calling it “les pays en voie de pauvreté absolue” (178).
the United States, the second-world is socialist and aligned with the Soviet Union, and the third-world is any country that has been subjected to colonization or imperialism. However, in light of fact that he excludes Ireland from the third-world, despite its colonial past, makes one wonder if Jameson’s definition is purely an economic one, or if racial considerations did in fact play a role. In a written response to Jameson, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” published in Social Text (Autumn, 1987), Aijaz Ahmad maintains that Jameson’s “classification divides the world between those who make history and those who are mere objects of it” (Ahmad 100).

Anticipating criticism, Jameson defended his use of the term, third world, saying that it is only a description used to facilitate his discussion. To this, Ahmad responded with the assertion that a description is never neutral, a contention previously made by Edward Said in his 1978 book, Orientalism. In the end, Ahmad rejected the whole idea of third-world literature saying simply, “there is no such thing” (97). According to him, the diversity of literary production that exists in the world is ultimately compromised when one tries to define it based on one single criterion. Ahmad explained, “There are

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9 Jameson admires Irish author James Joyce and cites him as an example of one of the very best writers of First-World Literature.

10 Edward Said exposed the power of and the central role played by the description of others in the colonial conquest, colonization and in sustaining the colonial system. Said contended that the West “produced” the East, the Orient, “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively” in order to “dominate, restructure and hold authority over” it (Said 3). Orientalism “assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different […] from the West” (96) with the Orientalist becoming the central authority on the Orient, allowing him to speak for the Orient (122). In fact, Said felt that all descriptions and representations were constructions produced primarily by the language, culture and institutions of the one who is doing the representing, not the one who is being represented. In other words, Orientalism “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12). According to Said, “the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer” (272).
fundamental issues of periodization, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production” (97). Impossible to consolidate countless literatures into one cohesive group, a more appropriate approach would be to speak of specific literatures, for example African literature of French expression, or Senegalese literature, rather than third-world literatures.

The second area of controversy I would like to discuss stems from Jameson’s assumption that “non-canonical forms of literature such as that of the third world […] will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce [and have the] tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development” (65). In other words, Jameson considered that the cultural production of the third-world, particularly the novel, had not yet been through all of the evolutionary steps already outdated in the West. The idea that “realism” as a literary mode is somehow less evolved and unsatisfying, and that only “modernism” is worthy of canonicity is both ethnocentric and false. What’s worse, Jameson seems skeptical of third-world authors’ capacity to produce a novel that could one day be included among the canon literary elite. Remembering Jameson’s definition of the third-world as any country that has been subject to colonization, it may be that the underlying mechanism at work here is imperialism as it was described by Fidel Castro and cited by Onwuchekwa Jemie Chinweizu and Ihechukwu Madubuike in their book, Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, Volume I: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics (1983).

Novels which attempt to reflect the reality of the world of imperialism’s rapacious deeds; the poems aspiring to protest against its enslavement, its interference in life, in thought, in the very bodies of nations and peoples; and the militant arts which in their expression try to capture the forms and content of imperialism’s
aggression and the constant pressure on every progressive living and breathing thing and on all that is revolutionary, which teaches, which—full of light and conscience, of clarity and beauty—tries to guide men and peoples to better destinies, to the highest summits of life and justice—all these meet imperialism’s severest censure. (Fidel Castro 1962: epigraph) (Chinweizu 91)

Imperialism and the ethnocentrism of Jameson’s vision allows him to see in these literatures only what he is looking to see, and at the same time, blinds him to the richness and diversity present there. Unfortunately, rather than succeeding in his stated goal which was “to convey a sense of the interest and value of these clearly neglected literatures for people formed by the values and stereotypes of a first-world culture,” Jameson reinforced those stereotypes (68).

**L’Enfant noir**

Remembering Camara Laye’s words cited earlier, it is clear he felt a fundamental link did exist between his story and that of his nation. As he wrote his autobiography, as he painted his self-portrait with words, Laye realized he was also writing the story of his home, Guinea. And so, *L’Enfant noir* is a national allegory, but it is also much more than that. *L’Enfant noir* opposes the harmony and plenitude of traditional Africa to the solitude, coldness, and sadness of the so-called modern or Western World. It is a celebration of tradition and a critique of modernity. In that respect, it is not simply about one African nation. As John Conteh-Morgan points out in his article on Camara Laye published in *The Encyclopedia of African Literature* (Gikandi, ed. 2003), *L’Enfant noir* presents the “urban world of colonial modernity […] as a locus of spiritual
impoverishment and alienation” and “the traditional world of rural Guinea […] as a kingdom of grace” (Gikandi 284). By reversing the binary oppositions at the core of colonial discourse, Laye produces “a strong statement of cultural assertion and resistance” (284). Knowing that Benedict Anderson clearly linked nationalism and nationalist sentiment to feelings of exile, it is important to note that L’Enfant noir was written while Camara Laye was living in France far from his home, his family and his friends. A nationalist text visibly motivated by nostalgia, L’Enfant noir is also guided by Laye’s desire to portray the reality of life in an African village, a reality he knew differed greatly from the one described by the colonizer. Just as Aimé Césaire did before him, Camara Laye seems to be fighting against the false image of Africa he had encountered in Europe. Like other African writers of his generation, Laye focused on his traditional village and home, making a point to address stereotypes that were common in the West concerning Africa. As he recounts the story of his childhood, he is also exploring the role of the African woman, demonstrating that the African is hard working, explaining the intricacies of African culture, tradition and civilization, and discussing questions of the supernatural. On one hand, the village, rural life, and spirituality, superstitious, backward and un- or undereducated in the imaginings of the West, are seen through Laye’s eyes as being defined by tradition and characterized by plenitude, harmony, health, family, warmth, faith, values, and community. On the other, the colonial school, urban life, the railroad (a symbol of departure and the encroachment of the West), and ultimately France, the embodiment of progress and modernity from a Western perspective, are defined, from Laye’s point of view, by discord and characterized by solitude, sickness,
doubt, emptiness, and unfulfilled promise. Between the two, we find Camara Laye, along with many other Africans of his generation, and quite possibly, the next.

Twenty-five years old, Camara Laye began his autobiography with his earliest memories and feelings from childhood. The resulting text conveys a certain longing for the warmth and security of home particularly through expressions of yearning for his mother’s presence. Although this longing leaves the reader with a sense that Laye struggled at times with questions of what might have been had he not left his home; had he not gone to the colonial school; had he learned the traditional ways, and continued his father’s trade; his feelings of regret are pushed aside as Laye affirms and reaffirms his belief in having followed the path meant for him. It was his destiny, even though at times, it seems to have been painful for him and his family. Letting an “African child” tell the story, Laye used his recollections of childhood, seemingly at times uninformed or incomplete, as a way to respond to widely held myths, thereby clearly positioning himself between the African and the European as outsider and innocent child. This affords Laye at least the appearance of being an impartial, unbiased and balanced mediator between the two cultures. Throughout the work, the reader is asked to trust the memories of a young boy. Indeed, as early as the book’s third line Laye says, “Je ne me rappelle pas exactement,” and a few pages later he says, “je l’ignore: j’ai quitté mon père trop tôt” (9, 11). Yet, despite the seemingly questionable reliability of the informant, the reader is not wary of the information presented by Laye in L’Enfant noir. In fact, this approach

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11 The African Child is the title used for the 1955 English translation of L’Enfant noir by James Kirkup. The 1954 translation is entitled The Dark Child.
seems, paradoxically, to have lent more validity to his words and helped him to open his reader to Africa’s multifaceted identity.

Like African identity, the structure of L’Enfant noir is also multi-layered. It corresponds to a child’s growth and development into adulthood, and parallels the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In his book, Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa (1990), Christopher Miller pointed out three phrases which mark the text; clearly dividing it into three sections: “J’étais enfant,” “Je grandissais,” and “Je quittais mes parents.” (Theories 126). Indeed, the reader meets Laye when he is 5 or 6 years old, accompanies him through his childhood and adolescence only to bid him farewell as he flies off to Paris at the age of 18. Witnessing this coming of age, the reader watches as Laye is slowly separated from Mother Africa (Eden/paradise) by his quest for and acquisition of knowledge (the forbidden fruit) through the colonial school, and his demystification of traditional rites of initiation. In a sense, Laye’s writing can be seen as an attempt to regain his paradise lost, even if only through his memories of childhood which remain forever in the realm of the imaginary. And so, born of nostalgia, his imaginings of Africa, embodied in L’Enfant noir, enable him to celebrate this paradise, Africa, and to valorize, for himself and for others, his African heritage, culture, and traditions. The following discussion of the text is guided by two elements of nationalism we have already discussed: Benedict Anderson’s assertion that the nation is an imagined community, and the notion that nations are imagined primarily through literature. Therefore, as we explore Camara Laye’s autobiography, we will be focusing on the ways in which he imagined his African
nation in its pages, and examining how anti-colonial nationalism has informed and shaped the content and style of L’Enfant noir.

Camara Laye’s construct of life in the Guinea of his childhood focuses on three essential aspects of African life: community, spirituality, and gender roles. I use the word “construct” to highlight the fact of choice of activities, events, modes of behavior in his portrait of Africa. And to underline the notion that specific choice is in turn dictated by the radically contrasting view he wants to establish between Africa and the West. In opposition to the individualistic and scientific West, Laye erects a communal and spiritual Africa where men and women are equal. It is an Africa deemed superior to the West. He gives his readers real-life examples of community and family life, explains the intricacies of rural customs and values, highlighting the important role of women in each. He demonstrates the pervasive quality of spirituality that touches every area of African life from the smelting of gold and farming, to the seemingly innocuous task of collecting water from the river, and offers his reader an alternative to the West’s linear conception of time through Africa’s cyclical or seasonal notion of temporality. However, Laye was not content to simply present Africa, he also portrays the Western colonial presence and influence in a less than idyllic light. His account of the colonial school, urban life and the fallibility of Western medicine all contribute to Laye’s message that colonial suppositions of superiority must be revisited and ultimately recognized, not only as being problematic, but also misconceived. This message is additionally underscored through the author’s use of language and his choice of style. While recounting elements of his African experience, Laye employs an abundance of adjectives and his style is observably poetic.
At the same time, during his discussion of the colonial school and life in Conakry, Laye’s writing becomes more sterile and conclusively prosaic in style. This shift in both language and style is undoubtedly intentional on the part of the author. Educated in French colonial schools; living in France, Laye chose the novel form in keeping with Western literary tradition. By modulating his language and by employing an intensely poetic style, however, he expands his celebration of Africa to encompass the poetry inherent in both its oral and literary traditions.

The communal aspect of African life is apparent from the very first pages of Laye’s autobiography, which opens dramatically with a perilous exchange between a snake and Laye, then a little boy. This scene is important because it gives us a glimpse of life inside the concession, or family compound, particularly underscoring the collaborative and communal effort put forth with regard to keeping one another safe, especially the children.

Surrounded by family and community, it is evident from this passage that Camara Laye grew up in an environment that promoted cooperation. As he continues his story, we soon learn that his father’s apprentices lived in the concession, the youngest of whom stayed with Laye in his mother’s case. The reader also learns that his father’s workshop is an important center of activity for the concession as well as for the community.
Friends, acquaintances and other visitors came regularly for conversation, for business and all too often, as Laye’s mother laments, for a good meal. The passage is also important for another reason. This confrontation between innocence and iniquity allows the reader to see that “evil,” in the form of the snake, is already present in “Eden,” and foreshadows Laye’s eventual loss of paradise caused by school. Later in the novel when Laye talks about the fear, humiliation, and terror he experienced in the colonial school, the reader is struck by its sharp contrast to the harmony, warmth and community that surrounded Laye in his home. Is it any wonder that Laye was hesitant to stay in the French school, sensing early on that it would eventually separate him from his community, his people and the way of life he loved?

Writing from Paris, Camara Laye contrasts his rural childhood to his later experiences in Conakry, where urban life and Western-type individualism reign. Raised in the small town of Kouroussa, he spent his school vacations in his mother’s childhood village, Tindican. Throughout L’Enfant noir, Camara Laye is careful to emphasize the important notion of community spirit in Africa including the significance of social conventions to rural life. These conventions regulated every area of daily living from eating to working and attest to the complexity of African society. Longing for the village of his youth, Laye reminisces about the rural environment steeped in traditional collective customs. Writing at length about his time spent in Tindican, he recounts more than just good memories of vacations spent at this grandmother’s house. Indeed, Laye uses his recollections from the countryside to dispute stereotypes long propagated by the colonizer. Not only does he paint a picture of harmony and plenitude predating the
colonial era, but also, he demonstrates a hard working African community. Using the rice harvest as an example, Laye describes the difficult work and the enormous communal effort made on the part of the entire village during harvest time, particularly by the *moissoneurs*. He transmits their unity, harmony and plenitude saying,

    Ils chantaient, nos hommes, ils moissonnaient; ils chantaient en choeur, ils moissonnaient ensemble: leurs voix s’accordaient, leur gestes s’accordaient; ils étaient ensemble! –unis dans un même travail, unis par un même chant. La même âme les reliait, les liait; chacun et tous goûtaient le plaisir, l’identique plaisir d’accomplir une tâche commune (63).

Inspired by this reflection, Laye also addresses the widespread notion that life in the countryside is in someway uncivilized and overall, less formal than it is in the city. Again, Laye draws on his experience in Tindican, and explains to his reader some social conventions, which reflect a consideration of the community as a whole. When he asked his uncle to work faster so as not to lose his lead over the other *moissoneurs*, Lansana replies that maybe he should slow down. After all, he says, it is not polite to be too far ahead.\textsuperscript{12} As a result of this incident, Laye reflects further on the origins of the opposition: urban civility versus rural rusticity. He says,

    Je ne sais d’où vient que l’idée de rusticité—je prends le mot dans son acception de manque de finesse, de délicatesse—s’accroche aux champs: les formes de la civilité y sont plus respectées qu’à la ville; on y observe un ton cérémonieux et des manières que, plus expéditive, la ville ne connaît pas. C’est la vie, la vie seulement, qui y est plus simple, mais les échanges entre les hommes—peut-être parce que tout le monde se connaît—y sont plus strictement réglés. Je remarquais dans tout ce qui se faisait, une dignité dont je ne rencontrais pas toujours l’exemple à la ville (65).

\textsuperscript{12} Presse-toi! disais-je à mon oncle. […] Nous ne sommes pas tellement en avance. […] C’est cela que tu apelles n’être pas tellement en avance? disait-il? Eh bien! je n’ai sûrement pas perdu de temps, mais peut-être ferai-je bien à présent d’en perdre un peu. N’oublie pas que je ne dois pas non plus trop distancer les autres: ce ne serait pas poli” (64-65).
Highlighting the possible reason why exchanges between people are more strictly regulated in the countryside than in the city, Laye wonders if perhaps it is because life moves at a faster pace in the city, or perhaps it is because everyone knows each other in the countryside. Whatever the reason, Laye noticed a dignity in everything that he did not always find in the city. Back at home in Kouroussa, Laye explained that day-to-day life in his small town was also governed by recognized conventions and ceremony. One example of this is family mealtime. He outlined the strict rules, taking much care to convey the formality of the affair, the complexity of the customs and the civilities involved.

Ainsi il m’était interdit de lever les yeux sur les convives plus âgés, et il m’était également interdit de bavarder : toute mon attention devait être portée sur le repas. De fait, il eût été très peu poli de bavarder à ce moment; […] l’heure était à honorer la nourriture; les personnes âgées observaient quasiment le même silence. Ce n’était pas les seules règles : celles qui concernaient la propreté n’étaient pas les moindres. Enfin s’il y avait de la viande au centre du plat, je n’avais pas à m’en emparer; je devais me servir devant moi, mon père se chargeant de placer la viande à ma portée. Toute autre façon de faire eût mal vue et rapidement réprimée; […] (72).

If Laye spent the time to discuss these rules, it was because he wanted to educate his reader and to convey the reality of a civilized Africa where community was essential, and where respect for ones elders, cleanliness, self-control and consideration of others are the rule.

At this point in his autobiography, Laye had not yet experienced life in the big city. So, when at age 15 he won a scholarship to study in Conakry, Laye tells us his mother’s reaction to the news. Contrary to the West’s praise for all things modern and urban, Laye’s mother saw it “un peu comme un départ chez des sauvages” (italics mine,
This passage represents an interesting reversal. His use of the word “savage” is important, because the African was reduced to this character type and exclusively played this role in much of colonial discourse and literature. Here, Laye is challenging that image, deconstructing it, and offering a new definition for Africans and for Africa. The reader finds another interesting reversal when Laye discusses his return home at the end of the school year in Conakry. Although we do not know much about his time in the capital city, we do learn that he was unhappy with his studies, and that he experienced both sickness and solitude for the first time. So, at the end of his difficult year, Laye expressed his delight at returning to his hometown saying, “Je repartis pour Kouroussa comme vers une terre promise” (italics mine, 180). After living in the city, Kouroussa becomes a promised land for Laye. Later, the reader understands, it will eventually become his Garden of Eden. Through each of these passages, it is clear that Camara Laye is doing more than simply celebrating rural life. As he imagines his nation, he actually reassesses the “rural,” now exclusively associated with Africa, in order to demonstrate its superiority over the “urban,” associated with the modern West. Laye’s motivation goes beyond painting a just portrait of his home, his culture, and his traditions. He is reversing and revaluing the binary oppositions set forth by the French and the West, refashioning them in order to reclaim his right to feel pride in his home and in his people.

13 Although Camara Laye wrote L’Enfant noir from Paris, but he was not living in political exile at that time. Unfortunately, after returning to Guinea at independence and working in the new government for a time, he was forced to leave, and lived in exile until his death in 1980.
He portrays his people as possessing a notion of gender roles that is complementary rather than hierarchical, as in the West. The strong relationship between mother and son is a fundamental aspect throughout the text. In fact, the book is dedicated to Laye’s mother. He even includes a poem along with the dedication that reminds the reader of Senghor’s classic poem, “Femme noire”, included in *Chants d’ombre* and published in 1945.\(^{14}\)

Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi ma mère je pense à toi…

O Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui me portas sur le dos, toi qui m’allaitas, toi qui gouvernas mes premiers pas, toi qui la première m’ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre, je pense à toi…

Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme du grand fleuve, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi…

In his article, “A Formal Approach to African Literature,” Kenneth Harrow ties Laye’s words to Senghor on a philosophical level, remarking, “all the images of Negritude [are] summed up in Laye’s tender epigraphs” (Harrow 85). Christopher Miller observed that the woman in Laye’s poem “is an agent and an arbiter of *culture*, even if she is also associated with nature” (*Theories* 259). Indeed, Laye’s mother raised her son in accordance with the traditions. Warm and tender with him, she responds to his questions and reassures him when he has to face something unknown. Using his mother as an example, Laye attempts to break the stereotype of the African woman by demonstrating the reality of her role to be very different from what has typically been imagined by the West.

\(^{14}\) “Femme noire” begins with these words: “Femme nue, Femme noire, Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté!” (*Theories* 258).
However, it is important to note that he does acknowledging the size and diversity of the African continent, and concedes the fact that some women in Africa do not enjoy the same importance as to the women of Guinea. Focusing on his personal experience, he shows his mother to be a disciplinarian, a transmitter of traditions, and a protector of her child. She does not hesitate to voice her opinion. The reader learns that she is not happy when her husband works with gold, and dislikes the Kondén Diara ritual. She was also very vocal about her disapproval of Laye’s plans to go to France. In the end, however, Laye chooses his father’s path and leaves his village for Paris. Knowing that what we include is as important as what we forget, Laye’s relative silence concerning polygyny, a case of selective omission, speaks more loudly about the role of African women than do his words.\textsuperscript{15} Regardless of the answer, Laye demonstrates to his reader that the bond between mothers and their children is indeed universal.

Camara Laye also emphasizes the importance and pervasiveness of spirituality. From the observance of both traditional animist and Muslim religious practices, to examples of the supernatural, he demonstrates an African spirituality reaching every area of traditional African life including the perception of time: a cyclical notion of

\textsuperscript{15} The following is an example of selection ommision, or the choice to construct a particular reality of Africa, and is one that will enhance his anti-colonial agenda. At his uncle’s home in Conakry, Laye finally gives the reader a glimpse of life in a polygynous household, but does not explain it in any depth and contents himself to only showing an idyllic vision of family life with co-wives who get along marvelously (173). Only briefly in Chapter Eight did Laye even acknowledge the reality of polygyny in his own family when he mentioned his father’s second wife, calling her his “seconde mère” (131).
temporality different from the linearity of modern Western temporality. Although a Muslim, Laye’s novel contains surprisingly few explicit references to Islam. He mentions beginning his education at a very young age in “l’école coranique,” tells us his father, Komady, has prayer rugs, “[l]es peaux de prière,” in his case, and says that his friend Kouyate swore “Par Allah” that everything he had told his father about the abuses at school was true, to which his father replies, “C’est donc vrai” (81, 11, 93, 93). Eric Sellin points out the significance of this last example in his article, “Islamic Elements in Camara Laye’s L’Enfant noir.” He explains, this “matter-of-fact acceptance of that oath tells us how completely and unselfconsciously Islam has been integrated into the truth system in the world described by Camara Laye in his novel” (234). Laye also mentions Ramadan on three occasions, but does not give details about this important Islamic celebration. Instead, Laye demonstrates the harmonious co-existence of traditional practices with Muslim ones, pointing out the Konden Diara ritual corresponded with the start of Ramadan. In addition, polygamy, generally associated with Islam, is, in fact, the foundation of the traditional family structure. With the spread of Islam throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, this traditional practice is regulated by Islamic law.

However, given the scarcity of direct references to Islam, the reader should not assume that it is unimportant. In fact, the impact of Islam on Laye, his family, and his community can be felt throughout the novel, particularly when he discusses his father and

16 pp. 25, 102, and 103

17 Eric Sellin explains that “the actual initiation and circumcision usually took place at a time when they would interfere neither with schooling nor harvesting” (231). Knowing that the start of Ramadan changes due to its dependence on the lunar calendar, Sellin concludes that it happened to “fall at an appropriate moment” for Camara Laye’s story (231).
his Uncle Mamadou. Of Mamadou he says, “Il était musulman, […] son observance du Coran était sans défaillance. Il ne fumait pas, ne buvait pas, et son honnêteté était scrupuleuse. […] Le Coran dirigeait sa vie!” (173-174). The link between his father and Islam is less obvious, but Eloise Brière points out in her article, “L’Enfant noir by Camara Laye: Strategies in Teaching an African Text,” “Islamic law requires that the head of the household be a rigorously just and upright person” (805). Visibly marked by the his father’s importance, his knowledge and respect of rituals and the sacred, his character, and his generosity, Laye illustrates the depth of Komady’s spirituality by offering us a detailed look at his reverent observance of traditional religious practices, by describing the most important contents of his father’s case and later, by recounting the sacred and magical smelting of gold.18

Enfin, à la tête du lit, surplombant l’oreiller et veillant sur le sommeil de mon père, il y avait une série de marmites contenant des extraits de plantes et d’écorces. Ces marmites […] étaient richement et curieusement cerclées de chapelets de cauris; on avait tôt fait de comprendre qu’elles étaient ce qu’il y avait de plus important dans la case; de fait, elles contenaient les gris-gris, ces liquides mystérieux qui éloignent les mauvais esprits et qui, pour peu qu’on s’en enduise le corps, le rendent invulnérable aux maléfices, à tous les maléfices. Mon père, avant de se coucher, ne manquait jamais de s’enduire le corps (11, italics mine).

Modest, Laye’s father implicitly attributes his place of respect and renown in the community and beyond, as well as his success to this devotion to religious and traditional practices, saying, “Il y a une manière de conduite à tenir et certaines façons d’agir, pour qu’un jour le génie de notre race se dirige vers toi aussi. J’étais, moi, dans cette ligne de conduite” (20). This totem is a small, glistening black snake. Laye’s mother is the first 18 “C’était une fusion d’or, assurément c’était cela, mais c’était bien autre chose encore: une opération magique que les génies pouvaient accorder ou refuser” (29).
to explain the significance to the boy. She says, “Celui-ci, mon enfant, il ne faut pas le tuer: ce serpent n’est pas un serpent comme les autres, il ne te fera aucun mal; néanmoins ne contrarie jamais sa course. […] Ce serpent, ajouta ma mère, est le génie de ton père” (15). Laye explains that the snake comes to his father in his dreams and tells him the future. In order to prove the power of the totem to his reader, Laye gives the following example:

L’artisan qui travaille l’or doit se purifier au préalable, se laver complètement par conséquent et, bien entendu, s’abstenir […] de rapports sexuels. Respectueux des rites comme il l’était, mon père ne pouvait manquer de se conformer à la règle. Or, je ne le voyais point se retirer dans sa case; […] prévenu en rêve par son génie noir de la tâche qui l’attendait dans la journée, mon père s’y était préparé au saut du lit (32-33).

Certitude that his father would never transgress the rites, rituals, and customs that regulated his life was proof enough for Laye of the totem’s supernatural intervention.

Interestingly, Laye does not always show the same level of confidence when discussing all things supernatural. Knowing that any fantastic story would be welcomed with skepticism, admits his own uncertainty. At the same time, he maintains he cannot deny things that he has seen with his own eyes, Laye succeeds in short-circuiting this reaction. By fluctuating between skepticism and certitude in his presentation of the supernatural, Laye betrays his increasingly modern outlook.

J’hésite un peu à dire quels étaient ces pouvoirs et je ne veux même pas les décrire tous: je sais qu’on en accueillera le récit avec scepticisme. Moi-même, […] je ne sais plus trop comment je dois les accueillir: ils me paraissent incroyables; ils sont incroyables! Pourtant il suffit de me rappeler ce que j’ai vu, ce que mes yeux ont vu. Puis-je récuser le témoignage de mes yeux? (73).

In fact, just a few pages later, he claims that he saw these things, and again assures the reader that he has not written about anything he had not seen with his own eyes. “Je ne
veux rien dire de plus et je n’ai relaté que ce que mes yeux ont vu” (80). This insistence has the desired affect of reinforcing Laye’s integrity and encouraging the reader to suspend, even for just a moment, their prejudice against the existence of the supernatural.

Like his father, Laye’s mother also had certain supernatural gifts that she inherited from her clan. Her totem, for example, Laye says, came from her grandfather and along with it, particular abilities. “Elle avait [...] hérité de mon grand-père son totem, qui est le crocodile. Ce totem permettait à tous les Daman de puiser impunément l’eau du fleuve Niger” (78). He also recounts a time when his mother was called on to help when a horse that was lying down in a pasture obstinately refused to move. Laye says, “Elle s’avança et, levant la main, dit solennellement: S’il est vrai que, depuis que je suis née, jamais je n’ai connu d’homme avant mon mariage; s’il est vrai encore que, depuis mon mariage, jamais je n’ai connu d’autre homme que mon mari, cheval, lève-toi!” (75). Of course, the horse immediately obeyed. Laye relates these events with confidence, but does not tell his reader everything she can do. “J’ai donné un exemple des pouvoirs de ma mère; j’en pourrais donner d’autres, autrement étranges, autrement mystérieux” (76). Later, he says, “Je ne veux rien dire de plus” concerning this subject (80).

It is also of some importance to note that African spirituality bears with it a cyclical dynamic of interdependence that has profound implications in all areas of traditional life, particularly with regard to the notion of time. As I have said, rather than the linear model of the West, the African notion of temporality tends to be circular,
seasonal. As a result, all life is interconnected. Everything is interdependent. Laye’s
discussion of the rice harvest is one example.

La fête évidemment ne tombait pas à date fixe: elle dépendait de la maturité du
riz, et celle-ci à son tour dépendait de la maturité du riz, et celle-ci à son tour
dépendait du ciel, de la bonne volonté du ciel. Peut-être dépendait-elle plus
encore de la volonté des génies du sol, qu’on ne pouvait se passer de consulter.
La réponse était-elle favorable, il ne restait plus, la veille de la moisson, qu’à
demander à ces même génies un ciel serein et leur bienveillance pour les
moissonneurs exposés aux morsures des serpents. (55).

Indeed, the timing of the rice harvest is dependent on the conjunction of innumerable
natural and supernatural elements: rain, temperature, sun, spirits, etc… That may
explain why Laye was always so impatient to begin. He says, “Chaque année, j’étais
invité à cette moisson, qui est une grande et joyeuse fête, et j’attendais impatiemment que
mon jeune oncle vînt me chercher” (55, italics mine). For his reader, Laye’s words evoke
a level of excitement and anticipation comparable, for some, to a child on Christmas Eve.
A celebration of life and of nature, the rice harvest, and the festivities surrounding it,
gave the community a moment to recognize these spirits, “les génies,” and thank them,
not only for their generosity, but also for their protection.

However, les génies did not always protect those in need. Saddened by the death
of his friend, Check, Laye tells us that the traditional healers had failed to save his friend.
Through his reflections on this personal tragedy, the reader understands the impact that
school has had on Laye and his friends. He explains that Check himself no longer had
much confidence in traditional healers.

Je ne sais si Check avait grande confiance dans les guérisseurs, je croirais plutôt
qu’il en avait peu: nous avions maintenant passé trop d’années à l’école, pour
avoir encore en eux une confiance excessive. Pourtant tous nos guérisseurs ne
They also doubted that Western medicine would produce better results. Laye asks the question, “Est-ce que le médecin blanc réussirait là où nos guérisseurs avaient échoué?” (206). School had taken away their faith in tradition, yet Western science had not given Laye, his friends, and other young Africans a better alternative. As Laye reflected on his life in light of Check’s death, the reader is keenly aware of the fear and uncertainty he faced with regard to his future and his life calling. He even goes so far as to say, “[l]a mort est moins effrayante que la vie” (209). Ending his chapter with a nod to his own exile, Laye leaves his reader with a piece of traditional wisdom saying, “le chemin de la vie, celui que nous abordons en naissant, et qui n’est jamais que le chemin momentané de notre exil…” (209).

No longer having total confidence in the traditions of his people, Laye is not able to rely on Western science and medicine because they did not save his friend. Eloise Brière notes that ultimately, “L’Enfant noir […] gives us the portrait of a hero gradually acquiring a split personality in matters that concern his cultural allegiance” (808). He is, in essence, “a stranger to his own culture” (808). Indeed, the colonial school has made him doubt the traditions of his parents, yet did not offer any other real solutions. In his mind, traditional Africa had become Eden lost, and like Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit—school—caused this loss. Laye knows that he has been preparing for this departure for Paris his entire life. Undeniably, from the very beginning of the book, he has told the reader of its inevitability. Eloise Brière pointed out the power and importance of the presence and symbolism of the train in foreshadowing his destiny.
Early on, we learn that the tracks ran next to the family compound, so close, in fact, fires were often started by sparks from passing trains, causing panic and chaos, and disrupting the daily activities. He tells us of the hours he spent as a young boy contemplating the railroad tracks, fascinated by the serpents drawn to them: “j’allais passer de longs moments dans la contemplation de la voie ferrée” (14). Serpents are drawn to it and this fascinates the little boy. The image of the serpent and the railroad, symbolic of Laye’s critique of modernity and reinforces the connection between the loss of paradise and the acquisition of knowledge. Later, Laye relives his painful separation from his family and friends when he leaves on the train to go to school in Conakry as an adolescent. In the end, Laye is on a plane bound for Paris with a map of the metro, a thoroughly modern train, in his pocket.

Moving our focus to a discussion of Laye’s use of language and style, we will explore the ways in which he uses both to relay and/or to reinforce his message. Educated in French colonial schools and in France, Laye chose the novel, more specifically the autobiography, in keeping with Western literary tradition. One might expect then, Laye’s writing to follow the formalist definition of prose reiterated by Kenneth Harrow in his article, “A Formal Approach to African Literature” (1990). “[P]rose is by definition not imbued with literary devices which would render it visible or unaccustomed, it must resort to non-linguistic means to achieve this goal” (80). Certainly inspired and influenced by the poetry of Négritude, Laye’s prose is indeed permeated with such literary devices. As Tony Afejuku asserts in his article, “Language as Sensation: The Use of Poetic and Evocative Language in Five African Autobiographies”
(1998), Laye’s writing should be characterized as “poetic prose,” because his language “can arouse strong emotions” through his use of words infused “with poetic and evocative connotations; words that are affective, metaphoric, imagistic, rhythmic, and symbolic,” and his style “depends on poetic and effective devices such as alliteration, consonance, imagery, repetition, and parallelism” (3, 5). As I have said, through his memories, Laye presents nostalgic imaginings of the Africa of his childhood, focusing primarily on communal, spiritual and supernatural elements defining Africa and African life. He also expresses his emotions as a reflection of the natural world. Although there are many instances when Laye’s imaginings of Africa are underscored by his use of poetic device and evocative language, we will examine only a few representing his vision of the communal (including family life), the spiritual and finally, the natural world.

Our first examples focus on the importance of family life in Africa. The solid foundation of Laye’s family is conveyed in the language of the following passage through the repetition of the /m/ and /p/ sounds reminding us of “mère” and “père,” and further reinforced by the soft, reassuring /s/ sound in “rassurantes” and “celle.” Laye says, “Ma mère était dans l’atelier, près de mon père, et leurs voix me parvenait, rassurantes, tranquilles, mêlées à celle des clients de la forge et au bruit de l’enclume” (9, italics mine).19 The reader also hears the /t/ sound returning several times as though to punctuate their nearness and continued presence. This idea of his parent’s presence—particularly his mother’s—in his life, in daily life, is reinforced in the following passage.

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19 I have added italics to this and all subsequent citations from L’Enfant noir in order to highlight Camara Laye’s use of certain poetic devices such as consonance, alliteration, assonance, and parallelism to name a few. Therefore, all use of italics should be considered to be mine and not original to the text, unless otherwise indicated.
“Je ne puis dire exactement que ma mère présidait le repas: mon père le présidait. C’était la présence de ma mère pourtant qui se faisait sentir en premier. […] c’était ma mère, par le seul fait de sa présence, […] qui veillait à ce que tout se passât dans les règles” (71-72). The repetition of the word “présence” is additionally enhanced by Laye’s insistence on the sounds /p/, /pr/ and /r/. Together, separate, and in various combinations, this consonance mirrors the presence of his parents who are shown alternately together or separate, but are always complementary. Family life and community life also complement one another in Africa. Our next example centers on the importance of the latter as seen through Laye’s eyes in his mother’s ancestral village of Tindican. Indeed, one of the most striking passages in L’Enfant noir is Laye’s presentation of the rice harvest. Through his words, he demonstrates the degree of harmony and symbiosis present in this communal effort through a rhythmic repetition of words and sounds such as: /ch/ (chantaient, chant, chacun), /m/ (moisson, même, âme, ensemble), /s/ (moisson, ensemble, s’accordait), /l/ (la, les, reliait, liaient, leur), /u/ (unir, une, commune), and /ir/ and /pl/ (plaisir, accomplir). Laye says, “Ils chantaient, nos hommes, ils moissonnaient; ils chantaient en chœur, ils moissonnaient ensemble: leurs voix s’accordaient, leur gestes s’accordaient; ils étaient ensemble! –unis dans un même travail, unis par un même chant. La même âme les reliait, les liait; chacun et tous goûtaient le plaisir, l’identique plaisir d’accomplir une tâche commune” (63). The sounds /s/, /ch/ and /m/ have a slower tempo, while /l/ and /pl/ seem to move the reader along at a faster pace. By alternating these sounds, by using repetition, and by introducing well-
placed pauses, Laye creates rhythm and gives the reader the sensation of singing along with the hardworking, yet content, *moissonneurs*.

The spiritual aspects of African life come across most profoundly in Laye’s recollection of his father working with gold in his *atelier*. Laye says, “N’était-ce pas les génies du *feu* et de l’*or*, du *feu* et du *vent*, du *vent* soufflé par les tuyères, du *feu* né du *vent*, de l’*or* marié avec le *feu*, qu’il invoquait alors; n’était-ce pas leur aide et leur amitié, et leurs épousailles qu’il appelait?” (29). The weight, the power, the significance and even, the interdependence of each element: fire, gold, wind, air—all fundamental constituents of the natural world; all controlled by the spirit or supernatural world—is inescapably felt by their repetition in this passage. Through the fusion, the marriage of these elements, as Jacques Bourgeacq explains in his article, “Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* and the Mythical Verb,” Laye’s father “reenacts the cosmic drama of creation” (512). Therefore, the blacksmith must be pure and thoroughly knowledgeable of all incantations necessary to satisfy the spirits, who in turn ensured the success of his project. Laye describes these sacred words, giving his reader the feeling we are witnessing them along with him.

* Ces paroles que nous n’entendions pas, ces paroles secrètes, ces incantations qu’il adressait à ce que nous ne devions, à ce que nous ne pouvions ni voir ni entendre, c’était là l’essentiel. L’adjuration des génies du feu, du vent, de l’or, et la conjuration des mauvais esprits, cette science, mon père l’avait seul, et c’est pourquoi, seul aussi, il conduisait tout (31).

Laye’s use of repetition and parallelism in this passage lends to it a chant-like quality. In addition, Laye recreates the hushed sound of his father’s voice reciting these secret words through the reoccurrence of the /s/ sound throughout this passage. Not only does this
sound reinforce the notion of a whisper, but also it underscores Laye’s final observation that only (seul) his father possessed knowledge of the incantations necessary to carry out such an important task.

In Laye’s imaginings of Africa, nature, man, and the spiritual world are all intertwined. One way in which he expresses this reality is by linking his emotions, or state of mind, to the natural world. From the very beginning of *L’Enfant noir*, Laye uses this technique to support the notion of an inherent bond between Africa and African. Our first example is taken from a passage immediately following Laye’s conversation with his father concerning the little black snake. Having difficulty falling asleep, Laye says, “La nuit scintillait d’étoiles, la nuit était un champ d’étoiles; un hibou ululait, tout proche. […] Mon désarroi était à l’image du ciel: sans limites; mais ce ciel, hélas! était sans étoiles…” (21). Star, étoile, is only repeated three times in this passage, but the /ét/ sound, common to both “était” and “étoile,” reoccurs several times over the course of just a few lines thus indicating the importance of this image to Laye. Indeed, the symbolic meaning of the star as guide is elucidated in a later passage in Tindican when his uncle tells him about the happenings on the farm. He says a very handsome calf has just been born with a star on his forehead. Laye says, “Et je rêvais un moment à cette étoile, je regardais l’étoile. Un veau avec une étoile, c’était pour faire un conducteur de troupeau” (41). Also important here, is his insistence on the /l/ sound. A long consonant, the /l/ lengthens the tempo of this passage, thereby underscoring Laye’s restlessness and distress. Another moment in the text finds Laye bursting with joy along with the blossoming of spring. He says,
En décembre, tout est en fleur et tout sent bon; tout est jeune; le printemps semble s’unir à l’été, […] jamais le ciel n’est plus clair, plus resplendissant; les oiseaux chantent, ils sont ivres; la joie est partout, partout elle explode et dans chaque cœur retentit. C’était cette saison-là, la belle saison, qui me dilatait la poitrine, […] c’était la belle saison […] qui me faisait danser de joie (57).

The repetition of tout, partout, plus, belle, and joie acts to reinforce the elation Laye feels during this season of the year. He attributes his feelings of excitement and joy to this annual awakening of nature.

Our final examples occurred on Laye’s voyage to Conakry. Here, Laye’s descriptions of the landscape mirror his own emotions of apprehension and fear of the unknown.

Le train repartit vers Mamou, et bientôt les hautes falaises du massif apparurent. Elles barraient l’horizon, et le train partait à leur conquête; mais c’était une conquête très lente, presque désespérée, si lente et si désespérée qu’il arrivait que le train dépassât à peine le pas d’homme. Ce pays nouveau pour moi, trop nouveau pour moi, trop tourmenté, me déconcertait plus qu’il ne m’enchantait; sa beauté m’échappait (166).

Laye’s inability to see his own future is translated into the symbolic language of nature. Speaking of the high mountain cliffs that blocked the horizon, Laye tells of his own slow and almost desperate struggle to conquer his fear. The life change that he was experiencing was too new for him, too tormenting, like the landscape, and at that moment he could not see its beauty. The reader understands that he later found the beauty in his departure despite difficulties he endured. Perhaps the beauty lies in this text whose very existence depended on Laye’s exile. Indeed, by the second day of his journey, Laye already knew that something within him had changed. His perception of the nature surrounding him reflects the depth of this change. He says, “mais mon opinion sur la montagne se modifia brusquement et à telle enseigne que, de Mamou à Kindi, je ne
quittai pas la fenêtre une seconde. Je regardais, et cette fois avec ravissement, se succéder cimes et précipices, torrents et chutes d’eau, pentes boisées et vallées profondes. […] C’était une terre heureuse” (167). Hearing the fast-paced /s/ sound, the reader can imagine the scenery whisking past Laye’s train window and can feel his excitement at his new discoveries now and in the future. This new outlook may also be taken in a larger sense as an affirmation of Africa, with all its diversity, as une terre heureuse.

In conclusion, L’Enfant noir, an excellent example of first generation (pre-independence) literary production, is counted among the most important novels written in French by an African. While Laye does use French, the colonizer’s language, not his native tongue, to celebrate the Africa of his childhood, the absence of any French colonial authority in this novel takes away any underlying significance this linguistic choice might have otherwise implied. Christopher Miller suggests that this absent colonial authority is a form of revolt against the colonial system and sees Laye’s writing as belonging to a new “space” that in the years following the publication of L’Enfant noir has become known as la francophonie (180). This autobiography elevates all that is African to a place nearing perfection. Warm, tender, communal, harmonious, loving, supportive, spiritual, hardworking, respectful and courageous all describe Laye’s memories, his ‘fictions’ of home. A witness to life in colonial Africa, Laye’s autobiography gives a much-needed vision of traditional African culture and society to the Western reader while at the same time reminding his fellow Africans of their proud heritage and strong roots. Along with their literary importance, Camara Laye and other first generation authors from Africa gave voice to the idea(l)s of Négritude and anti-colonial nationalism,
contributed greatly to independence movements and played a significant role in ending colonial rule. Remembering that Edward Said discussed the importance of culture and cultural resistance found in narrative forms of expression, particularly the novel. He reminded his reader that nations are themselves narrations, a proposition made by Homi Bhabha, adding, “the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection” (Said xiii). Indeed, they were successful in this endeavor.

The Theoretical Case Against Anti-Colonial Nationalism

The purpose of this section is not to take away from the importance of Laye’s work and the works of others from his generation, nor is it my aim to minimize the impact of anti-colonial nationalism on the project of decolonization and independence. Rather, it is my goal to offer a clear vision of the critiques leveled against anti-colonial nationalism by Said, Fanon, Glissant and others, in the context of post-independence Africa. Like medicine used to “cure” a disease, anti-colonial nationalism was indeed quite effective in putting an end to colonial rule. Of course, as with any treatment, undesired or unexpected side effects may occur. After weighing the risks, a doctor might choose a particular medication or course of treatment if the overall benefits outweigh any negative repercussions. In the case of anti-colonial nationalism, the desired result was achieved, colonial rule came to an end and independence was attained. However, in the
wake of independence, problems associated with nationalism began to surface\textsuperscript{20}. In this section, our focus will turn to identifying and discussing these issues. Then, in light of the critiques, what Fanon called “the pitfalls of national consciousness,” we will be able to explore the ways in which and the reasons for which texts like Laye’s were criticized. Indeed, a new generation of writers raised questions about the value of nationalism in the post-independence era and the ethics of promoting one monolithic African national cultural identity as proclaimed by Négritude, an idea which, after independence, seemed outdated and exclusivist in nature. As I have said, critics argued that although an important component of the independence movement, Négritude defined one essential African identity almost entirely in racial, and certainly, culturally monolithic terms. As a result, it met with mixed responses from the African community, with some harshly calling it just as homogenizing and racist as Western colonial discourse, and no longer sufficient to express the diversity of African cultures both past and present.

Born of the need to unite colonized peoples from all over Africa, anti-colonial nationalism helped to create solidarity by bringing Africans together and uniting them with one national identity. Remembering that the colonial system was fueled in part by the colonizers’ insistence on the perpetuation of a binary opposition positioning White Westerners above Black and Arab, Africans were able to deconstruct that very opposition with the help of anti-colonial nationalism, and to claim for themselves an identity that was \textit{other} and fundamentally different. Unfortunately, this solution to the problem of identity was also, in itself, problematic. While effective in bringing colonization to an

\textsuperscript{20} Christopher Miller calls nationalism in the post-independence context “postnationalism, protonationalism, or neonationalism” (\textit{Nationalists and Nomads} 120-121).
end, it did not succeed in creating something entirely new. Indeed, the structure of oppositions is maintained, and only the terms are revalued. Consequently, anti-colonial nationalism remained a derivative of the imperial nationalism it critiqued. Conserving the binary opposition would prove to be, not only totalizing and limiting, but also, it would be responsible for the perpetuation of colonial structures, long after the colonists had headed home. Edward Said explained this post-independence problem in these terms, “instead of liberation after decolonization one simply gets the old colonial structures replicated in new national terms” (Said 74). This in turn has contributed to political corruption and economic exploitation by the national elite. Christopher Miller pointed out the fact that “The arbitrary borders between African states, which had been ignored or critiqued as arbitrary by the theory of Pan-African nationalism, were reasserted as the armatures of a more familiar state nationalism at the service of new elites” (Nationalists and Nomads 120).

So, while anti-colonial nationalism certainly had its place, it has been generally discounted in the post-independence era as unable to resolve the realities of independence, and has degenerated into a form of national protectionism and discrimination. Ngaboh-Smart explains, “the failure of the African nation to redefine itself, its functions, and its space as less hostile and more representative than the colonial state it replaced. If anything, after independence, many nations failed to evolve, let alone reinvent, a discourse that would reconceptualize or redirect nationalist fervor towards a more equitable society” (148). In effect, through their celebration of essentialized tradition, first generation writers have elevated it to a place beyond reproach, failing to
recognize the fact that some traditions actually have the power to repress certain members of society. Post-independence writers criticize this failure, but are particularly disapproving of those who would manipulate tradition, under the guise of celebrating it, for their own benefit, a theme that returns again and again in the writings of this generation. In post-independence Africa, promises of liberation and the call to nation building could no longer mask other, important issues: freedom of speech, gender equality, racial and cultural hybridity, class conflicts, social justice, corruption, and the authoritarian state. These are all themes that began to appear in the writings of this new generation. Moreover, anti-colonial nationalism has been blamed for the rise of religious and nationalist fundamentalisms by neglecting, or even, intentionally masking diversity present within these new nations.

As we discuss theoretical and critical writings concerning nationalism, I will offer answers to the following questions: What are/were the pitfalls of anti-colonial nationalism? Whom has it excluded? Where has it gone wrong? How have francophone authors contested or disputed the claims of nationalism since independence? What have these authors specifically protested in nationalism? First, I will center our discussion on Frantz Fanon’s work, Les Damnés de la Terre, a cornerstone for studies concerning, what he calls, “the Pitfalls of National Consciousness.” Published in 1961 at the dawn of independence in Africa, Fanon discussed, with great clarity, not only the decolonization process itself, but also the problems that these new nations would face as they attempted to become autonomous entities. These include the reality of violence inevitable during and after the decolonization process, and the political corruption and economic
exploitation by those responsible for the well-being of the new nations, the national elites. Then, we will turn our discussion to the rise of religious and nationalist fundamentalisms that tragically fail to take into consideration ethnic, linguistic, cultural, racial, and religious diversity present within all African nations. Edward Said’s work, *Culture and Imperialism*, and Edouard Glissant’s book, *Poétique de la Relation* will be important as we explore this phenomenon. Finally, we will explore their proposals for possible alternatives to the constraints of national consciousness.

Included in Frantz Fanon’s work, *Les Damnés de la Terre* is his essay entitled, “On National Culture.” Written in 1959 on the eve of independence in Africa, it “was originally delivered to an audience of the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Rome” (Williams 24). In a sense, Fanon looked beyond independence in order to give some insight into life after the departure of colonial rule. Remarkably, Fanon possessed a rare lucidity concerning the mechanisms at work inside these newly independent countries. He foresaw many of the mistakes they would make, and predicted many of the dangers they could potentially encounter. Fanon seemed to have known, well in advance, the stages through which these nations would pass and the growing pains they would experience. For example, Fanon spoke of the use of violence to gain independence. He considered the use of force to be unavoidable in the context of the decolonization process. Stating this belief with candor he said, “la décolonisation est toujours un phénomène violent.” (Damnés 5). This statement was no doubt born of his experiences while living and working in Algeria during that country’s fight for independence. But more importantly, Fanon warned that the violence used in order to gain independence
would continue even after the birth of the new nation. Not always popular, Fanon spared no one with his criticism, particularly targeting the countries’ leaders for their political and economic decisions. We can divide this criticism into two main areas of contention: the decadence of the national bourgeoisie and the repressive one-party political system—itself, an outcome of the myth of the African nation as one and indivisible.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines bourgeoisie as being capitalist, the middle class or property owning class, and notes that, according to Marxist theory, it is the social class opposed to the proletariat in the class struggle (218). Since the 19th century, the bourgeoisie has been caricatured as having a penchant for ostentatious displays of wealth; as flaunting its “new” money; as being in perpetual pursuit of pleasure, in other words, as being decadent. Fanon’s attack, however, is far more biting. He claims that these post-colonial bourgeoisies, unlike their Western counterparts, are lazy and lack initiative. According to him, this reality has a tangible economic impact on infant nations in Africa insofar as the national bourgeoisies do not even attempt to transform the nation through invention or discovery, as other bourgeoisies have done historically. In the end, Fanon considers that all they have in common with other bourgeoisies in the world is the fact that they are decadent. Another factor Fanon observed which negatively impacted economic development is that national bourgeoisies have a poor understanding of their country’s natural resources both real and potential. What is more, they make no effort to create new companies and are content to focus strictly on what is artisanal and agricultural in nature. According to Fanon, the economic exploitation of newly independent states by the former colonial power
continues even after colonization ends with the complicity of national bourgeoisies who serve as intermediaries between foreign companies and their country’s natural resources. In return, they take the money they earn from this privileged position for themselves, rather than reinvesting it in their country, where it truly belongs. Fanon highlights the fact that unlike other bourgeoisies, the national bourgeoisies in Africa “ne voile[nt] même pas [leur] exploitation” (Fanon 214). He calls the members of this social class “corbeaux,” and he characterizes them as “vorace.” The national bourgeoisie does not think in terms of the nation, but rather, in terms of selfish gain. For example, under the disguise of tourism, they do not hesitate to sell the soul of the country to Westerners in search of exoticism.  

Fanon predicted that eventually the bourgeoisie was going to turn to foreign countries and attempt to impress them by grandiose construction projects in the capital city.  

Frantz Fanon insisted that the newly independent countries must develop other areas of the economy in order to succeed. In addition, Fanon charges them to help people to work for themselves, become free of the modern day slavery associated with economic exploitation, and through work, gain liberty, responsibility and consciousness saying, “l’esclavage ne permet pas le travail, que le travail suppose la liberté, la responsabilité et la conscience” (234).

Another important criticism of the decolonization/nationalization process in Africa was and in some cases, still is the reality of political corruption. Fanon discussed


21 This phenomenon was at the root of the Cuban revolution. Havana had become a haven for gambling and prostitution. It was the destination of choice for pleasure seekers from the north who had no idea of the repercussions this economy of “sin” would have on the people of Cuba.

22 A very recent example of this phenomenon is the Ouaga 2000 project in the heart of Burkina Faso’s capital city, Ouagadougou. The area being developed includes an international village that will house diplomats from around the world.
political corruption and economic exploitation together in this context because the two are intimately linked in the fertile soil of nation building. Indeed, internal economic ravaging of a country and her resources by national bourgeoisies cannot easily occur without the complicity of those in power. Fanon explained that the process of transferring power from the colonial administration to the new national administration was done without any appreciable reform to the system put in place by the colonizing countries. In addition, he insisted that nationalization was lateral, rather than vertical. That is to say, it was a transfer of power from the colonial administration to the national bourgeoisie, who continued the devastation of the country and its people. In order to ensure this power remained unchecked, Fanon predicted that the national elite would only allow the existence of one national political party in these newly independent states. Stifling enterprise, entrepreneurship, and integrity, Fanon accused members of these political parties to be preoccupied, not with the future of their country, but rather “de se remplir les poches” (206). According to him, “le parti unique est la forme moderne de la dictature bourgeoise” (206). Quickly and violently squelched, Fanon explained that brutality; prisons and/or exile eventually silenced the opposition movements that did manifest themselves. Indeed, as he said, “Tous les partis d’opposition […] ont été, par la force des martaques et des prisons, condamnés au silence” (224). Another problem faced by these young nations was the far-reaching ramifications of the culturally accepted practice of nepotism. Fanon explained that the positions in the administration are almost always distributed to family and friends, and that hiring practices are not based on solid criteria, but on family and political ties. Fanon states “Les administrations s’enflent […]
parce que de nouveaux cousins attendent une place” (228). This unnecessary ballooning of the bureaucratic ranks, caused government payrolls to expand leaving less money to reinvest in the country. Consequently, the capital city always received the bulk of the money in terms of budget allocations and payroll, leaving little for the economic development of rural areas. For Fanon, the solutions to these problems are clear. It is necessary to avoid the centralization of the country and strive to establish national policies, which benefit the whole country. It is also necessary to explain the problems of the nation to the people in a language that they can understand. “Les masses doivent aussi pouvoir se réunir” (237). Fanon wants to “politiser les masses” (240). In other words, he wants to awaken the spirit of the people. After all, for Fanon, “l’expression vivante de la nation c’est la conscience en mouvement de l’ensemble du peuple” (242).

Another area of concern and considerable critique with respect to anti-colonial nationalism, and nationalism in general, is its role in the inevitable rise of nationalist fundamentalisms. As I have said, anti-colonial nationalism, as it was manifest in literature, became the form of cultural resistance necessary to destroy the colonial system, because it was through the novel that colonized peoples were able to affirm themselves and their right to autonomy. However, during this process of narrating their identity, they typically returned to a time before colonization and imperialism in order to “imagine” a new identity free from the humiliations associated with their colonial experience. As we have seen, Camara Laye imagined a harmonious Africa where man, nature, and the supernatural coexisted in perfect balance, where men and women complemented one another in the context of family and community life, and where respect and observance of
traditional and religious practices ensures a successful and happy life. Edward Said criticized these “returns” as being too rigid, based on strict codes of tradition and he accused them of producing varieties of cultural, religious, and nationalist fundamentalism by not allowing the possibility of multiculturalism or hybridity (Culture xiii). He argued that this is a mistake, saying, “to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx). The fact is, many post-colonial writers and scholars have rebelled against the limiting tendency of nationalism, because of its inability to consider various types of diversity present within any nation, not simply those who have suffered colonial rule. In his book, Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture, Christopher Miller exposes the paradox of nationalism as being “an ideology of oneness” having plural roots (Miller 122). In his view, this truth is demonstrative of the incompatibility of nationalism and Africa after colonial resistance ended. As for Edward Said, he preferred the “permissiveness” of philosophies of multiculturalism and hybridity (Culture xiii). He felt “All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid” (xxv). Said discussed the reasons behind imagining identity and gave insight into the dangers of these imaginings. He asserts that while the “charting of cultural territory” is a prerequisite of recovering geographical territory, it is not enough to simply claim a different identity (209-213). And he concludes that it is also important to break down barriers between cultures, enter the European discourse, mix with it and
transform it (216). Said calls this phenomenon of writing back, “the voyage in.” He explains that without the work of intellectuals from colonial or peripheral regions who made it their task to deal with the metropolitan culture on its own terms, progress would never have been made (243). According to Said, “liberation and not nationalist independence, is the new alternative, liberation which by its very nature involves, in Fanon’s words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness” (Said 83).

Like Said, Edouard Glissant felt that the ideal solution is found in diversity, and not in the simplification and standardization, that has typically defined nationalism. His application of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizome as it relates to identity formation overall, and the post-colonial identity in particular is articulated in his work, Poétique de la Relation. In this book, he asserts the nature of identity as being relational and fluid, not limiting or reductive. “L’image du rhizome […] porte à savoir que l’identité n’est plus toute dans la racine, mais aussi dans la relation” (31). According to him, identity as a system of relations contested generalizing tendencies, assimilation and standardized habits. At the same time, relational identity, or rhizome promoted the celebration difference or diversity (le Divers) that he defines as “la totalité quantifiable de toutes les différences possibles” (42). He said, “l’identité comme système de relation […] conteste l’universel généralisant et requiert d’autant plus la sévère exigence des spécificités” (156). Moreover, “Il faut préserver [le Divers] des assimilations, des modes passivement généralisées, des habitudes standardisées” (42). According to Glissant, defending languages is one guarantee of difference and diversity and is inseparable from efforts to
rebalance relationships between communities. In his words, “La défense des langues, garante du Divers, est par là inséparable du rééquilibre des relations entre communautés” (122). In his view, the extinction of languages is a loss for all humanity. “Nous convenons que l’extinction de n’importe quelle langue constitue un appauvrissement pour tous” (110). He asks the following question and leaves us to find the answer: “Mais, avant que les communautés humaines aient appris à préserver ensemble leur diversités, combien de langues, de dialectes, de parlers n’auront-ils pas disparu, effrités par l’implacable consensus des profits et des régies de pouvoirs?” (110).

Glissant believes that post-colonial identity and identity formation should not be looked for in a single root, which is monolingual, nor is it as simple as the mixing of two, or even three groups, “le métissage” (27). Rather, identity and identity formation in the post-colonial context should be sought in the relation or rhizome, which is multilingual and manifested in creolization with its multifaceted, diffracting nature (31).

Si nous posons le métissage comme en général une rencontre et une synthèse entre deux différents, la créolisation nous apparaît comme le métissage sans limites, dont les éléments son démultipliés, les résultantes imprévisibles. La créolisation diffracte, quand certains modes du métissage peuvent concentrer une fois encore (46).

However, embracing the notion that identity and identity formation in the context of post-colonial Africa has been formed and informed by exposure to experiences of a cross-cultural nature has not been easy. Glissant maintained that as colonized peoples affirmed their identities in the context of nationalist movements during the decolonization process and the struggle for liberation, they did so in a totalizing manner, looking for their identity in a single root. “La plupart des nations qui se sont libérées de la colonisation
ont tendu à se former autour de l’idée de puissance, pulsion totalitaire de la racine unique, et non pas dans un rapport fondateur à l’Autre” (26-27). Clearly, it is both impossible and undesirable to erase the effects of cross-cultural encounters due to colonization and imperialism, even now, as we enter the 21st Century. That is why many feel that assertions of a pure culture or a static nationalistic identity must be questioned. Of course, the notion of decolonization does not imply a complete rejection of European or Western values, but rather a coming to terms with the Other within oneself. In fact, decolonization can be seen essentially as a process of accepting one’s identity even when, especially when, it includes the Other. As Edouard Glissant said, “La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l’enracinement, mais récuse l’idée d’une racine totalitaire. La pensée du rhizome serait au principe de ce que j’appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre” (23). Glissant also affirmed his belief that acknowledging difference and the Other who resides in us does not necessarily change us. “La pensée de l’autre, c’est la générosité morale qui m’inclinerait à accepter le principe d’altérité, à concevoir que le monde n’est pas fait d’un bloc et qu’il n’est pas qu’une vérité, la mienne. Mais la pensée de l’Autre peut m’habiter […] sans qu’elle me change en moi-même” (169). Glissant’s “poétique de la relation” supposed cross-cultural experiences, contacts between different cultures, and affirmed the notion that the Other lies within us (39). This notion resonates with Rimbaud’s famous quote: “Je est un autre” (39).

In conclusion, Franz Fanon states, “Allons, camarades, le jeu européen est définitivement terminé, il faut trouver autre chose” (Damnés 239). Since independence,
writers have attempted to move beyond the European model of identity formation, while still acknowledging that it has profoundly marked their own identities. What they seek is a new model, one that acknowledges the European influences while refusing a complete rejection of Western values. I believe that it is in this context that Fanon called his “comrades” to find “something else.” The implications of this idea include the necessity of dealing with differences in varying degrees, whether they are cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or religious. These differences can be internal to the individual or family unit, or external, between individuals. The dynamics of identity construction include internal reflection, interaction between individuals or observation and naming of others, family ties, linguistic realities, home environment, traditions, and school. As Edouard Glissant said, “On a feint d’oublier qu’un des pleins-sens de la modernité est donné, ici comme ailleurs dans le monde, par ce travail où les cultures des hommes s’identifient l’une l’autre, désormais, pour se transformer mutuellement” (Glissant 36). We have studied the intersection between nationalism and culture in literature through critical writings on anti-colonial nationalism. As we move forward to our next chapter, our discussion will focus more specifically on how second-generation francophone writers have contested or disputed claims of nationalism since independence, and we will study the elements of it they have particularly protested.
CHAPTER 2

Questioning Tradition: A Look Toward Modernity

As we have seen in the first chapter, movements dedicated to the formulation and articulation of new national identities in Africa, both in the context of anti-colonial nationalism and in the post-independence era, have categorically rejected the colonizer’s influence, opting instead for a complete return to traditional culture, values, and practices. Having shown the link between literary production and nationalism, we studied Camara Laye’s, *L’Enfant noir*, as an example of how the tenets of anti-colonial nationalism are embodied in the celebratory writings of first generation Francophone writers from Africa. In this chapter, we will examine Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* and Ousmane Sembène’s *Le Dernier de l’Empire*, in an attempt to better illustrate the critiques leveled against anti-colonial nationalism by a new generation of writers from the post-independence era. Inspired by the realities and difficulties faced by former colonies in Africa as they negotiate(d) questions of national identity and nation formation, these authors and their contemporaries acknowledge the importance of tradition as well as the reality and the permanency of modernization while, at the same time, raising important questions about the non-critical acceptance of each. Indeed, these Senegalese novels address issues not discussed in the celebratory writings for the previous generation, issues relating to social and political corruption, the manipulation, misuse, and/or abuse of religion, tradition and traditional culture either for personal or political gain, or as a way
to artificially perpetuate the façade of national unity. And so, before discussing their works, I will begin by outlining some of the oppositions we will encounter when contrasting literary production from these two generations: homogeneity/plurality, orality/literacy, collectivity/individuality, ascriptive roles/achieved roles, closed society/open society, domestic sphere/public sphere, and object/subject gender representations. Indeed, as we have already affirmed, anti-colonial nationalism celebrated African culture, history, and race in order to promote solidarity among Africans, creating a Pan-African identity. Orality, Collectivity, Caste distinctions, rootedness, purity, and domesticity are celebrated often to the point of closing off from outside influence and rejecting Western models of education that had already introduced notions of merit-based social mobility, individuality, and hybridity. In other words, while the homogeneity proclaimed by anti-colonial nationalism did help African colonial subjects assert their right to freedom from colonial rule, in the post-colonial period, it has been turned inward and become oppressive in its unwillingness to recognize the realities of social plurality and diversity across the continent and within each nation.

Now, as we turn our attention to these novels, I would like to point out that along with women’s issues encompassing polygyny, education, and personal choice, our first area of concern will also include the problematic place held by women in the search for national identity. Arriving on the literary scene after their male counterparts, women writers from French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa did not begin to publish until after independence in the mid- to late-1970s, and did not become a real force in this literary production until the 1980s. Exterior to and excluded from these celebratory movements,
yet at the same time, symbolic of Mother Africa and celebrated by traditional culture, they were left to create their own space within this culture. Women who had been to the colonial school found themselves particularly limited in terms of personal choice by these rigid returns to traditional culture. Having discovered their voice through education, they had no intention of losing it again by submitting to those who would entirely reject the colonizer’s influence. A school teacher during her life, Mariama Bâ felt the key to women’s emancipation was through education. Although she was raised primarily by her grandparents, it was her father who insisted that she attend French school like Camara Laye’s father had done. As a result, Bâ, like Laye, was caught between two worlds because of her education, she was unable to remain silent, and became a voice for change, for women’s rights, and for education. Born in Dakar, Sénégal in 1929, Mariama Bâ was among the first women writers to become a literary force in Sub-Saharan Francophone Literature. She had much to say on the subject of women and the realities of life in West Africa after independence. She used the pen to be to speak out about the injustices that surrounded her and to advance women’s issues, and although she wrote only two novels before her death in 1981: Une si longue lettre (1979) and Un chant écarlate (1981), she remains a central figure in Francophone African literature.

Our second writer, Ousmane Sembène, has been an imposing literary figure for nearly 50 years having published his first novel, Le Docker noir in 1956. Born in Ziguinchor, Senegal in 1923, he had very little formal schooling to prepare him for what would become his life’s work: writing. A fisherman, a dockworker, a plumber, Sembène, like many of his contemporaries, was also conscripted into the French army during World
War II. After the war, he found work in France and lived there until Senegal gained its independence in 1960. Inspired by real life experiences and hard work, his novels, short stories and films offer political and social commentaries on everything from worker strikes and polygyny, to the absurdities of French-style bureaucracy and the post-independence coup d’état, to name just a few. Sembène’s film career began in the early 1960s as a direct result of his desire to make his work accessible to the larger Senegalese and African audience. To this end, he has constructed his films in such a way as to alleviate linguistic and literacy constraints and barriers most often by using a mix of languages (Wolof/French, or Diola/French) and by adding English subtitles. Although we will not be further discussing Sembène’s filmography in the context of this dissertation, it remains an integral part of his work and a testament to his identification with, and connectivity to, the common man. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to a study of Sembène’s novel, Le Dernier de l’empire. In it, he is openly critical of the political and economic state of affairs in West Africa after independence. However, Sembène protected himself by refusing to accept any comparison between the nation represented in his text and his home country of Senegal. Both a literary technique and an instinct for self-preservation, his refusal also allows the fictional country to become an allegory for any newly independent West African nation. As a result, Le Dernier de l’empire precedes other post-independence texts, L’Etat honteux (1981) by Sony Labou Tansi and Le Pleurer-rire (1982) by Henri Lopes to name a few, in its unequivocal critique of the political machine in place, its scathing commentary on the exploitation of tradition for political and economic gain, its indictment of the West’s
presence and influence on the African continent, and its rejection of the Negritude movement, thinly disguised in the novel as, “Authenégraficanitus.”

**Une si longue lettre**

C’est à nous, femmes, de prendre notre destin en main pour bouleverser l’ordre établi à notre détriment et ne point le subir. Nous devons user comme les hommes de cette arme, pacifique certes mais sûre, qu’est l’écriture. Les chants nostalgiques dédiés à la mère africaine confondue dans les angoisses d’homme à la Mère Afrique ne nous suffisent plus. Il faut donner dans la littérature africaine à la femme noire une dimension à la mesure de son engagement prouvée à côté de l’homme dans les batailles de libération, une dimension à la mesure de ses capacités démontrées dans le développement économique de notre pays. Cette place ne lui reviendra pas sans sa participation effective (408).

Mariama Bâ’s words, quoted above, constitute the concluding lines of a speech given in 1980 concerning the political function of African literatures. As a whole, her speech transmits the same central messages as her novel, *Une si longue lettre*, published just one year before, and offers us the rare opportunity to hear her true voice, one that is free from literary artifice. It is clear from these words that Mariama Bâ believed her writing was not solely about personal satisfaction, nor was it Art for Art’s sake. Instead, her work was meant to be an example to other women. Knowing her desire for women to take up the pen and tell their stories, this passage confirms for us her views in a way that, I believe, affords us the freedom to engage more deeply with her novel. First, using the oppositions I have outlined in the preceding pages, I will analyse *Une si longue lettre* in

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1 This passage was taken from Mariama Bâ’s essay, “La Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites,” originally given as a speech in Frankfurt, Germany in October 1980 at a symposium entitled, “La fonction des literatures modernes de l’Afrique noire.”
such a way as to elucidate its function as a reply to the celebratory writings of anti-colonial nationalism in general, and Camara Laye’s, *L’Enfant noir*, in particular. Often, we will find that Mariama Bâ seems to be responding to Laye, balancing his words with a female perspective. Then, we will examine the novel’s structure. By situating her text somewhere between an epistle and a diary, Mariama Bâ underscores her belief that African writers have a responsibility and obligation to write *to* and *for* others, not simply for themselves. I will argue that the hybrid structure of her work parallels her hybridized identity whose solidarity seems to lie in sisterhood rather than in race, creed, or national origin.

As we have discussed, writers of the first generation, in order to create a sense of solidarity among Africans, celebrated one Pan African, homogenous identity based on race and stemming from one root, Mother Africa. In dedicating his autobiography to his mother, and by extension, to Mother Africa, Camara Laye aligns himself with other writers of his generation, expanding his literary portrait of the rural Africa of his childhood experience into a larger portrait of Africa. In *Une si longue lettre*, Bâ reminds her reader of this nationalist discourse through the words of Ramatoulaye’s suitor, Daouda Dieng. A politician, he affirmed his belief that women are a fundamental component of the nation saying, “La femme est la racine première, fondamentale de la nation où se greffe tout apport, d’où part aussi toute floraison” (90). Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, rejects this notion of one unique root and suggests the need, not only to move toward a solid, unified nation based on the family unit, but also to validate the diversity of all families saying, “Ce sont toutes les familles, riches ou pauvres, unies ou déchirées,
conscientes ou irréfléchies qui constituent la Nation. La réussite d’une nation passe donc irrémédiablement par la famille” (130). Although Laye acknowledges the size and diversity of the African continent saying, “l’Afrique est grande, aussi diverse que grande,” he avoids discussing this diversity, insisting instead on his experience to the exclusion of other realities, and thereby maintaining the homogenizing rhetoric of the nationalist phase throughout his novel (Laye 73). On this subject, John Conteh-Morgan observed, “Laye's novelistic practice and representation of Africa belies his intellectual convictions about the continent. In other words, as a detached intellectual he knows the place and cultures are diverse, but as a cultural nationalist he presents it differently.” (John Conteh-Morgan, 2/15/2005).

Unifying during colonial rule, this discourse became limiting, and even, repressive after independence. With important social and political consequences ranging from a one-party political system to racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination, post-nationalist authors have had to counter this discourse by exposing the realities of African diversity in their writing. For example, Bâ criticizes the sterility of the one-party political system through the words of Daba, Ramatoulaye’s oldest daughter, saying, “Je ne veux pas faire de politique, non que le sort de mon pays et surtout le sort de la femme ne m’intéressent. Mais à regarder les tiraillements stériles au sein d’un même parti, à regarder l’appétit de pouvoir des hommes, je préfère m’abstenir” (107 italics mine). On the subject of race-based African solidarity, Bâ was also critical. Giving the example of an African woman from Ivory Coast who had difficulties adapting to life in Senegal, Ramatoulaye says, “Noire et Africaine, [Jacqueline] aurait dû s’intégrer, sans heurt, dans
une société noire et africaine, le Sénégal et la Côte d'Ivoire ayant passé entre les mains
du même colonisateur français.” (64). She did not integrate well into the society,
because, as Ramatoulaye continues, “l’Afrique est différente, morcelée. Un même pays
change plusieurs fois de visage et de mentalité, du Nord au Sud ou de l’Est à l’Ouest.”
(64). Through the example of Jacqueline, Bâ breaks down the myth of a single, Pan
African identity, lets her reader know that African diversity remains the reality despite all
efforts to create an illusion of one homogeneous entity, and is honest about Africa’s
plurality.

This diversity is also evident in the persistence of the caste system. Originally
designed to designate one’s role within the society, the caste system is now based on
one’s birth. Today, the impact of the caste structure remains important primarily as it
relates to marriage, since there is still significant societal pressure not to intermarry. The
practice of marrying within one’s caste is called endogamy. Mariama Bâ addresses this
issue directly through Mawdo and Aïssatou who chose to marry despite the difference in
their social status. Mawdo was noble, a prince, a Guélewar, but Aïssatou’s father, a
jeweler, was from the blacksmith caste. Ramatoulaye explains the scandal their marriage
caused saying, “Un mariage controversé. J’entends encore les rumeurs colèreuse de la
inge: --Quoi, un Toucouleur qui convole avec une bijoutière? Jamais, il ‘n’amassera
argent’ ” (30). Mariama Bâ further helps her reader understand the hierarchy of the caste
structure by explaining, “Pour certains, l’honneur et le chagrin d’une bijoutière sont
moindres, bien moindres que l’honneur et le chagrin d’une Guélewar” (49). As one can
see, the question of caste is an important one in Une si longue lettre, but Camara Laye is
almost completely silent on the subject in *L’Enfant noir*. Of course, we do know that Laye’s father was a blacksmith, and like Aïssatou’s father, he also worked gold. We also know, despite the fact that both were from different parts of West Africa (Guinea and Senegal), the two shared the same occupational hazards and both had health concerns. Additionally, Laye indicated that his parents were both from the same caste, however, he does not indicate whether caste considerations figured into his decision to marry Marie (a métisse and a Christian, she was not subject to caste distinctions), or not to marry Fanta whose caste and class he does not discuss.

For Mariama Bâ, her solidarities transcend race, ethnicity, and caste. They are gender-based and are supported by Western education. Female solidarity founded on common suffering and friendship is celebrated in this novel. While in the hospital, for example, Jacqueline’s roommate was a French woman who had come to Senegal to teach and to escape her solitude. Like Jacqueline she was suffering from depression. Ramatoulaye remembers, “Elle est ainsi venue, mais tous ses rêves avortés, toutes ses espérances déçues, toutes ses révoltes tues se sont liguées à l’assaut de sa gorge” (66). Ramatoulaye also reflects on the power of friendship saying, “L’amitié a des grandeurs inconnues de l’amour. Elle se fortifie dans les difficultés, alors que les contraintes massacrent l’amour. Elle résiste au temps qui lasse et désunit les couples. Elle a des élévations inconnues de l’amour” (79). For Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, the genealogy of their friendship can be traced to their mothers and grandmothers, and has been passed

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2 Mariama Bâ, however, did not explain Aïssatou’s father’s poor health as being the result of unhappy or unsatisfied spirits, as Camara Laye had done. Rather, she explained it scientifically, saying it was the result of years of inhaling “oxyde de carbone” (30).
onto them. However, I would argue that this gender-based solidarity is not sufficient, nor
is it guaranteed, a subject we will return to later. Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye’s
relationship matured and solidified in school. In the novel, Ramatoulaye’s friends, who
had come from all over West Africa, were united both by gender and by their common
education, which gave them a shared vision, and shared modernity. For Ramatoulaye,
they were linked by a common destiny. She says, “Nous étions de véritables soeurs
destinées à la même mission émancipatrice.” (27). As schoolteachers, they would pass
on their liberation to the next generation.

Mariama Bâ’s fictional exploration of the importance of education in the
modernization process is very positive. The school system, as she presents it, is a
classless, casteless place where achievement and merit are rewarded. A poignant
moment in the novel comes when Ramatoulaye remembers with fondness the director of
her school who had had a profound effect on her life. She said that she will never forget
the French headmistress who wanted an extraordinary destiny for her students. She says,

Nous sortir de l’enlisement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs; nous faire
apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision
du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts;
faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche que
s’était assignée l’admirable directrice (27-28).

This education pushed her to see the multiplicity of Africa, to refuse the caste system’s
ascriptive roles, and to work hard in order to earn success. School also gave Aïssatou the
courage to leave her husband, to return to the classroom, and begin a new life, a new
career of her own. As she does throughout her letter, Ramatoulaye ‘reminds’ her friend
that books were her savior.
A jeweler’s daughter, Aïssatou did not let her caste affiliation limit her professionally. Through her education she was able to get a job with the Senegalese Embassy in the United States, a place where hard work and education are rewarded and social mobility possible. Bà also comments on the racism that exists within the school system, using one of Ramatoulaye’s children as an example. Ramatoulaye explains that her son, Mawdo, has been denied his place at the top of his class, because the teacher is tougher on him than he is on a white student. She says,

Mawdo Fall a des dons littéraires remarquables. Depuis la sixième, il a dominé sa classe en cette matière; mais cette année, pour une majuscule oubliée, des virgules omises, un mot mal orthographié, son professeur lui enlève un ou deux points. De ce fait, Jean-Claude, un Blanc, son second de toujours, se hisse à la première place. Le professeur ne peut tolérer qu’un nègre soit le premier en philosophie (105).

By pointing out perpetuation of the old colonial hierarchy within Senegal’s educational system, Bà is calling for a truly colorblind atmosphere that is entirely merit-based.

Despite this critique, Mariama Bà’s assessment of the importance of Western style education is positive. In contrast, Camara Laye’s representation of school was categorically negative. For Laye school did not bring solidarity, it brought separation: separation from his family, community, traditions, religion, his home, his village, and his country, separation from Africa. Indeed, his early experience at school was marked by mistreatment by the older boys, and forced labor by the headmaster. Although he was successful in the French system, at the end of his studies he felt isolated from his own
people and unable to live within the traditional setting. Once in France, he found himself again on the outside searching for his place. As we have pointed out in Chapter One, it was from this profound nostalgia that *L’Enfant noir* was born.

Unaccepting of outside influences, nationalist writers tend to look inward and to the past for roots. There is a scepticism and fear of the outside, and a desire to remain within the confines of traditional culture. In *L’Enfant noir*, the reader feels a certain rejection, particularly by Laye’s mother of everything that is outside her village. This includes the foreign influence of the French colonial school, but also extends to her inability to accept differences even among her own people. For example, worried about what her son might possibly eat when he is in the city, she regarded his departure for Conakry as “un peu comme un départ chez des *sauvages*” (italics mine, 156). Mariama Bâ’s novel, on the other hand, demonstrates quite a different view. Ramatoulaye and other characters in *Une si longue lettre*, while not blindly accepting all foreign cultural imports, are open to and accepting of the outside influences and enrichment brought by Western education. At the same time, she is cognizant of problems with this influence, and is uncomfortable with certain changes she is seeing around her. For example, she does not like her daughters to wear pants, nor does she want them to smoke. At the same time, when her teenage daughter gets pregnant, Ramatoulaye is reassured by the commitment shown to Aïssatou by the baby’s father and his family, a commitment that would not have been expected under traditional or Islamic law in light of their unofficial state as husband and wife, and a direct result of the changing status of women in Africa, a subject we will return to in a moment.
Our next opposition focusses the author’s choice to situate the text in the domestic realm, or the public realm. An example of a nationalist novel, *L’Enfant noir* is confined almost entirely to the domestic sphere. It is a space of plenitude, harmony, and cooperation, where even his father’s workshop is located within the confines of the family concession. The only exceptions to this domesticity are that of the school and the hospital, both places of pain, loneliness, and separation for Laye. In contrast, the scope of *Une si longue lettre* is not limited to the domestic sphere. Instead, Bâ finds balance between the public and the private domain. While it is certainly true that much of the novel is dedicated to domestic issues including love, marriage, and family, both Ramatoulaye, a school teacher, and Modou, a civil servant, have careers outside of the home. In addition, although Ramatoulaye writes from within the domestic space, Bâ’s intention to breach the limits of that space is made clear in her choice of the letter format. Indeed, Ramatoulaye’s letter, once sent, will take her words outside of the domestic realm. Finally, toward the end of the novel, the world of politics—a component of the public realm—becomes an important subject of debate. Ramatoulaye asks tough questions about the obvious absence and under representation of women in public life, lamenting, “Presque vingt ans d’indépendance! A quand la première femme ministre associée aux décisions qui orientent le devenir de notre pays?” (89-90). From Laye’s novel situated in the domestic realm, and *Une si longue lettre* balanced between the domesticity and public life, we will move to the other extreme later in this chapter with *Le Dernier de l’empire*. Indeed, a post-independence novel set entirely in the public
sphere, the plot is centered around a political crisis, a *coup d’état*, with almost no attention drawn to domestic life.

The next opposition places community life and a collective identity, important during the nationalist phase, in contrast with post-nationalist writers’ insistence on individuality, individual identity. While striving to create one, unified African identity, nationalist writers naturally highlighted the importance of community in African daily life. Laye, for instance, explains how everyone in the family concession ate together, sharing the same bowl; how Laye slept in the same case with his mother, and shared a bed with his father’s young apprentices; how the entire village worked together in the field, how all the apprentices participated in the activities of his father’s workshop; how the children walked to school together. The practice of polygyny also falls within scope of community life. Camara Laye drew little attention to the practice in his novel, *L’Enfant noir*, but did acknowledge it and gives his reader the impression that a polygynous family is a harmonious one. And although one might argue that Camara Laye stands out as an individual, he does not present his path as having been the result of personal choice, but rather as his destiny. Going to France despite his mother’s protests, may seem to have been his choice, but staying in his village was not an option. Without a traditional education, he had not been prepared to fulfill any role within his community.

As for Mariama Bâ, individual identity and individual choice are central components of her novel. And although she is hopeful that more and more women and men will make their own choices instead of bending to the obligations of society, she is also realistic enough to understand that personal choice does not always guarantee
freedom or happiness. She is honest about her society’s weaknesses and is not afraid to address problems that stem both from modernity and from tradition. For example, Ramatoulaye chose her husband against the advice of her mother, thereby breaking with tradition. Aïssatou also chose her husband against the rules of tradition. A controversial choice, Mawdo and Aïssatou both believed they could break with tradition. They were in love, well educated, and thoroughly modern. They chose one another despite their respective ascriptive social roles. Ramatoulaye remembers, “[Mawdo] souligna son adhesion totale au choix de sa vie, en rendant visite à ton père, non à son domicile, mais à son lieu de travail” (30 italics mine). Indeed, Modou and Ramatoulaye, and Mawdo and Aïssatou were modern in the sense that they had chosen to marry despite traditional constraints, they refused to accept the cultural practices of polygyny and endogamy, and they placed personal choice above family obligation. Later in their marriage, when her husband took a second wife, Ramatoulaye chose to remain, and to share her husband according to the equitable rules of polygyny proclaimed by Islam. She says, “je choisis de rester. Modou et Mawdo surpris ne comprenaient pas… Toi, mon amie, prévenue, tu ne fis rien pour me dissuader, respectueuse de mon nouveau choix de vie. Je pleurais tous les jours. Dès lors, ma vie changea. Je m’étais préparée à un partage équitable selon l’Islam, dans le domaine polygamique. Je n’eus rien entre les mains.” (69, italics mine). Aïssatou chose a different path, deciding to divorce her husband in the instant she learned of his second marriage. Ramatoulaye presents Aïssatou’s decision with these words: “Tu choisis la rupture, un aller sans retour avec tes quatre fils, en laissant bien en vue, sur le lit qui fut vôtre, cette lettre destinée à Mawdo et dont je me rappelle l’exact contenu”
Despite the failure of these marriages and by extension, these choices, I would argue that Mariama Bâ insists on the importance of continuing to strive for individual identity and personal choice particularly for women.

In *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ addresses the question of gender by portraying woman, on one hand, as individual subjects, free to choose their career, their husband, their destiny, and on the other hand as objects, or commodities having a market value in a polygynous society. Ramatoulaye’s daughter, Daba is a perfect example of the former. She is a modern woman married to a modern man with whom she equally shares the domestic tasks. Her husband very clearly expresses his view that she is his partner and not his possession. He regards her has an individual who has chosen to marry him, an not as a woman he has taken in marriage. As Abou tells his mother-in-law, “Daba est ma femme. Elle n’est pas mon esclave, ni ma servante” (107). Mariama Bâ also exposes the reality of woman as object, possession, or commodity transferrable from one man to another for socio-economic considerations reflecting on the frequency of this status for women around her saying, “Je comptais les femmes connues, abandonnées ou divorcées de ma génération. […] J’avais entendu trop de détresses, pour ne pas comprendre la mienne. Ton cas, Aïssatou, le cas de bien d’autre femmes, méprisées, reléguées ou échangées, dont on s’est séparé comme d’un boubou usé ou démodé” (61-62 italics mine). Toward the end of her period of mourning, Ramatoulaye is faced with a suitor who treats her as if she is a commodity when her brother-in-law, Tamsir, announced that she will become his wife when her mourning is officially complete. Incapable of supporting the wives and children he already had, Ramatoulaye knew his interest in her was purely
economic. By taking Ramatoulaye as his fourth wife, he would considerably increase his
social standing because of her financial stability. In a shocking move, Ramatoulaye
refuses his marriage declaration saying, “Je ne serai jamais le complément de ta
collection. Ma maison ne sera jamais pour toi l’oasis sonvoitée: pas de charges
supplémentaires; tous les jours, je serai de ‘tour’; tu seras ici dans la propreté et le luxe,
dans l’abondance et le calme” (85). Men, however, are not the only people to blame
when it comes to using women as commodities.

Bâ also refuses to exonerate women for their role in polygyny. Her critique of
Dame Belle Mère, Binetou’s mother, is searing. Daba, asks how Dame Belle-Mère can
live with the fact that she took happiness away from two other women, her own daughter
included, for the financial windfall and social standing it would bring her. Daba asks
with anger and disbelief, “Comment une femme peut-elle saper le bonheur d’une autre
femme?” (103). As for Binetou, Daba sees her as a victim of materialism and greed, and
pities her. “Binetou est un agneau immolé comme beaucoup d’autres sur l’autel du
‘materiel’ ” (60). Later Daba says, “Quant à Binetou, c’est une victime, ta victime. Je la
plains” (103). Although Bâ seems to be more generous with naïve little Binetou, the fact
remains she knowingly accepted gifts and attention from an older, married man who was
twice her age. Her own greed contributed to this objectification, eventually causing her
to end her education prematurely, and give up her identity as an individual.

Through these oppositions, we have acknowledged an important shift in the
preoccupations motivating first and second generation writers. At once political,
symbolic, a metaphor, an allegory, a discourse, a diary, a letter, we will now move our
focus to the structure and language of *Une si longue lettre* in order to see the ways in which Mariama Bâ’s writing differs from that of the first generation. Unlike *L’Enfant noir*, this novel is not an autobiography. Although *Une si longue lettre* is written in the first person and does indisputably contain several autobiographical elements, it does not conform to the formal definition of an autobiography that requires the author, the narrator, and the protagonist to be one and the same. What’s more, despite the parallels between the author’s life and that of her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, Mariama Bâ never recognized *Une si longue lettre* as being an autobiography. That said, I do believe that Mariama Bâ intentionally blurred the line between author and narrator by writing in the first person and by allowing her protagonist to go unnamed until page 88, nearly halfway through her novel. Of course, for the letter writer to name herself in the first few lines of a missive intended for her best friend would have done nothing more than undermine the desired effect. That is to say, the author was very likely more intent on maintaining the illusion that her novel was written as one continuous and very long letter, as the title suggests, than on naming her protagonist as early as possible in the text. Moreover, waiting until the middle of the ‘letter’ to reveal the protagonist’s name actually serves a dual purpose. First, it transmits a piece of information one would not normally see until the letter’s closing. Second, it allows the author and narrator to inhabit the same space, at least for a time, before distinguishing themselves, so to speak, one from the other.

It is my view that Bâ’s refusal to designate her work as autobiographical, while at the same time fashioning it to resemble one, creates a paradox that cleverly undermines the genre. She uses this technique, one that inventively compels her reader to discern the
line between fact and fiction, knowing all the while they will find that line to be illusive. In this way, Bâ underscores the impossibility of recounting the story of one’s life without introducing elements of fiction, no matter how pure one’s intentions may be. In other words, Mariama Bâ seems to be asking readers to recognize the fiction, the work of literature that inhabits all autobiographies to varying degrees. I believe that by refusing the autobiographical genre in her own work Mariama Bâ sends an unmistakable reply to Camara Laye’s autobiography, L’Enfant noir. Despite his claim that it is an autobiography and therefore, true, factual, and non-fiction, the reader will agree that Laye’s text, written from a child’s perspective and tempered with the wisdom of experience, remains idealistic and nostalgic. In Laye’s world, everything African is good, beautiful, and harmonious. Traditional village life balances nature and spirituality, with love, family and friends. The paradise that is Mother Africa was lost to him because of his French colonial education. In contrast, Mariama Bâ’s text brings the reader back to reality showing the good along with the bad. As we have seen, she was unwilling to perpetuate the myth of a Mother Africa who unites all her children into one harmonious community without regard for differences in gender, religion, ethnicity, class or caste.

What can account for the divide between these 2 important authors? I would offer that it can quite simply be explained by the difference in the historical moment during which they were writing. You will remember that Camara Laye wrote during the celebratory and idealistic pre-independence period, while a disillusioned, yet hopeful Mariama Bâ wrote a letter to her friend almost 20 years after independence.
Broken into chapters, *Une si longue lettre* might at first glance look more like a series of letters than one very long letter. In fact, several chapters even commence with the name of Ramatoulaye’s correspondent, Aïssatou. Indeed, these instances might easily be mistaken for epistolary salutations, yet, upon closer examination, one can see that only the first chapter opens with a true salutation. As for the rest, the name Aïssatou is, in fact, incorporated into the sentence where it functions as a reminder to the reader of the correspondence taking place between the two friends, however one-sided it may seem. Another indication that these chapters do not function as separate letters is the fact that the author refrains from closing each section, waiting instead until the end of the novel to sign Ramatoulaye’s name. What then is the function of these chapters? I believe the answer to be two-fold. First, quite simply, these sections aid the reader by allowing her to process smaller pieces of this very long letter. Second, and more importantly, these chapters divide the text and help the author in her endeavor to create and maintain the temporal illusion that the letter was written in installments over the 4-month period of seclusion traditionally observed as part of the mourning process. This effect is further sustained throughout the novel with such chronological markers as: “Le troisième jour” (13), “A demain” (18), “ce matin” (19), “Je t’ai quittée hier” (22), “le quarantième jour” (84), “Nous sommes vendredi.” (93), “Demain, c’est bien la fin de ma réclusion.” (104), and “A demain, mon amie.” (129). These indicators mark the passage of time and act to guide the reader through Ramatoulaye’s period of mourning from beginning to end. At the same time, these temporal markers actually undermine the Bâ’s epistolary illusion, making the novel resemble a diary, a resemblance I will return to in a moment.
In her article, “Epistolary Friendship: La prise de parole in Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre” (RAL 1999), Ann McElaney-Johnson discusses the presence of Ramatoulaye’s interlocutor in the text by pointing out that the narrator “speaks directly to her addressee [Aïssatou] throughout the text […] frequently evok[ing] her presence by calling her name or by using the informal “tu” ‘you’” (RAL 30.2 116). In fact, in twelve of the novel’s twenty-seven chapters, Ramatoulaye actually addresses Aïssatou by name. When her name appears, most often it is within the first sentence of the chapter, many times it is the first word of the chapter. The placement of her name in that privileged space offsets the four chapters from which Aïssatou is absent. Throughout the remainder of the text, just as McElaney-Johnson notes, her presence is noticeably marked by the use of the informal “tu” form. For example, Ramatoulaye says, “Je t’ai quittée hier” (22), “Mawdo et toi” (41), “Toi, mon amie” (69), “Je n’ai pas honte de te l’avouer” (95), etc… In chapter 3, where Aïssatou is noticeably absent, Bâ deftly reminds the reader that Ramatoulaye is writing to a friend when she partially closes the chapter with an informal, “A demain” (18). However, Aïssatou is not the only person Ramatoulaye addresses in her “letter”. In chapter 6, she talks to her late husband while she reminisces about the past, their past. She uses the informal “tu” with him as she does with Aïssatou and even uses his full name at the beginning of a paragraph so there is no doubt to whom she is speaking. Ramatoulaye’s words convey the deep love and tenderness she feels toward her husband and has the effect of momentarily erasing the sting of his betrayal. She says, “Tu savais deviner toute pensée, tout désir… Tu savais beaucoup de choses

3 The chapters are numbered 1-28, however, there is no chapter 25.
As I have stated, the correspondence taking place in this novel seems, at first

As I have stated, the correspondence taking place in this novel seems, at first glance, to be rather one-sided. However, I would be remiss not to examine the ways in which the author injects true, or sometimes, illusory exchange into the novel. Right from the beginning, the reader is made aware that correspondence exists, and has existed for a long time, between the two friends. It is, as Ramatoulaye calls it, “notre longue pratique” (7). The novel opens with these words, “Aïssatou, J’ai reçu ton mot. En guise de réponse, j’ouvre ce cahier,” (7). Immediately, the exchange is clear. Ramatoulaye has received a letter from her friend, and although she will not be able to send it anytime soon, she has opened a notebook in order to begin her reply. Later, in chapter 12, Ramatoulaye says, “Tu évolues dans la quiétude, comme tes lettres me le disent […]” (51). The use of the present tense here indicates that Aïssatou’s letters are recent and most likely regular. Toward the end of the novel, on the final day of her mourning period, Ramatoulaye receives a letter from Aïssatou who will arrive the next day for a visit. Ramatoulaye writes, “Ousmane, mon dernier né, me tend ta lettre. Ousmane a six ans. ‘C’est Tante Aïssatou.’ Il a le privilège de m’apporter toutes tes lettres” (104). These references to Aïssatou’s letters are what I consider to be examples of “true”
exchange in the novel. They are, in effect, a *mise en abîme* of correspondance; letters within a letter. Another way Mariama Bâ gives voice to Aïssatou is by having Ramatoulaye quote her directly, as she does in Chapter 12 when she reproduces, in its entirety, the divorce letter Aïssatou left for her husband Mawdo after he took a second wife. In Chapter 6, Ramatoulaye paraphrases and quotes portions of letters she received from Modou during the time he was studying in France. She says, “Puis, tu partis en France, y vécus, selon tes lettres, en reclus […] Tu avais mal jusqu’aux entrailles du rythme intense des gens et de l’engourdissement du froid” (25). Later, she says he concluded his letters by reassuring her. Modou wrote, “C’est toi que je porte en moi. Tu es ma nègresse protectrice. Vite te retrouver rien que pour une pression de mains qui me fera oublier faim et soif et solitude” (25). And finally, Mariama Bâ also gives voice to Aïssatou by having Ramatoulaye express what Aïssatou will say: “Tu me diras” (81) “Tu repondras” (83). These rare moments when Aïssatou and Modou’s voices are heard help the reader appreciate the level of intimacy and deep friendship, or love in the case of Modou, that resides between them. It is this “illusory” exchange that reinforces the sense of correspondence in the novel and gives the reader access to Ramatoulaye’s most intimate relationships.

Now, I would like to return to the notion that *Une si longue lettre* also functions as a diary or *journal intime*. I believe this last area of discussion will confirm for us the idea that Mariama Bâ offers her reader privileged access to a private drama she has artfully layed our for public viewing. Unlike a letter, the contents of a diary are not to be shared, yet, in the novel’s opening lines, the reader learns Ramatoulaye has not chosen to
compose her letter on stationary, perhaps too constraining for the project at hand. Instead, she tells us she has opened a notebook in which she will write this very long letter. This choice will make the end result more closely resemble a diary than a letter. In addition, the contents of this “letter” are intensely personal and contain a depth of self-reflection that marks its dual function as a diary. In her article, “Enclosure/Disclosure in Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre,” Mildred Mortimer affirms “Ramatoulaye uses this period to travel in time rather than space. She recalls the past in an attempt to understand herself better and to cope with the present.” (Mortimer 70). The following passage gives the reader an indication of how Ramatoulaye will spend her time in seclusion and reveals her sincere desire that stirring up the past will not interfere with her religious duty to remain pure during the mourning process. She says, “Les murs qui limitent mon horizon pendant quatre mois et dix jours ne me gênent guère. J’ai en moi assez de souvenirs à ruminer. Et ce sont eux que je crains car ils ont le goût de l’amertume. Puisse leur invocation ne rien souiller de l’état de pureté absolue où je dois évoluer” (18). The last line of this passage is formulated as a prayer, a personal call to Allah for strength during this trying time. A few pages later, she explains her strategy for overcoming, “vanquishing” she says, her deep bitterness and resentment towards her husband. She will contemplate human destiny, a subject larger than her own personal distress and disillusionment. Yet, even after evoking the plight of orphans, the blind, paraplegics and lepers, she realizes this is only temporary way to bury her feelings, and finds her bitterness, discouragement and profound sadness remain.

Pour vaincre ma rancœur, je pense à la destinée humaine. […] Je pense aux aveugles […] Je pense aux paralytiques […] Je pense aux lépreux […] Victimes
Later, her distress becomes even more apparent when she emphasizes her self-questioning. At the conclusion of this passage, Ramatoulaye hesitantly admits to herself and to her friend that she still cries over Modou and the loss of her one true love. A revelation that defies logic, and one that is beyond her control, she says, “Et je m’interroge. Et je m’interroge. Pourquoi? Pourquoi Modou s’est-il détaché? Pourquoi a-t-il introduit Binetou entre nous? […] Je m’interroge. Ma vérité est que malgré tout, je reste fidèle à l’amour de ma jeunesse. Aïssatou, je pleure Modou et n’y peut rien” (83).

A powerful commentary on love, Bâ’s novel engages its reader on a socio-political level as well as a personal and, I would argue, a universal one. Translated into some 20 languages, read, analysed, taught, shared, and discussed around the world, the success of Une si longue lettre can be explained, at least in part, by the novel’s universal appeal.

Because the novel reads as though it were a private diary, Mariama Bâ’s readers are captured by her candor and sincerity, and are immediately able to identify with Ramatoulaye and her story. The novel harmoniously blends the local with the universal, exploring themes of love, friendship, loneliness and personal loss.

In conclusion, we have seen that some 20 years after independence in Senegal, Mariama Bâ used the pen in order to voice her ideas and concerns about the present and the future of her country and her people. She criticizes the politics of her country and the way in which men and women hide their true intensions and desires behind the law, the conventions of society, and their notion of duty. Bâ is also very realistic in that she does
not take all that modernity brings with joy. As I have mentionned, she in not happy about
the fact that her daughter has become pregnant out of wedlock, nor does she like to see
her children smoking. In the end, Mariama Bâ still believes in true love, freedom to
choose and the importance of education. She hopes for a future in which the leaders of
the country understand that the nation is not just the men, but the whole family, all
families.

**Le Dernier de l’empire: roman sénégalais**

A satirical portrayal of political life in Africa some 20 years after independence,
Ousmane Sembène’s novel, *Le Dernier de l’empire*, is a scathing critique of Léopold
Senghor, Senegalese democracy, Negritude, and neo-colonialism. Much of his critique is
centered close to home on internal corruption, social injustice, and the caste system, with
many characters recognizable, albeit fictionalized, former or current figures in Senegalese
public life such as President Léon Mignane (Léopold Senghor), Prime Minister
Daouda/David (Abdou Diouf), and the imprisoned, former député, Ahmet Ndour
(Mamadou Dia). At the same time, Sembène also unleashes an undeniable
condemnation of international intervention in the affairs of autonomous African nations

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4 According to Hal Wylie, Mamadou Dia was “[a]n economist with direct experience of rural production,
[who] was interested in organizing agricultural co-ops to help peasants market their crops. He
complemented Senghor well, guiding him in his understanding of traditional rural political forces. […] When [Senghor] became the first President of Senegal he organized a moderate, middle-of-the-road
government with Dia as ‘President of the Council of Ministers.’ […] Dia built his co-ops into a system of
‘animation rurale’ which brought the peasants into the economic and political fabric of the nation.
However, Dia’s successes threatened established interests. Tensions between Senghor and Dia arose.
Vaillant believes French forces worked behind the scenes to turn Senghor against Dia. A confused coup
attempt sent Dia to prison (probably unjustly) with a life sentence and left Senghor in the hands of the old
colonial establishment” (Wylie 362).
through his discussion of the weight of foreign debt, the questionable personal and/or national interests of foreign advisors (French Ambassador Jean de Savognard and Adolphe, the French advisor to the president), as well as the motivations of foreign mercenaries. Written between 1976 and 1981, *Le Dernier de l’empire* continues where *Xala* left off, and is a departure for Sembène in the sense that he has chosen to concentrate this novel on the politicians, those in power, rather than on the people. This significant shift in focus serves to underscore his important message: dysfunction in African democracies comes from the top—from the politicians—not from the people.

Through the voice of the “Doyen,” Cheikh Tidiane Sall, Ousmane Sembène reminds us that “[l]a démocratie est issue de la base, non du sommet de la pyramide.” (*Dernier* 422). Undeniably, over the past fifty years, the core of Ousmane Sembène’s literary and cinematic career has been the people, and more specifically, as Magueye Kassé explains, the contradictions faced by them as their traditional community shifts its values toward monetary, material, and commercial considerations, while becoming an authoritarian society. She asserts, “[l]a majeure partie de son oeuvre concerne la vie du menu peuple, pris dans l’engrenage des contradictions d’une société de plus en plus orientée vers les valeurs commerciales plutôt que collectives, et vers l’autoritarianisme plutôt que la participation.” (Kassé 179). Although Sembène makes reference to neo-colonial factors, he places the blame for Senegal’s problems and “contradictions” squarely on the shoulders of those in power. As Kassé notes,

[L]e plus souvent [ces contradictions] naissent de la dynamique interne de la société sénégalaise elle-même. L’ancien pouvoir colonial peut bien […] tirer les ficelles en cachette, mais Sembène met aussi en lumière la responsabilité des
exploiteurs sénégalais eux-mêmes, et ces contradictions sont toujours exposées de
façon à décontenancer au maximum la bourgeoisie régnante.” (Kassé 179).

Indeed, throughout the novel, Ousmane Sembène exposes the naked ambition and greed
of members of the Senegalese government. Even in the face of an unthinkable crisis, the
disappearance of the president, political figures at every level seem to be incapable of
putting the needs of the country above their own thirst for power and monetary gain.

Kept in the dark about the military coup d’état, neither reader nor politician learns
the truth about the disappearance of the Vénérable until the eleventh hour. By imagining
that the ministers might be capable of deceiving the population for several days rather
than informing them immediately upon discovering the president’s disappearance,
Sembène forces the reader to come to the same conclusion as the fictional insurgent
military officers: the current government is so corrupt that it must be replaced.

Certainly, the politicians demonstrate a lack of faith in democracy and the democratic
process that ultimately leads them to choose a path of deception rather than one of
integrity, responsibility, and public service. Like the politicians, Sembène also
demonstrates a certain lack of faith in democracy by suggesting that, under the right
circumstances, a Marxist military regime might actually be preferable to a democratically
elected government. In his article, “Marxist Intertext, Islamic Reinscription? Some
Common Themes in the Novels of Sembène Ousmane and Aminata Sow Fall,” Peter
Hawkins explains Sembène’s main point is precisely this. He says, “The general thrust of
the polemic is that the Senegalese political establishment is so corrupt and hypocritical in
its pretensions to pseudo-democratic power, so much more self-serving than beneficial to
its electorate, that a Marxist military régime might even be preferable” (Hawkins 166).
Indeed, at the end of the novel, the now-retired Sall wonders to his friend, Procureur Ndaw, if this coup d’État is really worse than the situation under President Léon Mignane where arbitrary and unjust arrests and imprisonment exist, where freedom of speech and of the press is not only compromised, but also questionable, and where the multi-party political system only exists to boost the president’s legitimacy. From Sall’s point of view, the leaders of the military regime might actually help to improve democracy in his country. After all, they have promised democratic elections, are meeting with representatives from various groups, and are forcing civil servants to justify their use of state-owned property and governmental funds in an effort to curb corruption. “Le C.O.S. [Comité d’Officiers Supérieurs] a réuni les chefs des partis de l’opposition, quelques cadres de l’ancien régime, des hommes de foi, catholiques et musulmans, des syndicalistes, des femmes, des lycéens, des étudiants, pour dégager une ligne générale” (Dernier 431). I believe that Sembène’s valorization of a military coup is simply meant to sound the alarm, and to force readers to examine the divide between democratic ideals and actual practice, not just in Africa, but all over the world.

Our examination of Le Dernier de l’empire will be divided into two main areas: critiques and techniques. The first will address Ousmane Sembène’s political and social commentaries representing a departure from first generation writers including a critique of Negritude, endogamy and the caste system, internal corruption, nepotism, the misuse of public resources, and neo-colonialism in its many forms: economic and military, overt and covert. As is evident from the discussion above, Sembène acknowledges the weight, past and present, of the fait colonial while maintaining that the responsibility of Senegal’s
(and by extension, Africa’s) future must ultimately lie in Senegalese (African) hands. The second part of our discussion will focus specifically on the linguistic and typographical techniques Sembène uses in order to convey his message in the most poignant way possible. From paratextual elements such as Sembène’s *avertissement* and his choice of title, *Le Dernier de l’empire: roman sénégalais*, to the incorporation of newspaper articles, speeches, and political tracts, his use of a variety of type settings, and linguistic elements, Ousmane Sembène enriches his novel. The end result, I argue, is a new kind of *écriture*, one that departs from first generation writers in francophone Africa, both in content, preoccupation, and form. The novel is one of the first of several, by various African authors, that exposes the realities of the post-independence politics, questions the end of the empire, and most importantly, offers solutions.

Published in 1981, *Le Dernier de l’empire*, appeared just on the heels of Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor’s resignation in December 1980. The timing of the book’s publication should be noted for two reasons. First, Hal Wylie called the novel a “personal attack” on Senghor through the fictional president of Senegal, Léon Mignane, resembling Senghor in nearly all respects (Wylie 363). Second, the novel’s intrigue revolves around the disappearance of Mignane, also known as the Vénérable, and the murder of Siin, his chauffeur. With these elements in mind, one can not help but wonder if the author was not simply waiting for the right moment to publish his novel. It is true that although Senegal has been politically stable in the years following independence, other African nations have not always enjoyed the same degree of stability. As a result, at the time he was writing this novel Sembène had seen many other
writers of his generation imprisoned or exiled. Doug Payne explores this question in his article, “Instabilities: The Politics of Literary Form in Sembène’s The Last of the Empire.” Doug Payne points out the fact that, “Although the novel is intensely focused on the days surrounding the succession, and Senghor did not publicly announce his resignation until the last day of 1980, Sembène gives as dates of composition in his Author’s Foreword ‘August 1976-January 1981,’ so presumably much of the novel was already written at the time Senghor stepped down” (122). Whatever the reason, one thing is clear, Ousmane Sembène did not publish this novel, Le Dernier de l’empire, until Senghor’s tenure as president of Senegal was complete.

Throughout the novel, Sembène’s treatment of Senghor (in the person of the Vénérable, President Léon Mignane) is highly critical and a considerable change from first generation writer’s portrayal of their leaders from the pre-colonial Africa. The best examples is that of Soundjata, the 12th century emperor from Mali whose selfless acceptance of his destiny, limitless courage, and ability to unite all his people have left an impressive example to follow. One area of critique of post-colonial leaders concerns the lack of personal monetary investment in the country. For example, on several occasions reference is made to the fact that the Vénérable, along many other prominent political figures, does not own property in Senegal. More than one character discusses this fact, and in the end, it becomes one of the principal points of contention for the leaders of the military regime. In fact, when Daouda is asked if he owns a house or apartment in Senegal he replies that he does not. However, through a series of questions he finally reveals that his wife used a state-backed loan in order to build a house in Senegal and is
currently collecting rent on that house since he and his family live in the “Petit Palais.” He also reveals that he has recently purchased a pavilion in France on credit, again using a government loan. In a similar vein, Sembène also criticizes the tendency for Senegalese politicians to become quite accustomed to air conditioning, the cost of which, the reader understands, is underwritten by the people of Senegal. When describing one such politician in passing, the narrator says, “Alassane, comme bon nombre de ses semblables, accoutumé au conditionnement de l’air frais – dans le bureau, la voiture, le salon et la chambre à coucher – transpirait.” (Dernier 200). These are the people, society’s privileged few, who as Sembène says, “bâtissent leur fortune sur la sécheresse” (75).

These same politicians who have become accustomed to the good life prefer, Sembène explains, to blame the country’s social, economic, and political problems on modernity and the youth rather than to take responsibility for them. They even go so far as to use propaganda in newspapers and on the radio in order to paint the president’s chauffeur, Siin, as a victim of modern times and to rally the people behind the ideals of Authénégraficanitus, Sembène’s fictional version of Senghor’s Negritude. The narrator says, “Anonyme de son vivant, illustre dans la mort, le conducteur Siin, était devenu martyr, victime des temps modernes. On accusait, condamnait, la jeunesse oisive, parasitaire, débauchée, pervertie, sans morale.” (224). Despite the government manufactured propaganda, Sembène makes sure to show the capacity of young people to be engaged socially and politically. As Doug Payne points out, the author counters this attack on youth by “giv[ing] the young people in the novel an anti-imperialist attitude
(they pull down a statue of Faidherbe, 209-217), receptivity to the coup […], and an energetic resourcefulness.” (Payne 120). Moreover, Sall’s speech on the occasion of Migane’s 70th birthday places his hope for Senegal’s future in the capable hands of tomorrow’s leaders. Sembène also balances his attack on propaganda and the government-controlled news media by making Kad, one of the main figures in the novel, an independent journalist with high ideals and professional integrity. Using his initials, K.A.D. (Kabirou Amadou Diop), Kad likens himself to the deciduous tree of the same name which loses its leaves during the “hivernage” or rainy season, and is therefore unable to provide shelter or shade to kings. Just as his homonym, Kad does not spare criticism of those in power neither during times of crisis, nor during times of relative calm.

Sembène also criticizes Mignane/Senghor for placing the interests of European governments, particularly France, above the needs of his country, and ultimately, his continent. Through the voice of Cheikh Tidiane Sall, Sembène expresses the prevailing sentiment that colonial empires did not end with independence, and in the process, he offers a new definition of colonialism as it is experienced in the post-independence era.

Reconnaissons encore que le colonialisme n’est plus l’occupation des terres, mais le ravalement des esprits, l’orientation sociale, le piétinement culturel, l’imposition d’une armada de conseillers optus, dont le rôle, au sein de nos administrations toutes neuves, au lieu d’être de nous aider, est de mettre un frein à toutes les réformes audacieuses, à tous les esprits entreprenants. (Dernier 74)

Indeed, throughout the novel Sall and others question foreign intervention and/or influence in all of its forms: administrative, economic, military, and cultural.

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5 In a footnote, Ousmane Sembène explains that the kad is “l’arbre qui ne fait pas d’ombre aux rois” (234).
Administratively, Magueye Kassé explains that the perpetuation of the colonial system is in part due to the training administrators received under the colonial rule.

According to her,

La plupart [des administrateurs] étaient formés dans ce sens: mentalement, ils étaient prêts à être de très bons seconds de l’administration coloniale, du ministère des colonies. […] Si bien que même les cadres qui représentent la société sénégalaise ou les sociétés sénégalaises ne sont que des vecteurs du système néocolonial, qu’un prolongement sans rupture évidente, consciemment ou inconsciemment. (Kassé 185).

In fact, Sembène touches on this very point when Sall says, “Notre système éducationnel, nos écoles particulièrement, ne sont pas des endroits pour acquérir une culture. Ce sont des centres où l’on fabrique des mandarins” (Dernier 74). While Sembène does not specifically address the Senegalese administration, he does comment on the strong neo-colonial presence within that administration. In Le Dernier de l’empire, “Sembène shows the overt connections between Senegal’s government and French powers” through the following characters (Wylie 365). The most striking example is Adolphe, the seemingly indispensable, French “politico-militaire” advisor to the president (Dernier 14). A former military officer, he is portrayed to be a frustrated by product of anti-colonial conflicts in Algeria and French Indo-China, and one of the last vestiges of the colonial administration. Although his role in the government is never thoroughly explained or justified in the novel, Sembène makes it quite clear that his presence is very important to President Mignane. More tangential to the administration is the French Ambassador, Jean de Savognard, also present throughout the novel. He is often called upon for advice,

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6 A mandarin was the “titre donné autrefois aux fonctionnaires de l’Empire chinois, choisis par concours parmi les lettrés” (Petit Larousse en Couleurs 608-609).
as well as for economic, military, and diplomatic aid. Additionally, he almost always knows more than those in power. More important, it seems, than even his diplomatic duties, is Savognard’s objective to ensure the security of French economic interests principally by maintaining a Senegalese leadership favorable to French policies, even through extra-diplomatic means (i.e. monetary incentives, or military intervention).

Indeed, the narrator tells us that concerning the president’s disappearance, “Ce n’était pas Léon Mignane en tant qu’être qui […] intéressait [Savognard], mais ce qu’il représentait dans l’échiquier occidental.” (40). This type of administrative interference certainly has real consequences on the economic, and ultimately, on the political independence of young African nations like Senegal. Because the two are intrinsically linked, Cheikh Tidiane Sall deems the decolonization process to be incomplete. For him, “[l’]’Indépendance n’est – et ne sera – complète que lorsque nous contrôlerons notre économie” (239). At a time when foreign “aid” often comes in the form of mounting debt, and African businessmen and government officials, seduced by international capital, allow foreign governments or corporations to take control of natural resources (diamonds, or oil for example), it is little wonder that Madjiguène (Kad’s girlfriend) expresses pessimism for the future when she says, “Si l’argent est encore la seule valeur morale pour les hommes et les femmes, il n’y aura aucun changement.” (431).

While Ousmane Sembène only touches on the economic power foreign governments are capable of wielding over their former colonies, he does discuss in length the various types of military power at their disposal. For example, Cheikh Tidiane Sall is shown to be vehemently opposed to the creation of an InterAfrican Intervention Force,
which he regards as a way to oppress rising political talent and to safeguard foreign interests. During a heated debate with President Mignane, he is adamant and clear in his critique of this force saying,


An old friend of the President, Sall is able to ask Mignane tough questions that others in the government would not dare to voice. He is even audacious in expressing his conclusions that this force is only deployed when it serves the interests of multinational corporations. “Pourquoi n’avons-nous pas envoyé nos soldats à l’époque combattre du côté des nationalistes de la Guinée dite portugaise? Et maintenant, pourquoi expédier là-bas nos soldats? Pour quelle gloire? Et au profit de qui? Tout soldat mort dans cette expédition le sera pour le grand capital: les multinationales” (177-178). Incredulous of Mignane’s explanations, Sall unmasks his true intentions with ease saying, “C’est pour le bénéfice de l’Occident que tu veux envoyer des soldats, Léon” (179). Sall also opposes the existence of foreign military personnel and advisors, including foreign mercenaries, particularly with regard to their probable motivation, and the motivations of those whom they represent. He says,

La conduite des mercenaires est actuellement fondée sur une prétendue supériorité de la culture. Ils agissent au nom de leur civilisation… Relis… ou lis, les articles de presse, ou interviews qui leur sont consacrés. Ceux de l’Hexagone voient en eux les continuateurs de la grande épopeée des bâtisseurs d’empires. Nostalgiques de leur rayonnement passé, les soldats perdus demeurent un pâle rayon de la puissance d’alors… Ils assurent la pérennité d’une civilisation moribonde qui se veut encore conquérante. (381-382).
As Adolphe was one of the last remnants of the colonial administration, so too are the mercenaries who still believe in their cultural superiority and desire the continuation of the empire. One of the last references made to foreign intervention came toward the end of the novel when General Ousmane Mbaye refused the Prime Minister’s direct order to use force on civilian demonstrators. The general insisted that military force should not be used, justifying his decision three times with the following words: “Caaf da Xëm” (“les cacahuètes grillées sont calcinées”) (329-330). The meaning of this Wolof proverb was lost on Daouda who stubbornly informed the military leadership that he would call upon the country’s military alliances. Enraged, General Mbaye and Colonel Mané, his second in command, left the room. Later that evening Daouda would be arrested at his home and taken to prison.

Culturally, Sembène criticizes Mignane/Senghor for continually looking to France and Europe for personal validation. At the end of the novel, Mignane argues his own importance by reminding Sall that besides having invented a movement to celebrate all that is African, he has also succeeded in merging the best qualities of both Europe and Africa into what he calls, “l’Eurafrique,” and has received numerous honors from all over Europe. “Tu oublies que je suis l’initiateur de l’Authénégraficanitus… de l’Eurafrique… Je ne suis pas comme ceux à qui tu fais référence. J’ai été honoré par toutes sortes de distinctions européennes” (387). However, the Vénérable has not impressed everyone with these accomplishments. Sall’s son, Badou, had already dismissed the Vénérable saying, “Léon Mignane avec son Authénégraficanitus, n’a d’Afrique que sa peau noire.
S’il pouvait se blanchir, il le ferait” (67). The Minister of Finance, Mam Lat Soukabé had even harsher words concerning the missing president and his ideologies: “Et nous? Nous… que nous laisse le Vénérable? demanda-t-il moqueur. Son Authénégraficanitus? De la merde… Nous retiendrons de lui qu’il a été, après Faidherbe, le meilleur produit de l’ancienne métropole, et le meilleur proconsul que Paris ait envoyé en Afrique francophone” (Sembène 344). In his interview with Nicole Aas-Rouxparis, Sembène articulated these same ideas. He said, “Senghor, c’est le plus beau fruit du système colonial que la France ait pu nous offrir. Cela n’enlève pas sa valeur en tant que grand poète français. Il aura sa place dans notre Panthéon. Nous aurons notre vision de Senghor, vous aurez la vôtre. Ne demandez pas qu’on partage le même point de vue.” (Aas-Rouxparis 574). Above all else, however, Sembène criticizes Mignane’s/Senghor’s persistent reliance on his theory of Authénégraficanitus/Negritude, even when it has become evident that it is no longer a viable political force. More specifically, Kad tell us, “Son idéologie d’Authénégraficanitus ne mobilisait plus la nouvelle génération au pouvoir dans les autres états.” (Sembène 429). At the same time, Negritude does appear to be quite useful for certain situations, even where politics are concerned. Indeed, it seems that Sembène’s critique of Authénégraficanitus is at least in part directed at the feeling that it is only used when it suits the purposes of those in power. For example,

7 Badou, although not very present in the novel, is the character whose life and words seem to be most reflective of that of Ousmane Sembène. A professor of literature, Badou is a firm believer in communist ideals and, according to Sall, has remained essentially unassimilated despite his European education. Indeed, Cheikh asks him, “Comment as-tu fait pour échapper au sortilège européen avec ta formation?” (69) Magueye Kassé made a similar observation concerning Ousmane Sembène when she said, “il est un des rares écrivains africains ressortissants des ex-colonies françaises à ne pas avoir reçu une éducation assimilationniste.” (Kassé 179).

8 Faidherbe was a general in the French army who spent 13 years in Sénégal from 1852-1865. For eleven of those years, he served as governor of the colony.
even Mam Lat Soukabé embraces it when it suits his purpose. He says, “Respectons nos us et coutumes, ainsi que notre Authénégraficanitus. C’est le rôle d’un homme de caste d’être porteur d’un tel message…” (135). In this case, adherence to the principles of Authénégraficanitus would ensure respect for the traditions surrounding the caste system. This in turn would be politically advantageous for Mam Lat because his political rival, the current Prime Minister, Daouda, is a casté and therefore, despite the constitutionality of his succession, not a suitable choice for president in traditional Senegalese society.

A taboo, the word ‘caste’ is loaded, evoking powerful emotions, both positive and negative. Indeed, through the voice of the narrator, Sembène emphasizes the strong physical effect caused by Mam Lat’s use of the word: “Le mot ‘caste’ fit l’effet d’une douche froide.” (135). Also weighing in on this pivotal question is Diouldé, Sall’s eldest son, a representative in the National Assemble, and part of Mam Lat’s entourage. He says, “Daouda?… C’est un homme de castè.” (258). For him, that fact alone is sufficient to disqualify Daouda for the presidency. Nevertheless, he does justify this position based on his belief that installing Daouda as president would provoke the anger of the people who are still fundamentally attached to the values of Authénégraficanitus. 9 We should not believe, however that there is only one side to this issue. In fact, Sembène is careful to show a movement, at least in some circles, away from these elitist mentalities and toward a more egalitarian view of society. Kad, for one, had this to say, “Les gens de notre génération ont dépassé ce complexe” (222). Other characters agree with Kad’s

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point of view. One minister, Haïdara, asserts, “Nous sommes tous des égaux.” (135).

Another, Corréa, adds, “Dépassons la ‘Démocratie villageoise.’ L’Afrique se modernise. Nous devons épouser notre époque” (135). Later in the novel, during his interview with “le Doyen,” Kad asked both whether the people would accept to be governed by a “casté,” and more personally, whether or not Sall would accept to serve in a government where the president was a casté. Knowing that Kad was referring to Daouda, Sall replied, “Des années durant, j’ai servi sous les ordres du P.M., Daouda. Je condamne cette attitude négative, raciste, d’où qu’elle puisse venir” (237). Explaining his interest in the question, Kad reminds Sall that “L’antique tradition fait encore force de loi—loi par accoutumance—même lorsque, comme aujourd’hui cette tradition ne répond plus aux réalités contemporaines.” (238) Kad further explains the motives for his visit saying, “En venant vous voir, j’avais cru que cet élément avait été determinant dans votre retrait.” (238). Although he misjudged Sall’s resignation, Kad’s analysis of the continued power of the traditional caste system in contemporary Senegalese society is reinforced throughout the novel. For example, despite his excellent education and impressive political career, even Daouda cannot help but question his own legitimacy. His father, a griot for the family of Mam Lat Soukabé, had once told Daouda that he must remember to stay in his place. “Quelque puisse être ton avenir Daouda, tu dois savoir tenir ton rang.” (32). Now, years later, faced with the possibility of becoming president, he remains “[r]ongé par l’obstacle de sa naissance, sa propre légitimé l’inquiétait.” (191-

10 “En cas de vacance définitive du pouvoir, est-ce que le peuple accepterait d’être dirigé par un homme casté?” (236-237). “Je voudrais savoir si nous sommes mûrs pour une démocratie moderne. Seriez-vous disposé à servir sous les ordres d’un président de la République casté?” (237).
Even the Vénérable, once Daouda’s mentor, friend, and father-figure, allows his own prejudice to show through at the end of the novel saying, “David de la dignité! Sois un noble de coeur au moins pour une fois dans ta vie…” (Sembène 168). Well aware that this was the prime minister’s weakness, Mignane cruelly adds, “David, ne te dérobe pas de tes responsabilités—Sois un Guélewar.” (168).

In their 1995 interview with Ousmane Sembène, Magueye Kassé and Anna Ridehalgh discussed the Wolof caste system in depth. They note that “Le système des castes persiste aujourd’hui, principalement dans l’interdiction de l’exogamie. Un géér [non-casté], par exemple, peut très bien accepter de travailler sous les ordres d’un ñeeño [casté], sans pour autant accepter que sa fille épouse le fils de celui-ci” (Kassé 183).

Thinking back to our discussion of Une si longue lettre, we are reminded that Mariama Bâ directly addressed the issue of exogamy through her characters Aïssatou (a blacksmith’s daughter and thus, a casté), Mawdo (a Guelewar, or noble), and Tante Nabou (Mawdo’s mother). This couple’s disregard for the societal constraints placed on marriage in the form of exogamy eventually resulted in their divorce. For his part, Daouda experienced first-hand the deception of being unable to marry presumable

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11 Often hyphenated, the two names, David and Daouda, are used interchangeably throughout the novel.

12 “Le système wolof des castes est caractérisé tout d’abord par la division en géér et ñeeño (le premier terme désignant le groupe supérieur des personnes libres, le second, la catégorie des artisans et griots). Chacune de ces deux entités était à son tour divisée, les géér comprenant différents ordres: nobles, notables, gens du commun; les ñeeño, subdivisés en castes et sous-castes. Parmi les ñeeño, il y avait les jëf lekk, ceux qui vivaient du travail de leurs mains, de l’artisanat: forgerons, cordonniers, tisserands, etc, étaient en général considérés comme étant supérieurs au sab lekk: ceux qui vivaient de la parole, les ‘artisans du verbe’, autrement dit les griots qui, à leur tour, se subdivisaient en historiens traditionnalistes, laudateurs, musiciens, amuseurs publics.” (Kassé 182)

13 It is interesting to note that this marriage was unacceptable for Mawdo’s mother, yet Aïssatou’s father welcomed her husband with open arms.
because of his caste. Even though his Senegalese fiancée, Madeleine, was Catholic, her parents still opposed their marriage. Although he is not referring specifically to Daouda, Cheikh Tidiane Sall explains this phenomenon.

Les religions ne sont que des superstructures. Elles coiffent, mais ne sont pas les sources de notre culture. La minorité catholique subit l’influence de la culture générale. […] Il y a eu des jeunes filles catholiques qui ont refusé d’épouser des cadres hautement qualifiés à cause de leur lignage…Elles ne refusent pas pour des raisons de différence religieuse, mais plutôt par peur du qu’en-dire-a-t-on. Il est difficile de ne pas reconnaître la permanence et le poids de la tradition (242).

Having once been stung by the constraints associated with his birth, Daouda chose to protect himself by marrying a woman unaffected by caste considerations. His wife, Guylène, is from the French Antilles, and although she is not a casté, she is presumably a descendant of slaves and therefore according to some—including Daouda’s sister—of inferior social class.  

Similarly, Mam Lat’s disgust at the idea of Daouda becoming president of Senegal stems mainly from his perception that Daouda is in some way inferior, because of his birth. Mam Lat says, “Tu es un homme de basse extraction. Inférieur à un esclave. Et tu n’y peux rien… Toi à la tête de ce peuple, mon cul…” (136).

From Guelewar to casté to slave, the social structure seems to be, at least in current practice, a question of class. Interestingly, Kassé and Ridehalgh explain that the caste system was not traditionally a problem of class, but rather of function in the society.

“L’erreur que nous commettons, notre génération, à propos des castes, c’est de ne pas comprendre que ce sont non pas des classes mais des métiers, des corporations.” (Kassé 194). However, since a person’s trade or vocation was often passed from generation to generation, the social structure remained consistent with the traditional caste system.

generation, over time it became more associated with one’s birth than with one’s function. The same phenomenon occurred in many cultures. For example, the English surnames: Baker, Smith, Shoemaker, etc… testify to this one-time link between family and trade in Europe. Kassé insists that viewing the caste system to genealogy reduces the social function associated with it. She says, “Mais les castes, ce n’est pas une question de naissance. On voulait toujours en faire un problème de naissance en réduisant la fonction sociale des castes. […] Nous avons conservé ce qui nous intéressait.” (Kassé 196, italics mine). To make her point, Kassé reminds us that as a journalist—“le chroniqueur, la mémoire, l’historien, l’investigateur—Kad performs one societal function or trade that was traditionally fulfilled by a particular caste through his chosen profession (Kassé 195).

Kassé’s reflection reminds us that history, fact, and tradition are all only as reliable as those who record it, remember it, and/or transmit it. As Renan said, in the process of creating a national identity, forgetting is just as important as remembering. Cheikh Tidiane Sall’s wife, Djia Umrel also comments on this tendency to selectively remember and practice traditions, criticizing those who only uphold African traditions when they serve their needs, but who choose imported European modernity when African customs become problematic for them. She says, “Lorsque l’africaine convient à nos besoins et notre sécurité du moment, nous nous y cramponnons. Mais dès qu’elle nous chauffe, nous brûle, nous nous jetons à l’eau pour aller vers la modernité importée d’Europe. Nous sommes les éternels fuyards de nos réalités africaines.” (Sembène 244).

15 The reader knows that Kad is not a casté, because his girlfriend, Madjiguène says, “Crois-tu que moi, si tu étais casté, je vivrais avec toi.” (222).
For Djia Umrel, labels such as Guélewar, casté, and slave exist for a very important reason: to weave the people together into the fabric of national unity.

Nous connaissons de Chefs d’Etats, des hommes et femmes qui se réclament d’une descendance royale – arrière-petit-fils d’un roi, d’un empereur, d’un grand guerrier. Ces noms glorieux du passé cimentent aujourd’hui notre unité. Cet attachement à la légende confère une identité à cette gloire… qui rejaillit sur le clan, la tribu. Les griots sont là pour tailler dans le tissu social, les gestes et faits nourrissant la fierté et la gloire. Un peuple a besoin de ces labels, ces estampilles. (243-244)

Through her words, Sembène reminds his reader of the role of myth and legend in the foundation and perpetuation of a national identity, particularly with respect to the “invention of tradition” as Hobsbawm has said. As we have seen, the social and political preoccupations and critiques offered by Sembène differ dramatically from the celebratory and nostalgic portrait of Africa drawn by Camara Laye in his L’Enfant noir. But it is more than just content that is different in the writing of this second generation. As we have seen with Une si longue lettre, even the écriture is new. In his book, Nouvelles Ecritures Africaines : Romanciers de la seconde génération, Sewanou Dabla asserts this new generation of writers is completely changing the face of francophone literature from Africa, not only by rejecting Negritude’s fixation on the past and focusing on current social and political issues facing their countries, but also by refusing the linear narratives and realism of the first generation. In addition, Dabla argues that these new African novels are infused with linguistic innovations that transform and enrich the French language making it into something new. As we continue our discussion of Le Dernier de l’empire, we will shift our focus from Sembène’s social and political preoccupations to his linguistic, typographical, and paratextual innovations.
I would like to begin with an examination of two very important paratextual elements that set the tone for the novel: the title and the preface, or as Sembène calls it, the *avertissement*. When approaching the novel, the first thing the reader will study is the title: *Le Dernier de l’empire: roman sénégalais*. Different from first generation writers whose choice of title, Dabla points out, was either clearly linked to the novel’s main character, naming or describing the protagonist physically or professionally (*Doguicimi* [1938] Paul Hazoumé, *L’Enfant noir* [1953] Camara Laye, *Le Docker noir* [1956] Ousmane Sembène), or it explained the novel’s content (*Une Vie de boy* [1956] Ferdinand Oyono), and sometimes it did a bit of both (*Soundjata ou l’épopée mandingue* [1960] D.T. Niane) (Dabla 62-65). In contrast, second generation authors tend to use more ambiguous titles that generally raise more questions than they answer. In the case of *Le Dernier de l’empire: roman sénégalais*, the reader is immediately drawn by the reference to empire, particularly since the novel was published 20 years after independence. By referring to the former French colonial empire, as the reader might assume, Sembène makes a strong statement concerning its continued importance in the post-independence era. As the novel unfolds the reader will see that it is also a discussion that he develops throughout the novel, and one for which he offers no conclusions. More enigmatic, is the question of to what or to whom *dernier* refers. In other words, who or what is the *last* of the empire? Even at the end of the novel, the one might argue that a definitive answer to this question remains allusive. However, the most probably response is the doyen, Cheikh Tidiane Sall. Indeed, the reader learns on the last page of the novel that Sall has chosen *Le Dernier de l’empire* as the future title of his
memoirs, and in many ways, he is one of the last remnants of the French colonial empire. With an assimilationist education, Sall considered himself to be French before being African. As Sall points out to his son, Badou, his home is filled with European goods and books, nothing is African. He confesses, “Rien ici n’est un produit de chez nous. Rien de l’héritage de mon père, de mon grand-père” (67). Before independence, he served his adopted country, France, and after independence he continued his service in the new Senegalese administration, one that was still very attached to the former empire. If he is the last of the empire, it is presumably because he is the last one of his generation alive and not in prison or living in exile, who is still capable of serving his country. Indeed, Leon Mignane, his contemporary, has been pushed out of office by a successful coup d’état, forced to leave the country, and live in exile in France.

It is important to note that although Sembène intentionally blurs the line between his novel and Sall’s memoirs by using the same title for each, he does not create a true mise en abîme as he did with his first novel, Le Docker noir. I would like to point out three elements of the novel, Le Dernier de l’empire, that make it impossible for us to confuse it with a memoir. First, a memoir, like an autobiography, is written in the first person. In Le Dernier de l’empire, there is never a moment in the novel when the narrator is not exterior to the action and the narration written in the third person. Second, if the novel were Sall’s memoirs, then the narrative perspective would necessarily pass through him at all times. However, the narrative perspective in Le Dernier de l’empire does not pass exclusively through Sall, but rather, it continually shifts from one character to another giving the novel almost a cinematic feel. Third, whereas a memoir recounts
the public life of a person, often the entirety of a political career for example, the time frame for this novel is limited simply to the events of only a few days from early Friday morning until Wednesday evening. During his time, the reader is witness to the unfolding of a coup d’état from many perspectives, each with limited knowledge of the events. As such, the reader only learns the details of the coup when it is finally explained by Kad to a few other characters at the end of the novel. For these reasons, I argue it would be an error to confuse Sall’s unwritten memoirs with Le Dernier de l’empire.

The last piece of information included in the title, roman sénégalais, is in fact, very informative as it indicates both the novel’s setting and focus. This detail has the additional effect of delineating this novel from those which claim to be more broadly African, and sets the tone for Sembène’s refusal of one pan-African identity as proclaimed Senghor through Negritude. Secure in the certainty that Le Dernier de l’empire is a Senegalese novel, the reader is abruptly destabilized by Sembène’s avertissement. Dabla explains that for this new generation, the preface, (sérieux) avertissement, avant-verbe/etc… often defines “le projet Romanesque nouveau qui a inspiré les auteurs” (69). However, for Sembène, this avertissement seems to function more as a disclaimer with ironic undertones.

Ce présent ouvrage ne veut être pris pour autre chose qu’un travail d’imagination. Notre cher et beau pays n’a fécondé, façonné, que des femmes et des hommes dignes de notre estime, de notre confiance absolue pour être à la place qu’ils occupent même momentanément. Ces femmes et hommes de notre cher SUNUGAL – Sénégal – sont au-dessus des médiocres types campés dans ce livre. Je ne pardonnerai (jamais) à une lectrice, un lecteur, tout comparaison, toute allusion même furtive entre “ces personnages inventés” et nos vaillants concitoyens, dévoués à notre avenir jusqu’à leur mort (d’une manière ou d’une autre). Et n’hésiterai pas à recourir à nos lois (qui sont justes, équitables). “Avertissement de l’Auteur,” Ousmane Sembène (Dernier 6)
Obviously tongue in cheek, Sembène vehemently rejects the many possible comparisons between the fiction of his novel and the realities of his country. In this way, he presumably protects himself from reprisals which could result from his blatant critiques of Léopold Senghor and other former or current members of the Senegalese government. At the same time, the reader wonders if such a protection was in fact necessary for Sembène since Senegal has enjoyed a comparatively high level of democratic freedoms in addition to social, political, and economic stability since independence, which unfortunately has not always been the case for other African nations. Most importantly, I see Sembène’s use of humor as a way for him to critique the blind nationalism and celebratory tone of first generation African writers.

Moving closer to the text, I would like to shift my focus toward the examination of the presence of a variety of typographical forms which Sembène uses in order to enrich the novel. Not studied nearly enough in his estimation, Sewanou Dabla argues “[la materialité brute du texte] constitue à coup sûr l’une des composants essentielles de l’art écrit qui utilise comme la peinture le fait des couleurs et de leurs harmonies, ‘l’objet-lettre’ dans ses formes et ses épaisseurs différentes” (Dabla 73). More than just esthetic devices, these typographical variations help transmit meaning and even convey emotion in the novel. From the conventional uses of italics to the unconventional employment of capital letters, Sembène plays with the text on both visual and linguistic levels. One example is Sembène’s use of bold type throughout the novel for the purpose of dividing the text. In addition to the traditional chapter divisions, of which the novel has 46 and an epilogue, Sembène has also chosen to include 16 temporal references ranging in
specificity from simply the day of the week, “Samedi,” to the precise day, hour, and minute “Samedi/midi trente-huit” (Dernier 145, 219). Dependent upon Sembène’s choice of narrative perspective, these temporal references are important because they alter the reader’s perception of the passage of time throughout the novel. For example, Chapter 1 begins: “Vendredi 6h30” (7). It is the start of the day from the perspective of Mam Lat Soukabé. At that precise moment in time, he has just arrived for a meeting with the President and as yet, knows nothing of the disappearance. However, soon the reader learns that the rest of the ministers have spent the better part of the night in this meeting room. Sembène chose to use Mam Lat as the reader’s first window into this adventure that will take place over the course of 6 days. Not every day is given equal attention or equal length with the first advancing slowly from early morning until well into the evening. During this first day of the crisis, Sembène reinforces the sensation that time is almost at a standstill by meticulously presenting all of the main characters, and by giving the reader a brief history of Cheikh Tidiane Sall’s political life. Indeed, the physical length of each of the novel’s 6 days indicated by the temporal markers throughout the text actually mimic the fluidity of our own human perception of time, with days sometimes passing in an instant, or hours seeming to stretch on for days. Sensitivity to the treatment of time not only enhances the novel’s realism, but also contributes to the text’s filmic appeal.

Bold typeset is not the only typographical variation used by Ousmane Sembène in this novel. Another technique he uses sparingly is capitalization. Most often, he employs it in accordance with conventional abbreviations such as C.I.A., S.D.E.C., or O.L.P. (265,
However, Sembène also uses capitalization in more unconventional ways: for entire phrases, word groups, or for single words that necessitate additional emphasis. One of the most powerful examples in the novel is when Badou held up a sign bearing the message, “NOUS VOULONS NOTRE INDÉPENDANCE IMMEDIATE,” during a speech by President De Gaulle (66). Written in red letters, this explosively divisive political demonstration drove a wedge between father and son that lasted for 2 years. In fact, Cheikh was so angry at that moment with his son he says if he had had a gun he would have killed Badou on the spot.16 Sembène’s choice of typography not only lends realism to the passage by helping the reader visualize the sign held by Badou, but also it physically separates the sentence from the novel’s narrative content by drawing the reader’s eyes to it thereby forcing those words to stand alone on the page. Seen in this way, the phrase takes on a new and more present meaning 20 years after independence. It underscores Sembène’s message that it is necessary to demand immediate independence—economic, political, and cultural—from the empire.

Another example of Sembène’s use of capital letters helps him to convey the insight and importance of Djia Umrel’s words. Destined to be Sall’s wife from the time she was 7 years old, married at age 12, Umrel is very traditional, but also has had a formal French education. She knows when and how to make her point. Sembène’s use of capital letters for Umrel’s words underscores the importance of her ideas. Sembène does not use this technique with any other character, which further reinforces its significance. The first time it appears, is during a conversation between she and Sall

16 “Si, à la minute, une arme à feu avait été à sa portée, il aurait abattu Badou.” (66)
concerning the intervention of French troops on the African continent. In her estimation, Léon Mignane has always acted consistently in this regard and so she says, “Léon est dans ses NORMES” (159). Sall is taken aback and asks her to explain her statement. She repeats herself and then, without restraint, gives her opinion saying, “Votre government – car tu fais partie de ce gouvernement – a toujours été complice de tous les coups fourées sur ce continent.” (159). Knowing that her analysis of the situation was exact, Cheikh understood that, along with Léon, he too was responsible. Later in the novel when Djia Umrel, Sall, and Kad are talking, Umrel expresses the opinion that no one married to a foreigner, man or woman, should be allowed access to positions of power in the government. Although not as severe, Sall agrees with his wife. In response, Kad asks, “N’avez-vous pas peur qu’on vous taxe de racistes” (242, italics mine). The “on” referred to by Kad is swiftly attacked by Umrel. Finding this sensitivity to such an ambiguous pronoun to be ridiculous and a sign of weakness, she says, “Et vous les hommes, très sensibles à ce ‘ON’.” and “La peur du ‘ON’ est preuve de faiblesses de l’élite, et des gouvernements.” (243, 244). Although Djia Umrel is very present in the novel, her role remains secondary to that of her husband. However, Sembène’s intentional insistence on her opinion as demonstrated through these 2 examples gives some insight into the reality of her influence in particular and that of Senegalese women in general, at least in the context of conjugal life. As Umrel herself remarks, “Lorsqu’on sait la force et la douce violence d’une conjointe dans l’action de son époux, one ne discute pas de cette question.” (243).
By far, the typographical variation used most frequently and most variedly by Ousmane Sembène throughout the novel is the italic typeset. One of the most conventional applications of italics is its use for newspaper, magazine, and radio program titles: “Quotidien National,” “Le monde, France soir, Le Matin, La Croix, L’Express,” “Europe soir,” “Agence Europresse,” “Radiodiffusion Nationale,” to name just a few (56, 188, 195, 197, 198). Also italicized are references to elements of popular culture such as Mouloudji’s song, “comme un coquelicot,” as well as the refrain: “Tout le monde aime le samedi soir. Tout le monde…Tout le monde” (210, 262). In a similar vein, the narrator quotes an entire poem, in italics, by the writer, Sembène, and later, makes less than flattering remarks about Sembène during a short discussion of his 1976 film, Xala (208-209, 260). Titles, songs, and poems are all examples of customary uses of italics, but Sembène moves beyond these conventions when he also presents the spoken and written word in this typeset. Sembène not only announces the upcoming change in narration, but also visually shifts to italics in order to present a radio program, newspaper article, or breaking news coming across the wire. Adding realism to the novel, the reader can hear the radio, or see the article. As the novel progresses, breaking news is heard more and more frequently with nothing the first “day” (roughly the first 150 pages), but toward the end of the novel which parallels the end of the crisis the interventions are as frequent as every 20 pages.

Sembène’s also uses italics for Wolof words, titles, and exclamations such as “Guélewar” (261), “Geew” (271), “Cëbu Jën” (340), “Debbo” (89), “Joom Galle” (121),

“Grand-bi” (254), “Ndey San!” (87), and “Maan!” (134) just to name a few. Unlike Amadou Kourouma who revolutionized the “phrase malinké” with his novel, Le Soleil des indépendances, Sembène insists upon italicizing the African linguistic elements in his text in order to obtain an opposite effect. That is to say, Sembène does not want these words to be absorbed into the linguistic fabric of his novel, because he is intent on demonstrating the distance between the language of the country’s elite and the language of its people. Since the focus of this novel is the former, the narrative perspective, and dialogues pass through them. Therefore, examples of the later are less common and are presented as observations rather than interactions. For example, as he was walking home from his office for the very last time, Cheikh overheard a conversation between two men who were on their way to the Mosque for the Friday prayer. Not himself on the way to the Mosque, he is tired and impatient to get home. The narrator tells us, Cheikh overheard everything, “Malgré lui” (88). A sad story, one man tells his friend he has recently lost his wife to breast cancer. With words interlaced with religious refrains, he says, “Implorons la miséricorde d’Allah sur elle, et pour nous ! Nous ne vivons que pour mourir. Elle était atteinte de cancer […] Elle me laisse trois gosses. Mourir à 25 ans. Al lahou Akbar!” (87). In order to show his commiseration with his friend, the second man interjects, “Ndey San!” after each new revelation (87). Feeling a bit guilty about having overheard, the reader is left with the impression that Cheikh feels somewhat removed from his fellow citizens, a feeling which draws him, not only to eavesdrop on this conversation, but also to observe the clothing, the smells, even the teeth of those around

18 “Le manque de pratique de sa foi de lui pesait pas. […] Il se hâta pour rentrer.” (88).
him, just as an outsider might do. With a hint of exoticism, the narrator details for us Cheikh’s observations about one of the men: “Replet, le visage plein, il exhibait des canines chaussées d’or. Tout de blanc vêtu, il portait une calotte triangulaire au sommet de sa tête rasée, et une écharpe en soie négligemment jetée sur ses épaules. Il dégageait une senteur musquée, tenace” (87). In order to reinforce Cheikh’s difference, Sembène gives a description of his colonial style house and European clothes on the next page. Sembène’s use of italics is important in that it helps him to differentiate the linguistic attributes of the social and political elite from those of the people. By keeping Wolof and French separate, Sembène shows the reality of the divide between the two groups, a gap that may be difficult to bridge.

By writing Le Dernier de l’empire some twenty years after independence, Ousmane Sembène shows, as Peter Hawkins explains, that he is concerned with the problem of creating stable and just political and social structures in African countries: the need for genuine economic independence, for freedom from foreign political interference, for a responsible and honest political class; respect for human rights and social justice, even for the poorest members of society, the importance of a freely expressed opposition, the elimination of corruption and the materialist pressures that fuel it. (Hawkins 169)

In the short term, however, Sembène is pessimistic regarding the perpetuation of neocolonialism and the continued intervention of Western nations on the African continent. This is best expressed through Kad’s response to Joom Gallé’s query, “Pourquoi les autres se mêlent-ils de nos problèmes?” (430). To which Kad replies:

La France a surmonté son complexe algérien… Elle interviendra encore en Afrique. L’Amérique s’est guérie du syndrome vietnamien… Europe?... Les memes pays qui s’étaient partagés l’Afrique en 1885 à Berlin continueront sous d’autres formes leur penetration et leur pacification. L’Afrique est l’enjeu de la
Indeed, in his estimation, much remains to be seen. Until then, much remains to be repaired. Sembène portrays the failings of Senegalese democracy as being the result of both internal and external factors, but tends to place more of the responsibility on his own people. He criticizes the use of Negritude and tradition for personal or political gain, just as Mariama Bâ criticized the misuse of religion and tradition for the same reasons. Just as history is embellished and tradition invented, so too, the novel is adapted and transformed to suit the needs of Ousmane Sembène and other writers of his generation.

Shifting from celebration to criticism, we have seen Mariama Bâ’s and Ousmane Sembène’s social and political preoccupations include topics ranging from polygamy and teen pregnancy to neo-colonialism and questions of caste. We have studied their writing, titles, genre, paratexual elements, linguistic and typographical transformations, and found a new écriture that has altered francophone literature from Africa.
Chapter 3

La Créolité and Post-colonial Identity

[N]ous avons vainement tenté […] de chercher refuge dans la normalité close des cultures millénaires, sans savoir que nous étions l’anticipation du contact des cultures, du monde future qui s’annonce déjà. Éloge de la Créolité (Bernabé 27).

In Chapter Two, we discussed the ways in which second generation writers have responded to the homogenizing claims of cultural purity celebrated by first generation nationalist writers, and studied the shift, not only in their preoccupations, but also in their écriture as compared to that of the first generation. We have seen the realities of cultural, social, ethnic, and religious diversity as they are perceived by writers in the post-independence era. In this chapter, we will continue our study of second generation writers by examining two novels through the lens of la créolité: Henri Lopes’s Le Chercheur d’Afriques (1990), and Assia Djebar’s Les Nuits de Strasbourg (1997). Although neither Lopes, nor Djebar have made explicit reference to the concept in regard to their work, we will find that the principles of this movement apply remarkably well to both of these texts. Using the definition outlined in Éloge de la Créolité, and drawing upon Edouard Glissant’s work, Poétique de la Relation, I will discuss these two novels as examples of la créolité, an assessment that is evident in the structure, language, preoccupations, and post-colonial identities contained within both works.
In order to better understand the creole aspects of these novels, I would like to begin by briefly discussing the principle arguments and positions of this movement. In 1989, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant celebrated their post-colonial identities in their work, *Éloge de la Créolité*. In it, they explained that “La Créolité est une annihilation de la fausse universalité, du monolinguisme et de la purété.” (28). Although this notion is generally associated with francophone literary production from the Caribbean, *la créolité* is not limited by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant to one geographical area. They explain, “le processus de créolisation […] n’est pas propre au seul continent américain (ce n’est donc pas un concept géographique)[. Il] désigne la mise en contact brutale […] de populations culturellement différentes” (30). To the extent that *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* and *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* go beyond geographic limitations, one can say that they illustrate a central plank of *la créolité*. Through them, Lopes and Djebar cross national, racial, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and geographic boundaries in order to question assumptions concerning identity in a post-colonial context. What is more, these novels explore each of the five elements of *la créolité* explicated by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant in their work and recalled below.

The first element concerns the infusion of orality within the fabric of the literary text. The trio finds the roots of their literary production in the spoken word. As such, they encourage creole writers to infuse orality into writing in order to regenerate literary creation and produce something new. They explain, “Nous pourrons à travers le mariage de nos sens aiguisés procéder à l’insémination de la parole créole dans l’écrit neuf. Bref, *nous fabriquerons une littérature* qui ne déroge en rien aux exigences modernes de l’écrit
tout en s’enracinant dans les configurations traditionnelles de notre oralité” (36, italics text). Much of this orality has taken the form of proverbs, songs, and stories, all rooted in the traditions and history of creole peoples. The second element of la créolité concerns these traditions, this history, by promoting “la mise à jour de la mémoire vraie” (36). With a desire to expose the real stories hidden behind official colonial history, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant make memory, particularly collective memory their priority explaining: “Notre Histoire (ou plus exactement nos histoires) est naufragée dans l’Histoire coloniale. La mémoire collective est notre urgence” (36-37). Complementing “la mémoire vraie” is the third element of la créolité: “la thématique de l’existence” (38). As Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant explain, “voir notre existence c’est nous voir en situation dans notre histoire, dans notre quotidien, dans notre réel” (38). For them, creole literature must be concerned with lived experiences and the everyday aspects of life. For this trio, nothing is too small or insignificant to enrich their literature. They say, “La littérature créole à laquelle nous travaillons pose comme principe qu’il n’existe rien dans notre monde qui soit petit, pauvre, inutile, vulgaire, inapte à enrichir en projet littéraire” (39). The fourth element accepts modernity’s uncertain identities. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant proclaim, “Il nous faut nous accepter tels quels, totalement, et nous méfier de cette identité incertaine, encore mue par d’inconscientes aliénations” (42). Finally, the fifth element celebrates the multiplicity of languages and the choice afforded the creole writer to use these languages. For Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, “le choix de sa parole” is the most important possession for the creole writer. “Notre première richesse, à nous écrivains créoles, est de posséder plusieurs
langues” (43). These five elements will guide our reading and analysis of *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* and *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* as novels of *la créolité*.

**Le Chercheur d’Afriques**

Beginning with the title of his novel, *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*, Henri Lopes clearly departs from first generation francophone writers from Africa. Indeed, by making Africa plural, Lopes already hints at the *créolité* that the reader will find within its pages. A refusal of one Pan-African identity, one African reality asserted by Negritude, this plurality leaves open the possibility of multiple roots. Different even from the novels we studied in Chapter Two, *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* moves back and forth temporally between multiple pasts situated in the 1930’s and 1950’s, and shifts locationally between multiple sites in France (Nantes, Chartres, Paris) and Africa (village, French military post, island). A text untethered by the boundaries of the African continent, *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* manifests its *créolité* in several ways. Even Lopes’s choice to situate much of the novel’s intrigue in the city of Nantes, a former center of the slave trade, is a meaningful indication of his intention to write a Creole text. Indeed, as Roberta Hatcher points out in her article, “Perpetual Movement and Multiple Identities: The Creolized Imaginary of Henri Lopes’s *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*” (2003), although all the action takes place in Africa and Europe, the French episodes are situated not in Paris, center of French civilization and capital of the Negritude movement; but in Nantes, a former center of the slave trade. […] this slight geographical displacement in fact represents a significant shift, introducing an opening such that the narrative is always one axis oriented towards the Americas. (Hatcher 533).
Lopes even references the city’s past in the novel when his protagonist André says, “Je ne connais pas la ville. Je sais seulement que c’est un ancient port négrier” (Lopes 258). Fleur then takes him on a tour of l’île Feydau, and André explains, “Et elle m’a conduit rue Kervégan, d’hôtel négrier en hôtel négrier” (259). Hatcher argues, the “back and forth cultural flow—from Africa to the Diaspora and vice versa—[…] departs from the familiar narrative of return” (Hatcher 531). In Lopes’s novel, she explains, “The hierarchical, unidirectional, vertical flow of patrimonial transmission is replaced with a horizontal, multidirectional movement with multiple points of contact rather than a single point of origin” (531). In an article that clearly argues for the creoleness of *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*, Hatcher maintains, “Lopes’s novel can be situated alongside contemporary Caribbean writers such as Glissant, Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, and others who engage in the move beyond binary oppositions of Africa and Europe in order to make room for what postcolonial critic Françoise Lionnet calls ‘multiply organized’ subjects” (530).

André is one such subject. With a creolized identity in constant motion, André’s hybridity is also reflected in the structure of the text whose non-linear plot finds its plural roots, its rhizome, in Jazz. It is the novel’s infusion of orality, its incorporation of music and dance, and its multilingual landscape that keeps *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*, like André, in constant motion. As we continue our discussion of this novel, we will first explore examples of orality that fill its pages through linguistic elements, music, dance, and sexual intimacy. Part of André’s daily life, we will also examine these as aspects of “l’existence.” Coupled with this orality will be our exploration of the multiple languages present within the text. We will then study instances of official and unofficial, or
personal history, as well as traditional and collective memory evoked in the text. Here again, we will take a look at Lopes’s treatment of existence in everyday life. Finally, we will examine André’s hybridized, transnational identity, as a central element of this novel.

From the novel’s very first pages, Henri Lopes highlights the importance of orality as a fundamental component of *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*. Opening with a conference given by Dr. Leclerc, André’s father, the reader listens to this “voix bien timbrée” along with André who “savours” the structure of his “exposé” (9). André shows admiration for Leclerc’s speaking ability saying, “Détaché de son texte, l’homme aux cheveux rouges s’exprime comme on voudrait écrire. Sans hésitation ni répétition, il évolute, trouvant la nuance exacte ou le mot juste, avec la facilité et l’élégance des classiques” (9-10). This observation is contrasted later in the novel with André’s inability to find the exact word or nuances in Lingala for his translations of selected poems (Césaire, Senghor, Langston Hughes, Aragon, Damas, etc…). He says, “Cet exercice me fournit l’occasion d’une plongée dans les profondeurs d’une langue dont les secrets nous échappent de plus en plus. Il y a des mots dont l’usage s’est perdu et qui me font défaut pour traduire avec précision le vocable français” (255). Like his father, André too is a natural orator. During a conference he gave in Nantes just a few weeks earlier, André says, “je sentais physiquement mon auditoire. Ma voix retrouvait son timbre naturel, et je me détachais de mes notes” (69). With an uplifting, spiritual resonance, Dr. Leclerc’s words are compared to music. As André explains, “Je reçois les phrases de son discours comme celles d’un morceau de musique envoûtant” (10). André also compares
him to an African in the midst of a speech, observing, “il secoue l’index et gesticule comme un Africain en palabre” (20). Larger than life, Dr. Leclerc seems to be as fiery and powerful as “sa crinière rousse” might suggest (9). André remarks, “Le feu sort de sa bouche, et le tison de sa parole enflamme les cerveaux et les coeurs. Maître de son souffle, la voix de baryton se fait ample et termine sur un morceau de bravoure” (20).

The musical quality of Leclerc’s baritone voice in particular, and by extension of each word, each sentence of his speech, resonates with the novel’s many references to music, rhythm, singing, and dance woven into the melody of the text. Indeed, music is just one aspect of orality, one element of *la créolité* found in this novel. Edouard Glissant brings music and orality together in his discussion of three different types of speech: “directe, ravalée, différée” (Glissant 87). He asserts that “La langue créole a intégré ces trois modes et les a jazzés” (87). Although Glissant uses the word jazz, he does so broadly, allowing it to stand for all types of African and Creole music: “Les musiques nées du silence, negrospirituals et blues, continuées dans les bourgs et les villes grandissantes, jazz, biguines et calypsos, éclatés dans les barrios et les favelas, salsas et reggaes, rassemblent en une parole diversifiée cela qui était crûment direct, douleureusement ravalé, patiemment différé.” (88, italics mine). As we will see, André’s musical tastes are very diverse, which itself symbolizes his créolité. From the vinyl (“microsillon”) records in Vouragon’s apartment, the juke-box at *Le Pot-au-lait*, the nightclub and carnival music, to traditional lullabies sung by Olouomo, André’s nanny, and Ngalaha, André’s mother, Lopes evokes many different types of music. He celebrates American Jazz artists, Charlie Parker (saxophone), Ray Charles (piano/vocal),
Louis Armstrong—Satchmo (trumpet/vocals), Fats Waller (piano), Earl Hines (piano), as well as French singers, Eddie Constantine, Yves Montand, Marcel Mouloudji, Line Rénaud, and others. However, it is Jazz music that takes center stage in Le Chercheur d’Afriques. The Creole music par excellence, Jazz is a metaphor of the novel itself, reinforcing the novel’s multiple temporal moments, and linking Africa, France, and the Americas together through shared popular culture in the midst of ongoing social injustice, political unrest, and war. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the end of the 1900s, Jazz began with the fusion of Ragtime, marching band music, and the blues. Through the improvisation that at once defines it as a unique form of art, and frees it from definition, Jazz continually evolves and changes through its on-going musical dialogues between musicians.

Political dialogues are also found within Lopes’s references to popular artists of the day. Not a political activist himself, Lopes’s protagonist does hint at his political ideologies through his choice of music. André’s interest in current events and politics is illustrated with his references to Paul Robeson and Marcel Mouloudji. A French-Algerian singer and actor, Marcel Mouloudji was a political activist and a militant pacifist. As a result, one biography tells us,

Mouloudji rencontre quelques soucis de censure lors de la Guerre d’Indochine. L’objet de discussion est la chanson ‘le Déserteur’, manifeste anti-militariste écrit et crée par Boris Vian. Quand Mouloudji l’interprète au Théâtre de l’Oeuvre le jour même de la chute de Diên Biên Phu, cela provoque un scandale et il devient la cible des censeurs et des politiques.¹

¹ www.rfimusique.com/siteFr /biographie/biographie_9027.asp

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This censure would not be Mouloudji’s last. Lopes’s references to Mouloudji are numerous, but do not offer the reader much additional information on the artist. In constrast, Lopes writes one entire passage about Paul Robeson, but only mentions him at that moment in the novel. Like Mouloudji, Robeson too was a political activist.

[He] was the epitome of the 20th-century Renaissance man. He was an exceptional athlete, actor, singer, cultural scholar, author, and political activist. His talents made him a revered man of his time, yet his radical political beliefs all but erased him from popular history. […] While his varied talents and his outspoken defense of civil liberties brought him many admirers, it also made him enemies among conservatives trying to maintain the status quo.²

In the novel, André’s discovery of Robeson had a particularly profound effect on him. He discusses his impressions of Robeson’s music in length saying, “Au début, je me laissais porter par la puissance de la voix du chanteur. J’aurais juré avoir déjà entendu ces airs auparavant, en une époque oubliée de ma propre enfance” (94).

Important structurally, as well as for the novel’s intrigue, Lopes’s references to music, specifically Jazz and Caribbean music, allow him to identify with and to further open his text toward the Americas. Moved by the Caribbean music he discovers in Vouragon’s apartment, André says, “Il y a dans la musique de ces terres un rythme, et une manière de dire l’amour-piment, de se moquer d’autrui, de pleurer et de crier la joie, où je me trouve en pays de connaissance. Pas besoin d’interprète. Fermez les yeux, seulement” (30). He finds in a familiar space when listening to this music even though it is not from Africa. In a similar moment, André sings Louisiana Creole right along with Kid Ory on the record player. He says, “Je répétait en choeur le créole de la Louisiane scandé par Kid Ory, conscient que ce que j’entendais et reprenais sans comprendre n’était

² www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/print/robeson_p.html
pas toujours les paroles de la chanson” (34). Although he did not always get the words right, his reference to Kid Ory was important for another reason. Like André, Ory was a mulatto. As André remarks, “Le vieux Kid était un mulâtre. Je ne signalera pas cette découverte à Vouragon. Je connais sa réponse: il n’y a pas de mulâtres; il n’y a que des Noirs et des Blancs. Le reste n’est qu’élucubrations” (34). It is interesting to note that André appropriates Vouragons sentiments later in the novel.

Henri Lopes also creates music with his use of language. For example, the reader notices the African tam tam as it lends rhythm to the novel’s intrigue. In one passage, Lopes writes, “Le tam-tam cogne et insiste pour convier le village à venir s’assembler. Coups, coups, coups. Coups assourdis, mais lancinants. Une, puis plusieurs femmes hululent. Le tam-tam poursuit son roulement démoniaque comme pour convaincre jusques aux sages et aux vieillards de se dresser pour venir damer le sol de la place aux veillées.” (Lopes 103). The repetition of “coups,” along with Lopes’s insistence on the hard /c/ sound in “cogne,” convier,” “comme,” and “convaincre,” alternated with the /s/ sound in “insiste,” “s’assembler,” “assourdis,” “lancinant,” et cetera, punctuates this phrase, giving it rhythm. In another example, Lopes recreates the spiraling sensation, originally produced by Charlie Parker’s saxophone. He alternates the /a/, /s/, and /l/ sounds throughout the following sentence: “Le saxo de Charlie Parker avait lancé dans la pièce un serpentin musical, glissant, filant, tournoyant à vive allure pour repartir, insaisissable, dans une spirale de fusée.” (33, italics mine).

Intrinsically linked to music and rhythm, dance is also an important element in this novel. From the traditional dances of his childhood, to the waltzes, tangos, mambos,
and swing André dances in Vouragon’s apartment, at the nightclub, and during Mardi Gras, dance also moves this text imbuing it with Creole rhythm. The importance of dance to the acquisition of traditional culture is underscored when André remembers the night of traditional dancing he almost missed, because his mother wanted him to go to bed. His aunts protested saying, “Laisse-le danser. Laisse-le introduire le pas de la tribu dans son corps. Laisse faire la nature et la force du rythme pour qu’une fois à Mpoto il n’oublie ni l’odeur de la peau noire ni ses soeurs qui dorment sur la natte. *Eh, Kongo gbwa! Eh, Kongo gbwa! Eh, Kongo, Kongo gbwa yaho!*” (104, italics text).³ In another passage, the reader sees André moved to dance by island music. He explains, “Je me levai, une main sur le nombril, l’autre enserrant une cavalière imaginaire. Je fermais les yeux, les rouvrais en regardant le ciel, et poussais le soupir du délice. […] Je frappais dans mes mains, lâchais ma cavalière et me mettais à déployer ma virtuosité des jours de grandes compétitions!” (30). Another time, André dances with a real, not imaginary, partner. Recounting the tango he danced with Fleur at the nightclub during his first stay in Nantes, he places the accent on the sensuality of the moment. Reliving the moment, André writes,

> Une jambe entre celles de Fleur. La sienne entre les miennes, moi capitaine délicat, elle pirogue fendant le courant, moi cavalier, elle monture anticipant mes fantasies […] La danse était tiède, désaltérante, comme un bain de source pure. […] Les mouvements de la danse conduisaient nos corps à s’enchâsser toujours plus l’un dans l’autre. Je sentais son souffle et son corps de ballerine qui se moulait contre ma poitrine, mon ventre et mes cuisses. (156-157)

Clearly linked to dance, sexual intimacy returns several times throughout the novel. For example, Lopes describes at length his memory of the first time André made love to

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³ *Mpoto = Europe*
Kani, comparing it to art in many forms. “Nul sculpteur ne saurait polir les formes de son corps de reine, dilaté par le désir” (100). “Quels dieux surent, dans ces instants brûlants, guider mes doigts pour reconstituer les gestes du pianiste faisant monter les volutes de la mélodie sacrée?” (101). Even when Kani reaches her sexual climax, her pleasure is interpreted through art. “Et la voix qui poussait ce cri de victoire avait le timbre des chanteuses de jazz à la fin des cantiques” (102). There is also his carnival night adventure with the dame au péplos, and finally, his liaison with Fleur. André attributes this sexual appetite to his Gangoulou blood saying, “J’avais honte de la bête en moi, mais, dites un peu, ô vous-là, dites comment se maîtriser? Vous connaissez le sang gangoulou…” (157). Vouragon would say that their aptitude for dance comes from there as well. (43).

Like music and dance, traditional words, exclamations, and proverbs also lend rhythm to the text. This is particularly evident during the frequent exchanges that take place between Oncle Ngantsiala and André. These exchanges often begin with traditional language. As André tells his reader, “[Oncle Ngantsiala] commença par les paroles traditionnelles qui annoncent le début d’un récit” (50). At another moment, André writes, “Dans son chant, l’oncle Ngantsiala introduisait des formules en kigangoulou ancien que je ne comprenais pas, et sa suite répondait par d’autres formules” (165). The conversation then proceeds in a highly structured way, with specific sequencing of coded questions and responses. André explains, “Avant d’entrer dans le vif du sujet, le conteur avait besoin d’une mise en train par échange de formule codées”
The following is an example of one type of coded exchange. It is a consecrated formula for telling stories, the opening of Ngantsiala’s “performance.”

-- Niain!
-- Que je répande ma palabre?
-- Verse, seulement!
-- A vous en inonder?
-- A nous noyer!
-- Tape-là!
-- Tapé!
-- Jusqu’au soleil levant?
-- Jusqu’à épuisement!
-- Cacher la vérité, c’est…
-- Mauvais!
-- Yéhé, héhé, yéhé, héhé!... (53)

Having satisfied tradition, André says, “Et Ngantsiala se mit à égrener le passé” (53).

Traditional words and conventions are not only reserved for conjuring up memories of the past. André recounts his reunion with Vouragon at the train station in Nantes saying, “Puis, comme deux marabouts qui se rencontrent, nous avions longuement échangé les paroles traditionnelles de politesse. Comment se portrait-il?...Et moi?...Sa santé?... Et la mienne?... De grands éclats de rire ponctuaient notre palabre” (14).

Through André’s memories of this exchange with his brother, the reader begins to understand the complexity of his fluid, multilingual reality. “Sans transition, nous passions du lingala au français, pour revenir au lingala, voire à kikongo émaillé de français ou, quelquefois, à un kigangoulou rapiécé de lingala” (14). This fluidity is reinforced and tied to the jazz Vouragon plays on his record player. André continues, “Et tandis que nous poursuivions nos plaisanteries, utilisant indifféremment le kigangoulou, le lingala, le kikongo et le français, il posa avec précaution un microsillon sur le plateau de son électrophone, et j’entendis les notes bleues du Modern Jazz Quartet” (25). Some
might argue that this type of multilingualism is more compartmentalized than the one described by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, since there is no “creole” language at play. However, I would argue that André’s linguistic plurality is testament to his double creole identity, one that is internal to African, and one that resulted from interaction between Africa and the West. We know that phenomenon of cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial mixing did not begin with the slave trade, colonization, nor the European presence on the African continent. Indeed, Africans from different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities have always mixed. For that reason, we can agree that André was already a creole subject in Africa. By virtue of his colonial experience, as well as his multiracial identity, André’s identity has been further creolized in a way that more closely resembles the model outlined in *Eloge de la Créolité*.

Returning to André’s multilingualism, I would like to add that despite the apparent fluidity moving between these idioms, Lopes does demonstrate that the passage between several languages is not always easy. For example, when looking for his father’s address in France, André describes his difficulty when faced with choosing the right listing in the phone book. Because both Ngalaha and Ngantsiala had insisted André’s father’s name was “Suzanne,” André was left trying to figure out his real name. When, during his search, he found three “Leclerc Suzanne,” he was immediately reminded of home, a discovery that left him amused. He says, “J’ai songé avec amusement à Ngantsiala et à Ngalaha. L’un et l’autre n’ont jamais réussi à prononcer César. Ils disent Suzanne” (15). Explaining the problem, André says, “Mais il faut être

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4 “Quel était son prénom? Suzanne, affirment avec constance Ngalaha et Ngantsiala” (208).
habitué aux phonèmes gangoulous pour comprendre ce glissement” (15). Another difficulty he encounters, because of his multilingualism, is that of translation. Given the multiple languages at play in the novel, it is not surprising this problem arises more than once. For example, André talks about writing a ten-page letter in French to Joseph, in such a way that he will be able to translate it correctly to André’s mother. In other words, André has Joseph’s eventual translation constantly in mind while writing to his parents. He says, “j’ai écrit une lettre de dix pages. Une lettre en français où je choisissais chaque mot, chaque expression, en fonction de la traduction que Joseph devrait en faire à Ngalaha” (192). At times, André finds that an exact translation is simply impossible. One example involves the manner in which André addresses his Oncle Ngantsiala. He says, “J’ai du mal à donner à ces préliminaires la densité que leur conférait la langue gangoulou. Ainsi, chaque fois que je prenais la parole, j’invoquais l’Oncle Ngantsiala d’un mot qui n’a pas d’autre équivalent que ‘vieux,’ ce qui, en français, paraît irrespectueux ou vulgaire” (52). So, although these languages each inhabit André, they do not all serve the same purpose or function, nor are they entirely interchangeable. Each language adds a dimension to André’s identity that would be lost without it. Inseparable, André’s multilingualism corresponds to Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant’s definition: “La créolité n’est pas monolingue. Elle n’est pas non plus d’un multilinguisme à compartiments étanches. Son domaine c’est le langage. Son appétit: toutes les langues du monde. Le jeu entre plusieurs langues (leurs lieux de frottements et d’interactions) est un vertige polysémique.” (Bernabé 48). A perfect example of this is during his reunion with Vouragon. André remembers, “Il y avait longtemps que je n’avait plus parlé lingala.
Il fallait, bien sûr, s’extraire d’un profond engourdissement, se délier la langue, se
nettoyer le cerveau, mais au fur et à mesure que les voyelles chantaient et que je
retrouvais l’intonation originelle, les souvenirs de notre commune adolescence se
réveillaient” (22). A part of him, a part of his past was rediscovered when he started to
speak the language of his youth.

Leaving our discussion of orality and multilingualism, we will now explore these
memories as examples “la mémoire vrai,” and “l’existence,” two elements of la créolité
articulated by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant. Resembling an autobiography, Le
Chercheur d’Afriques is written in the first person, and contains detailed memories of
André’s African childhood and later of his search for his French father. In the novel,
André makes reference to Camara Laye’s autobiography, L’Enfant noir, on two separate
occasions. A gift from his girlfriend, Kani, André writes, “Dans le train du retour, j’ai lu
Camara Laye, d’une seule traite” (284). While it is certainly a significant reference given
the autobiographical feel of the novel, Henri Lopes does not follow in Camara Laye’s
footsteps in a few important ways, including choice of genre, structure, and narration.
First, Le Chercheur d’Afriques cannot be considered an autobiography, because it does
not conform to the formal definition we discussed in Chapter Two. Second, in contrast to
L’Enfant noir, a text written with a strictly linear progression from early childhood
through adolescence, Le Chercheur d’Afriques, as I have mentioned earlier, is diffracted
and fragmented, jumping spatially and temporally from one chapter to the next from the
Congo of André’s childhood, to his visits to Nantes, and time spent in various locations
with Kani. Third, Camara Laye presents the events, places, and people in his novel as
ones which have been a part of his own personal experience, at times, his explanations give the work an ethnological feel. In the case of Le Chercheur d’Afriques, Lopes’s narrator, André, primarily recounts personal, and even intimate memories, but he also cites entire passages taken from his father’s ethnological work, Carnets de Voyages, which he found in the “archives du ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer” (26).

For Lopes, the inclusion of this (fictional) historical document is a key component in André’s attempt to understand his father, and by extension, to understand himself. Completely uninterested in history before this discovery, André says,

De cette lecture date sans doute mon premier intérêt pour l’histoire. Auparavent, je trouvais la matière ennuyeuse et ne condescendais à en apprendre quelques dates et péripéties que pour m’éviter des ennuis aux examens. Contrairement aux autres auteurs, Leclerc, dans ses relations, évoquait un milieu familier, et les protagonistes de ses chroniques devaient encore être vivants pour la plupart (50).

César Leclerc’s text is full of examples of living history, and real memory. It pays homage to the details of everyday life, “l’existence” celebrated by Creole writers. One excerpt from Carnets de Voyages justifies Leclerc’s inclusion of what some would call “secondary details. He writes, “Certes, ce sont des détails secondaires que je donne ici, mais qui n’en sont pas moins bons à recueillir; car j’estime qu’il n’est petit renseignement qui ne possède son utilité. Évidemment, tous les Blancs qui habitent cette partie de l’Afrique connaissent les particularités que je signale, et ils trouveront peut-être puéril que j’en fasse mention” (223, italics mine). These elements of real memory and everyday life infused in Leclerc’s ethnological writing strike a cord with his son, and incite André to discuss them with his Uncle Ngantsiala. André says, “J’ai décidé de confronter les témoignages de Leclerc aux souvenirs de Ngantsiala.” (50).
Ngantsiala’s memories gathered from his own experiences, or handed down from past generations also incorporate real and collective memory, as well as many elements of daily village life. When André asks Ngantsiala to tell him about his father, le Commandant, Ngantsiala has this to say, “Interroge le sage Ossibi d’Etoro, écoute les chants des griots de M’Bé, de Makotimpoko, d’Abala, ou de Ngambom’, tous te diront que de Mouroupéen bon comme Suzanne, la mémoire gangoulou n’en connaît pas un seul. Pose la question en kitéké, en kikouyou en kimboisi ou dans la langue des Bamoïs, le même mouvement de tête te répondra” (91, italics mine). Question, listen, ask, these are the words that punctuate Ngantsiala’s discourse. Here orality and memory are interdependent. Culture, history, and language are transmitted from generation to generation through word, hence the importance of not separating mother and child. Ngantsiala says, “L’enfant ne peut quitter sa mère avant que la geste des Anciens ne lui ont ait été relatée en détail, non pas seulement pour qu’il en ait connaissance, mais surtout pour la graver dans l’argile de sa mémoire.” (176). Through oral tradition, the old ways are carved into the clay of a child’s memory. The comparison of memory and collective memory to clay can be seen as quite a contrast to the Western world’s general lack of confidence in memory, often described as fleeting or fallible. It is also a comparison that elevates the status of memory and collective memory to that of official history. At the same time, André does mention one inconvenient aspect of this oral tradition. He explains, “La tradition orale est souvent entourée de brumes. Ainsi est-il difficile de préciser, à partir du témoignage de Ngantsiala aussi bien que de celui de Ngalaha, si, lors de son séjour au Congo, Leclerc était un administrateur (le
Commandant) ou bien déjà médecin” (115). Trying to piece together a portrait of his father, André draws from many sources, Leclerc’s own writings, Ngantsiala’s and Ngalaha’s recollections, and finally, his own memory. Indeed, André remembers the bamboo truck given to him by this father; “Le camion de bambou m’avait été offert par papa,” and he reminisces about the time when his father proudly took him in his arms; “[Le Commandant] m’avait pris dans ses bras avec fierté” (18, 31). He remembers his mother’s special care in preparing his favorite dish, even though his father did not approve. He says, “Elle voulait me préparer du saca-saca à la sardine, nom plat préféré. Elle m’en a donné en cachette car le Commandant ne transige pas sur ce chapitre. Son fils ne doit pas manger téké” (13). He recalls the comfort and security he felt when sleeping on his nanny’s back, tied in a piece of cloth: “Olouomo m’avait serré dans ses bras, puis enroulé dans un pagne sur son dos. Malgré mon âge, elle me portait encore ainsi à cette époque-là. […] En sécurité, je succombais aussitôt au sommeil” (16). But there are also holes in André’s memory and gaps in his own African experience that he has filled, interestingly enough, by reading ethnological sources. The son of a white man, André was circumcised in a hospital, not in the traditional way, yet he is able to tell Fleur about this rite of passage as if he had lived it himself thanks to these texts. André says,

Et je me mis à raconter mon initiation, non pas telle que je l’avais vécue, mais ainsi que je l’avais lue dans des traités d’enthologie […] Ngalaha n’aurait au demeurant jamais permis que le fils du Commandant fût traité à l’indigène et circoncis à la machette. En fait, je suis un circoncis d’hôpital. Mais j’avais besoin de me couvrir de gloire aux yeux de Fleur, j’avais besoin de me rattacher à ma famille de la forêt (282).
This passage calls to mind Camara Laye’s heroic description of his initiation. Only his perspective as participant, rather than observer, excludes the possibility for us to see it as a purely ethnological study. Incomplete, diffracted, fragmented, André’s memory, like the structure of the text also mirrors his identity. It is a Creole identity, an “identité mosaïque” (Bernabé 52).

A multilingual métis born of a red-haired, French father and Congolese mother, André has green eyes and soft black curls. His complexion blurs the lines dividing race, dividing black and white, African, Caribbean, North African, and French. However, from an early age, André finds that transgressing these racial divisions is not without consequences. He explains,

Car, hormis les Bagangoulous pour qui j’étais sans ambiguïté le fils-fils, ce qu’on appelle le fils, les autres me traitaient tantôt de café au lait, tantôt de Mouroupéen, tantôt de Blanc-manioc, les plus grossiers de mal blanchi. Quand tout allait bien, j’étais le frère, mais quand le palabre tournait au vinaigre, alors on m’insultait comme ces fous auxquels les enfants lançaient des pierres. (242).

Angry with his mother, André blames her for his hardship saying, “Si, au lieu de vouloir hisser sa tête plus haut que celle de ses parents, elle s’était contentée d’ épouser un Noir, selon la tradition, je serais même peau, même cheveux que les gens normaux” (239). At the same time, his mother and uncle were also the source of great comfort and strength to him during these difficult moments. He says,

Chaque fois qu’une pierre m’atteint et m’écorche, chaque fois que la salive d’une bouche sale me touche, chaque fois que j’entends l’arrogance et la grossièreté de ceux qui s’imaginent leur sang pur, c’est à tes paroles, Ngalaha, et à celles de l’Oncle Ngantsiala que j’ai recours pour répliquer et reprendre la marche. (182)

Laye talks about the ceremonies of initiation despite the fact that he was sworn to secrecy. He exposes its secrets, forever demystifying the Lion and in the process, taking away some of his power. Laye says, “Il va de soi que si le secret était éventé, la cérémonie perdrait beaucoup de son prestige” (122).
Not only the source of personal trauma, métissage in the colonial context also caused ideological problems for colonial administrations in Africa. André says, “Dans les villages, les enfants métis gênaient. […] [Ils] brouillaient la ligne de démarcation” (178). As a solution, the French colonial administration ordered the rounding up of métis children from all over the countryside, literally ‘ripping’ them from their villages. “Des ordres parvinrent de Brazzaville: arracher de la brousse tous les gamins mulâtres qu’on repérerait dans les villages” (178). In fact, André tells us that Joseph was taken from his mother and village as a result of this policy.

Some 20 years later in the France of the 1950s, the problem is similar. For his part, André is perfectly capable of identifying the various Africans he encounters while in Nantes by their respective national identities (usually from their accent): Senegalese, Sudanese, a Madagascan, Cameroonian, etc…, yet he mentions many times, the difficulty others have in guessing his identity, with some calling him “bicot,” or “bougnoul,” and others wondering if he is from the Caribbean (202, 197). He says, “Même Kani, la première fois me pris pour un Antillais” (37). André is even arrested, because the police suspect he is a “fellaga,” a member of the FLN, an assumption, after reflection, he ideologically affirms: “Quand je lis les journaux, je suis un Nordaf. Quand je traduis Sophocle, quand j’explique les guerres puniques à mes élèves, quand je réhabilite le Jugurtha du De Viris, quand je lis Confucius, Montaigne ou Le Contrat Social, je suis aussi un fellaga. Alors, pourquoi en avoir honte?” (202). However, André does admit being guilty of making similar judgments about the authenticity of other mulattos, confessing, “Ne m’était-il pas arrivé à moi-même de douter de l’authenticité africaine de
tel métis jugé trop clair, aux cheveux trop lisse, ou au français trop châtié?” (38). In the end, André discovers that the color of his skin, does not make him more European, or less African, his identity is not found in this non-color. He affirms, “Métis c’est une création coloniale. Ce n’est pas une race. Il y a les Blancs, il y a les Noirs, il y a les Jaunes, il y eut les Rouges…C’est tout. Métis, ce n’est pas une couleur. Ça n’existe que dans la tête de certaines personnes.” (257).

Henri Lopes expresses André’s complex, hybrid identity through the constant metamorphosis of his name. Born, André Leclerc, he is called Okana when his mother flees with him from his village. Once back home, he is known as Okana André, or as his mother calls him, Okana Andélé. Later, when his mother marries Joseph Veloso, he becomes Okana André Veloso. Opposed to this last name change, this new identity, André explains, “Non, je ne voulais plus changer de nom. Chaque nouvelle identité m’avait traumatisé. Les camarades ne me prenaient plus au sérieux. C’était comme si l’on me demandait, chaque fois, d’avoir honte de ma nature” (242). As an adult in France, he introduces himself as André. However, he tells Fleur she can call him Okana when she mentions her grandfather was also named André. Finally, when he goes to Dr. Leclerc’s office, André invents a new name to conceal his identity: Moïse André Okana (290). Jewish, French, and African, this hybrid name is a reflection of his transnational, Creole identity. This name is significant in that, just a few pages earlier, he affirms his identification and solidarity with marginalized, oppressed peoples around the world saying, “je suis juif. Je suis palestinien, gitan, chicano…” (281). A man with many names, André also has several fathers, each with more than one name. Indeed, his
biological father, César Leclerc, is called “Suzanne” by Ngantsiala and Ngalaha. In addition, he is Dr. Leclerc and le Commandant. He calls Oncle Ngantsiala papa on one occasion and addresses him with a traditional title resembling elder or wise one. Finally, there is Joseph Veloso whose name was originally Velours. Uncomfortable with this constantly changing family tree, André initially protests when he learns his mother will be marrying Joseph saying, “j’était le fils du Blanc! Le fils du Commandant. Pas de n’importe qui. Du Commandant, je vous dis! Du chef des colons! […] Après le Blanc, il y avait eu l’Oncle Ngantsiala!” (239). At this, Ngalaha slaps him, and tells him that Ngantsiala was his uncle, her brother, and not his father. At first she is angry with André, for evoking incest, even unknowingly. Indeed, “Ngalaha n’avait jamais été la femme de Ngantsiala. Est-ce qu’on épouse son frère, dans la race gangoulou? Évoquer l’inceste, même en pensée, c’est appeler la malédiction sur soi” (239). Then, Ngalaha was amused by her son who wanted to make himself blacker than he was. “L’enfant-là veut se faire plus noire qu’il n’est et en même temps décrit la famille à la manière roupéenne” (239). In fact, Ngantsiala had simply stepped in to fill the role of father in the absence of le Commandant. A child with multiple fathers, André is also part of an extended African family with many “mothers.” He is the responsibility, not only of his mother, aunts, and other members of his immediate family, but also of the entire village. As his aunts declare, “–C’est notre fils à toutes! —C’est l’enfant de la famille” (104). André’s multiple paternal and maternal lineages are rhizomatic in nature, a source of his hybrid identity that cannot be rooted in one single origin.
One might also say that André is also a member of another family, the Leclercs. It is a family composed of his father, César, his stepmother, “Michèle Morgan,” and his half-sister, Fleur. André even calls his French parents “papa” and “maman” one time, as he was leaving them the first and last time they met. “Tous deux m’ont raccompagné jusqu’à la porte. –Aurevoir, monsieur. –Au revoir, papa, aurevoir maman.” (295). Seeing the surprise on “Michèle Morgan’s” face, André explains, “…Dans ma langue, les mots monsieur et madame n’existent pas. On appelle papa et maman tous ceux de la génération de nos parents” (295). At that point, it seems that Dr. Leclerc knows that André is his son, but Fleur and “Michèle Morgan” never discover the truth. André himself did not know that Fleur was his sister until after his first visit to Nantes. Since he was separated from his father at a very young age, he does not know his family, and unintentionally has an incestuous relationship with Fleur. The two are brought together by fate, drawn to one another instinctively, but it is Fleur who pursues André. Disguised as Judex, wearing a mask and a wig to hide her red hair, Fleur seductively takes André captive at sword point, refusing to speak or show her face until they had finished making love. Unaware that she is his sister, André leaves Nantes the following day and becomes ill on the train. Once home in Chartres, he discovers Fleur’s true identity and is overcome with nausea. Roberta Hatcher points out the similarities between André’s story and that of Oedipus saying,

While in Fleur’s apartment, André leafs through a text by Sophocles an allusion that foreshadows the tragic consequences issuing from the violation of the incest taboo. […] what is interesting from the perspective of André’s story is that Oedipus’s violation is also committed in ignorance, the result of having been abandoned by his father and raised as an orphan, unable as a result to recognize his own family. (Hatcher 541).
The similarity does not end there. Indeed, although André does not marry his mother, he
does seem to have a hand in his father’s death. While at Dr. Leclerc’s office, André had
a special magical object in his pocket that was given to him by Oncle Ngantsiala.
“L’Oncle s’était procuré ce grigri spécialement pour moi auprès d’un marabout du Tchad.
[…] Je serre le sachet magique dans la paume de ma main et mes yeux n’arrivent plus à
se détacher des siens” (293). While there is no indication that André wished his father
any harm, the fact remains that Dr. Leclerc unexpectedly died that night. The incorporation
of the Oedipus myth into the fabric of this text is significant, because it further supports
our demonstration of *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* as an example of a Creole text. Indeed,
Edouard Glissant discusses incest as it relates to the disruption, even “perversion” of
filiation, of the root, of myths of origin (Glissant 70). He asserts, “[L]a violence
intolérante de la filiation était jadis enfouie au mystère sacré de la racine” (74). In the
context of *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*, the incestuous relationship between Fleur and André
serves the purpose of breaking the lineage between father and son, and pushes André to
give up his search for identity in one single root, his biological father, but look for it
instead within the multiple relations, the creoleness, that constitute his African reality.

**Les Nuits de Strasbourg**

Que cela ne sera pas un souci pour la grande voix de l’Europe que l’on parle
breton en Bretagne, corse en Corse, que cela ne sera pas un souci pour le Maghreb
unifié que l’on parle berbère en Kabylie, ou que l’on affirme ses manières en pays
touareg. (Bernabé 51).
Like *Le Chercheur d’Afriques*, Assia Djebar’s 1997 novel is also a remarkable example of *la créolité*. Pregnant with post-colonial, transnational, hybridized, creole identities, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* embodies “l’anticipation du contact des cultures, du monde future qui s’annoncent déjà” as celebrated by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant in 1989 (Bernabé 27). This trio further explains that the contact between cultures was brutal (30). Indeed, the identities portrayed in Djebar’s work are the result of the wars and colonial/post-colonial experiences lived by each of her characters. Interwoven and informed by the memories, maternities, sexual intimacy, and multiplicity of languages within the pages of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, today these hybrid identities constitute the intersection between Europe’s colonial past, its post-colonial present, and its uncertain, but hopeful future. In addition, as we observed earlier, this trio refuses to restrict *la créolité* to predetermined geographic boundaries. Likewise, Djebar refuses to bind her novel geographically. The plot of her novel is not limited to Strasbourg, France, but touches several countries including Germany, Holland, Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar, and the United States, and is situated in several cities including Paris, Algiers, Rotterdam, to name a few. The transparency of these geographic borders within the European context is illustrated when Djebar’s protagonist, Thelja, notes the absence of police or customs agents when crossing the *pont de l’Europe* over the Rhine, a link between France and Germany. “Thelja, qui s’attendait, après le pont de l’Europe, à un contrôle de police ou de douane, et qui en constata l’absence, s’exclama: Me voici en voyageuse clandestine! Je devrais avoir un visa pour entrer en terre allemande…” (197).
As we continue our discussion of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, we should keep in mind the elements of *la créolité* outlined in the introduction of this chapter. Beginning with the histories and memories that transpierce this novel, we will explore “la mémoire vraie” and “l’existence,” the first two of five elements of *la créolité* manifest in this text (Bernabé 36, 38). We will then study Djebar’s treatment of maternity both within the novel’s world, and as it is embodied by the structure and language of the text. For writers of the first generation, mothers and motherhood have been associated with Mother Africa, that is to say, with a point of origin conceived as one single root. However, Djebar continually problematizes motherhood in *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, thereby causing it to stand for the uncertain identities our creole authors discussed, identities which have plural, even rhizomatic roots, a third element of *la créolité*. Throughout our discussion, we will also explore the role of sexual intimacy as it informs these three elements of the novel. Far from gratuitous, the author’s representation of intimacy becomes a testimony to its power, not only to create new life, but also to evoke, explore, and even to recover memories of war, ultimately reconciling and uniting enemies. Finally, we will turn our attention to the last two elements of *la créolité* discussed by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, examining the orality infused into the languages and the *écriture* of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, while at the same time exploring the multilingualism that permeates its pages. In the end, we will discover that *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* is a tapestry of love, conflict, memory, motherhood, sex, and second chances in which the creolization of Alsace and Algeria is completed in Alsagérie.
As we begin our discussion of memory, it will be important for us to consider Ernest Renan’s words concerning the crucial role of forgetting in the creation of a nation, and I would argue, in the formation of both individual and collective identity in the post-colonial context. “Forgetting, I would go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (Renan 11). Indeed, as we explore the memories evoked in Les Nuits de Strasbourg, we are immediately struck by the emphasis Djebar places on forgetting, l’oubli, and we sense that perhaps what is forgotten may sometimes be just as significant as what is remembered. We will explore the different types of memory represented in the novel: collective/individual, official/unofficial, and we will study the process of remembering, including Djebar’s metaphors of wind and sexual climax. In the process, we will also discern what is truly forgotten; what one wants to forget; what one cannot forget; and what one believed was forgotten. In doing so, we will find that Djebar exposes both sides of memory, the remembered and the forgotten, in order to leave her reader no doubt as to the importance of each.

Personal, private, individual memory, represented for example, by the evocation of Thelja’s childhood, is not the only type of memory explored in Les Nuits de Strasbourg. Djebar actually begins her novel by referencing official, historical memory with a reconstruction of the evacuation of Strasbourg in 1939. However, as in L’Amour, la fantasia, Djebar never completely separates these two types of memory in her text. Rather, she intermixes them, and blurs the line separating them. Somewhere between official and unofficial, individual and collective, public and private lies the stories of her characters and countless men and women like them. For example, Eve makes reference
to the Holocaust, “la mémoire” of her people, and connects this memory to her love affair with a German by saying, “Je suis en enfer et en paradis (en enfer pour la mémoire, ‘en paradis’ pour la volupté).” (Djebtat 70). Something she cannot forget, yet is forced to put aside, this collective memory of World War II directly impacts Eve’s personal life. Despite the memory, she has moved to a place beyond. Her transformation is evident in her pregnancy which will leave a legacy for future generations. Indeed, in the case of Eve, her Jewish identity takes precedence over all others (Algerian, North African, Francophone), and links her with all Jews who were deported and killed by the Germans under Hitler’s command. Her existence, in particular her choice of who to love, becomes more important than the official history that attempts to define her life. Another example drawn from the text focuses on François’s memories and knowledge about his father. An advocate for Alsatian autonomy before the war, his father fought for the Germans “malgré lui” during World War II, ultimately dying in a Russian concentration camp (199). A little boy during the war, François did not know the details of his father’s life and death until he made contact with a survivor who knew his father. “Un de ses compagnons de détention a pu me faire renouer la chaîne…Sinon, cela n’aurait été qu’un trou! (il ricana) qu’un gouffre de mémoire plutôt!” (199). Cognizant that most of the information he had been able to piece together about his father’s last years of life until that point had been filtered through the embittered memories of his mother, François’s experience demonstrates that these personal memories are in danger of disappearing, of being forgotten. If they are not shared with others or written down, they will leave holes,
a “gouffre de mémoire” (199). The fate of François’s father did not figure in the pages of any official history book, yet learning his story had a profound impact on François.

Djebbar articulates this link between history and memory most eloquently through the words of Halim who observes, “Nos âmes ressemblent à ces lieux d’histoire et de mémoire: en danger d’être détruits, nous ne voulons pourtant pas nous exiler!” (97). A remark meant as a way of gauging Thelja’s intentions to remain exiled, so to speak, in Paris, Halim’s words also reinforce this fear of forgetting. That is not to say that Djebbar portrays forgetting in an entirely negative light. She is careful to make forgetting as much a part of the fabric of Les Nuits de Strasbourg as remembering, by showing her reader that in the process of forgetting, sometimes only the good remains. This is apparent when Jacqueline’s theater troupe decides they need a name, one that evokes their North African heritage. Someone suggests “le théâtre de la Smala” since it includes one of the more than 2000 Arabic words that have entered into the French language (216). Thinking to herself, Thelja asks “Savent-ils au moins les détails de ‘l’enlèvement de la Smala’ de notre émir Abdelkader?” (217). Today, a word that, for most, calls to mind images of a large, boisterous family, for Thelja, “la Smala” conjures up acts of violence: “un enlèvement,” “un rapt,” “un pillage.” (217). By highlighting the fact that the images of war in relation to this word have all but disappeared in the memories of today’s youth, one might find optimism for the future and the possibility that even a violent past can give way to something good. A transnational memory, it evokes interaction between more than one nation, in this case, violent interaction. As such, this memory is representative of most others, both personal and historical, evoked in Les
Nuits de Strasbourg. Indeed, Djebar moves well beyond specificity with regard to the Algerian war and widens her scope to include the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, World War II, and even, the “affreux massacre—disons le mot—le génocide” committed by the Khmers Rouges in Cambodia (274).6 In his article, “Cultural Memory and the Legacy of World War II in Assia Djebar, Leïla Sebbar, and Tahar Ben Jelloun,” Michael O’Riley highlights the important transnational implication of layering memories from multiple locations of conflict. He says, “Placing World War II in relation to other imperialist moments such as the Algerian War, these authors point to the relational possibilities of cultural memory across national borders” (Dalhousie French Studies 149). One might say then, this layering also serves to reinforce Djebar’s refusal of essentialized national identities, a subject we will develop further in a moment.

Through the experiences of her characters, Assia Djebar explores memory and the process of remembering, demonstrating that profound or emotional recollections often emerge from our subconscious as the result of external stimuli, and offering insight into what elicits these unintended reminiscences. Pulling memories out of “l’oubli,” Djebar’s characters, for example, are often pushed by others to remember with the words “Souviens-toi” returning regularly throughout the novel (57, 115). In another case, a single word, spoken by another, might be enough to trigger a particular memory. Talking about his travels during the years of the Algerian War, for example, François indicates that he spent time in Munich, New York, and Chicago. Hearing the word Munich, Thelja

6 By including the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, Djebar shows empathy with the plight of displaced Alsatians despite the fact that once displaced, many chose to emigrate to Algeria and lived there until they were forced to leave at the end of the Algerian war for independence. She even shows compassion for those of pied-noir origin through her character, Karl. As the grandson of Alsatian immigrants to Algeria, Karl feels at ease in Alsace, considers Algeria to be his true home.
remembers, “comme hier,” a cousin who had lived in Munich and who returned to her village with his German wife and three or four children (56). Reunions between friends might also prove to be fertile ground for recovering memories. Referring to Eve and Thelja, the narrator explains, “Le souvenir d’autrefois redeviendrait scintillant: grâce à leur amitié, autant dire à leur gémellité.” (100). This last word, “gémellité,” which refers to the friends as being twin-like, bring us to yet another stimulus capable of evoking memories: resemblances between two people. For instance, Hans reminds Touma of her son, Ali. During a visit to Eve’s apartment, Touma begins to reminisce about Ali, who was born in Algeria. This, in turn, brings back memories of her village, and eventually, leads her to recount a horrific experience that took place there during the French war with Algeria. With a beautiful metaphor, Djebar likens Touma’s memory to the wind. When her story was finished, the narrator says, “Le vent de la mémoire—d’il y a trente ans—est tombé.” (145, italics mine).

As in L’Amour, la fantasia, music plays a particularly important role in remembering and forgetting in the novel, and is also one way in which Djebar infuses orality into her text.7 For example, although Jacqueline does not talk about her childhood during the dinner party at Eve’s apartment, she does share one aspect of her past, music. She put on a record of Billie Holiday and told the group, “—Ecoutez cette voix […] Elle a bercé mon enfance!” (182). In another example, Djebar creates a mise en abime of memory with a scene where Eve remembers a moment that reminds her of an earlier experience. A bit sad because Hans will not be arriving on Friday night, Eve internally

7 Assia Djebar composed the third part of L’Amour, la fantasia as though it were a musical composition.
remembers their telephone conversation with him, saying, “Tu as donc sifflé les premières mesures de Schubert. Cela a augmenté ma nostalgie” (94). His whistling reminded Eve of the time they spent together in Rotterdam, “C’était l’un de nos passe-temps de gamin, à Rotterdam, les premiers jours, quand nous n’avions pas tellement de mots à échanger: toi, dix mots français, et moi, deux ou trois fois plus…en anglais. Tu sifflais alors; moi, souvent je te suivais en fredonnant. Ainsi, tu fais appel à la complicité du début, de l’année dernière.” (93-94). In another example, Thelja is enveloped by the “douceur de la voix” and the “mélancolie des paroles,” while listening to Moroccan music (107). “[E]lle allait tout oublier peu à peu, sauf cette chandelle qui fondait, sauf la tendresse chaude de la voix, le velours de la langue qui glissait sur l’empreint, en elle de son plaisir récent” (108). She would have forgotten, that is, if Mina had not stopped the music and left her “suspended” in the silence (108). In this case, the music was powerful enough to begin washing away her memory of last evening’s intimate pleasure, washing away everything except what surrounded her at that moment: the warm tenderness of the voice and the melting candle.

The evocative sexual imagery from the preceding passage leaves no question as to the centrality of intimacy in Djebar’s text, particularly as it is related to memory. Indeed, sexual encounters throughout the novel create intimate spaces where Djebar allows memories to flow freely, often unintentionally. For example, after a night of making love, François begins to tell Thelja about the Strasbourg of his childhood. The narrator explains that he did so despite himself. “Il parla, sans l’avoir voulu. Il parla de la ville, de sa ville. Il dévida ses jours d’enfant dans Strasbourg d’autrefois.” (121). Another
time, after he and Thelja made love, François seemed to be dreaming as memories from the past began to resurface. “Il rêve dans le noir comme s’il n’avait pas entendu sa dernière repartie: —Non, se souvient-il à nouveau, je n’ai pas fait la guerre d’Algérie.” (55).

Similarly, after a night of intimacy with François, Thelja herself wonders why she is drawn to the past saying, “Pourquoi, ce matin, me laisser engloutir par ce récent passé?” (98). Finally, Djebar vigorously links sexual desire, or more precisely, the yearning for sexual climax, to the overwhelming longing to remember. In the following passage, Djebar uses a powerful metaphor, full of sensual imagery in order to put in parallel these two urges that Thelja must satisfy.

*Elle désira à nouveau se souvenir, comme si c’était hier... Tout le temps de son évocation, son désir à elle affleurait, naissant et latent à la fois, mais elle parla et ses seins gonflés recherchaient les jointures de l’amant, les muscles de son torse, de ses bras, elle parlait [...] pour parvenir au bout de son souvenir aussi pressant que son désir. Elle ne voulait maîtriser pour l’instant que ce dernier, pas le jaillissement, lait de palme inépuisable, de la mémoire d’enfance prête à déborder...* (85-86, italics text, emphasis added)

Wanting or needing to remember, desiring to reach the end of these emerging memories, Thelja controls her desire for a physical orgasm so that she might first enjoy the inexhaustible pleasure of the childhood memories that are on the verge of overflowing. Childhood memories, private stories, recovered memory, all examples of “la mémoire vraie,” are also examples of “l’existence” which Djebar seems to portray as aspects of daily life, sexual intimacy, music, love, memory, nostalgia, even maternity, our next area of discussion.

*A fertile womb, Les Nuits de Strasbourg is a protected space where Djebar nurtures and develops her optimistic vision for the future while remaining ever conscious
of difficulties and challenges both past and present. From ante-partum to post-partum, all aspects of maternity, mothering, and motherhood—both positive and negative—are explored. More than just an element of the novel’s fiction, the centrality of this theme is undeniable as it pervades even the structure, language, and imagery of the text. In fact, Djebar deliberately constructs *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* so that it parallels pregnancy from conception through to delivery. Beginning with the prologue, Djebar situates her novel within its historical context, thereby articulating its moment of conception. A fictional account of events starting with the order to evacuate Strasbourg and continuing until the entrance of German tanks into the city some nine months later, the prologue brings Strasbourg to life as Djebar recounts the exodus of roughly 400,000 people from the city and its neighboring villages in September 1939. In addition, the narrator makes reference to the length of time that passed between September 2-3, 1939 and June 15, 1940 when the Germans entered the city, saying, “Plus de neuf mois vont s’écouler sans discontinuer, jusqu’à la fin du printemps suivant” (34-35). Djebar’s reference to nine months, the length of a normal pregnancy, is not arbitrary in that it functions as a precursor for additional maternal imagery to come. Historically the site of conflict, today, Strasbourg is home to the European Parliament, and has become a symbol of peace and unity, and the promise of a vibrant future. Our reading of this novel should reflect the optimism Strasbourg, the “nombril de l’Europe” as Djebar calls it, inspires (350).

The novel’s structure further reflects the stages of pregnancy through its nine chapters, again, a parallel for the nine months of fetal gestation. Beyond its maternal symbolism and structural significance, the number nine also punctuates the novel’s
historical references (1939, 1959, 1989). Nine is also the number of central characters (Thelja/François, Eve/Hans, Irma/Karl, Jacqueline/Ali/Djamila) and the number of languages spoken and/or referenced in the novel (Arabic, French, Alsatian, German, Berbère Chaoui, Moroccan Arabic, English, Latin, Hebrew). Djebar also incorporates at least one example of each art form represented by the nine Muses of Greek and Roman mythology. What’s more, she uses the number nine to mark important moments in time. For example, after being raped, Jacqueline asks Djamila to meet her at 9 am. “Sois à neuf heures au commissariat le plus proche de chez moi: rue de la Nuée-Bleue et rue du Fil.” (332). Again, the number nine is used to mark Jacqueline’s death just a short time later. “Un carillon, de l’autre côté de la placette voisine, sonne la demie de neuf heures, ce mercredi matin” (327). Also significant, Eve reminds Thelja that as a “fillette de neuf ans” she had solemnly sworn never to set foot in Germany (68). Finally, of course, there are the nine nights Thelja spends with François in Strasbourg. Although the

8 Beginning with and returning again and again to 1939 throughout the text, the author situates the novel’s present fifty years later in 1989. This date is also historically significant as it evokes the fall of the Berlin Wall in the reader’s memory (November 9, 1989), and is the eve of the Algerian civil war (1990-1998), still underway at the time Djebar published in the novel in 1997. 1959 is another significant date in the novel. The year of Thelja’s birth, it is the year her father died, and is also the date given to situate Jacqueline’s story about Anne and the taxi, “el Koul en mout,” which means, “si nous devons mourir, nous mourrons tous!” (253).

9 Calliope/Epic poetry (Agamemnon 196), Erato/Love poetry (René Char 168, Louise Labé 274), Euterpe/Lyric poetry (Pindare 255, poésie mystique/poésie classique arabe 295, Schubert La Jeune fille est la Mort 145), Melpomene/Tragedy (Sophocle—Antigone 210-216), Thalia/Comedy (217), Clio/History (World War II, Algerian War), Urania/Astronomy (le ciel/le vide), Polyhymnia/Sacred song (Still nacht 133), Terpsichore/Dance (sexual intimacy). Moreover, Djebar incorporates numerous literary references (Nerval, Hugo, Canetti), music (Maria Callas, La Traviatta, Billie Holiday, Melhoun—La Complainte de la bougie), sculpture (Camille Claudel), painting (Vermeer), and photography (Eve is a photographer) into the fabric of her text.

10 The narrator tells us that it is Thelja who has determined the length of her stay in this city. [E]lle a désiré venir à Strasbourg, mais pour retrouver Eve, ‘celle de Tébessa’, et, bien sûr, pour l’aventure des nuits avec cet homme. A propos de ce dernier, elle a pensé d’emblée ‘neuf jours’, ou plutôt ‘neuf nuits’, comme si les
significance of the number to Thelja is never explained, the reader may find one answer in the timing of her visit to the city, a séjour that will end with the first day of spring. Perhaps Djebar’s heroine, whose name means snow in Arabic, has decided to transform herself into something new, leaving the old Thelja to symbolically melt away. Anticipating her state of mind once back in Paris, Thelja’s internal dialogue with François foreshadows her transformation, her metamorphosis. She says, “je risque de t’oublier, de te renier, je m’oublierai aussi, je me métamorphoserai” (348).

In light of the author’s insistence on metaphors of transformation, birth, and new life, this hypothesis is not only viable, but also it is further reinforced by the novel’s epilogue. Entitled, “Neige ou le Poudroiement,” this passage follows the ninth chapter/night/month, and therefore, is structurally symbolic of labor and delivery. Throughout the novel, Thelja is drawn to the “vide,” the post-partum emptiness left by loss, and the disappearances or deaths caused by war. For example, she is fixated on the destruction of the Abbé of Herrade’s text, Jardin des délices, during a Prussian assault on Strasbourg in 1870. Surprised by this profound fascination with disappearance, Hans asks, “[P]ourquoi s’attarder sur la disparition? Autant dire sur le vide… Pourquoi pas sur ce qui se transforme, sur ce qui s’est maintenu, ou modifié, malgré les guerres?…” (172). Through his words, Djebar clearly reveals her optimism for the future, an optimism made...
possible by her willingness to focus, not on loss and emptiness, but rather on all that
remains, despite war. I would argue that Djebar even transforms emptiness into
something new. The word vide is given a prominent place in the text, opening and
closing both the novel and the epilogue. Indeed, Djebar begins Les Nuits de Strasbourg
with a quote from Forough Farroukhzad, “Tu devins vide de l’echo de la céramique
bleue,” opens the epilogue with Maria Zambrano’s, Les Clairières du bois, “La beauté
fait le vide—elle le crée...Au lieu de néant, un vide qualitatif, pur et marqué à la fois,
l’ombre du visage de la beauté lorsqu’elle se retire,” and closes the novel with “le vide
règne là-bas, debout, un cri dans le bleu immergé...” (9, 379, 405, italics text). Despite
the recurrence of this empty word, Djebar does not dwell on the void. Rather, she
chooses to employ the word vide in a variety of ways. Complex, it is at once vast, heavy,
full, immense, empty, and beautiful. Completing her metaphor of birth, Djebar
concludes the epilogue ambiguously with Thelja’s ascent to the top of the cathedral.

Peu avant l’aube, j’entreprendrai l’ascension, le long de la façade sud, jusqu’au
beffroi; je commencerai à craindre le vertige quand, reprenant souffle, j’entrerai
dans les spirales de la tour octogonale de maître Ulrich, puis à l’intérieur même
de la flèche de maître Jean Hülz, et parvenue aux derniers degrés de l’escalier en
escargot de la lanterne, je braverai le premier vent d’avant l’aurore, immobilisée
en plein ciel, au sommet de la flèche de lumière, immense doigt dressé sur le plus
haut toit de l’Europe. Je ne redescendrais pas: après la nuit et juste avant le jour,
le vide règne là-bas, debout, un cri dans le bleu immergé...(405, italics text)

Some would say a disappearance, this ascension is arguably Thelja’s transformation, her
birth, her rebirth articulated through the cry in the immerging blue.

11 “La ville est immergée dans ce vide; plombée” (18). “La ville et le poid de son vide” (34). “La scène
restait vide” (354). “Devant moi, le vide, un immense vide plein et bleu” (316).
Structurally a metaphor for conception, pregnancy, and birth, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* also contains within its pages extensive maternal language and imagery. Many of the characters, both male and female, are described as being maternal or as having maternal attributes. For example, Touma, the Algerian grandmother who lives upstairs from Eve, looks at Hans with “un regard maternel,” and “un large sourire maternel” lights up her face (140, 144). Irma has a “beau visage maternel” even though she is not a mother (175). Thelja even describes François as maternal saying, “Tu es un homme, et pourtant je te trouve…maternel!” (223). Djebar also uses the consonance of the word *mère* extensively throughout the text. For example, she couples *mère* with *amère* six times and gives the phrase a prominent place as the title of Chapter VII, “La Mère Amère” (273). Another example of this maternal sonority happens when Thelja and Jacqueline are visiting Father Marey to look in his archives on rue Polygone. Jacqueline says, “Donc vingt-sept épouses arabes ou berbères ont traversé la Méditerranée et se sentent comme vous, chère Thelja, des ‘passagères’” (292, italics mine). Thelja replies, “—Je me sens une éphémère…à Strasbourg!” (292, italics mine). And Jacqueline concludes, “—Donc, […] il y a eu vingt-sept éphémères à Strasbourg” (292, italics mine). This repetition of the sounds /ère/ and /mère/ reminds the reader that the novel’s foundation is indeed, the mother.

Of course, there would be no mothers, no maternity without copulation, fertilization, and conception. During their second night together, Thelja tells François about springtime in her oasis. “C’est le temps des amours…pour les palmiers!” (86).

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Thelja goes on to explain how these date palm trees copulate with the help of people, more specifically, “deux ou trois jeunes gens les plus vigoureux” (87). The result of this artificial insemination is the birth of the famous “fruits d’or,” the “Deglet en nour” (“doigts de lumière”) as these dates are called (88). Indeed, the novel is pregnant with many examples of human copulation, i.e. sexual intimacy, but the reader knows that none of these encounters will result in conception. As François remarks, “Tu voudrais faire comme des grimpeurs de palmiers de chez toi: monter là-haut et redescendre, mais sans même poursuivre la fêcondation” (89). Correct in his assessment, the reader learns that Thelja, who has one son, will never be pregnant again. She tells Eve, “Moi, contrairement à toi, […] je ne suis sure que de cela: je ne serai plus jamais enceinte. En arabe, comme c’est révélateur, on dit ‘lourde’! Non, je ne serai plus jamais lourde!” (110). On several occasions throughout the novel, Djebar uses this Arabic euphemism for pregnancy. For example, the female palm trees, the narrator says, “s’alourdiront, au moment des premières chaleurs, des fameux fruits d’or,” and Thelja says, “Eve alourdie s’accroupit à mes pieds” (88, 351). Eve is weighted down, she has attachments in this city and she intends to stay no matter what the future brings. On the other hand, Thelja, Eve’s almost sister, Eve’s double, would like nothing more than to fly away. She is just passing through; she has no attachments here and will not return home, even though she misses her little boy. At one moment, François senses this desire and physically lays on top of Thelja. The narrator explains, “il ne chercha pas à la pénétrer, non, simplement l’alourdir, la meurtrir, lui faire sentir la terre, ainsi que son poids à lui, son corps d’homme de plus de la cinquantaine avec un passé, une histoire, une histoire de terre, de
ville autrefois vidée, de retours, d’accidents. Qu’elle ne s’envole pas, qu’il la marque.” (317). But Thelja’s desire to fly away is neither linked to François, nor to the city of Strasbourg. Rather it is a desire that comes from her past that has already manifested itself in a suicide attempt at age 18. Describing her state of mind at that time she says, “j’avais désiré m’envoler, là, sur-le-champ, pour me dissoudre dans le vide!... Le vide bleu” (318). If she returned home, she explained to François, she would not be able to begin a new life, or as she describes it, “je me sentirais vieille! […] c’est-à-dire sans avenir, sans une seconde vie de femme.” (43).

Thelja, it seems, has rejected motherhood, yet she allows herself to be mothered by Eve who symbolically gives her warm milk and dates. “[Eve] me tend quelques dattes et pose devant moi un verre de lait.[…] Je bois lentement le lait chaud, les dattes sont dans ma main” (351). The dates, of course, remind us of the fertile images from Thelja’s oasis and the warm milk evokes the maternal milk that will feed Eve’s baby, “enfant ni allemand, ni juif algérien, enfant alsacien” (71). As the mother she is, the mother she represents, and the mother she will be, Eve nurtures Thelja even though it is Eve who has lost her dear friend, Jacqueline, just the day before. Named after, and positioned as the mother of all mothers, Eve is the central figure linking all the characters together: Eve and Thelja went to school together; Irma and Eve met at the swimming pool; Eve and Jacqueline are friends; Eve’s neighbor, Touma, is the mother of Jacqueline’s obsessive, and ultimately, murderous ex-boyfriend, Ali. At the same time, Eve’s maternity like all

13 “les seins d’Eve débordent, hors des larges paumes de Hans…—‘Gonflés du lait qui va bientôt arriver, sans doute!’” (156)
the other maternities in the text, is problematic. She, like Thelja, has left her first child, a
daughter, with her ex-husband in Morocco, choosing to forfeit her role as mother. Now
six or seven years old, Selma lives with her father near her grandmother, aunts, and
cousins, and only sees Eve during school holidays. Unable to understand Eve’s decision
to give up Selma four or five years ago when she was only two, Thelja internally
questions Eve saying, “Pourquoi tu le laissais se réinstaller au Maroc avec votre fille,
Selma (deux ans, comment as-tu pu quitter une fillette de deux ans?...)” (62). Eve views
her decision as a sacrifice, one that placed the needs of her daughter above her own desire
to be with her. Selfless, Eve believes her little girl will be better off surrounded by so
many “mothers” in Morocco, than with Eve alone in Europe.¹⁴ That is why, Eve could
confidently let Selma’s aunts and grandmother fulfill the role of mother in Selma’s life.

In this way, Djebar expands the definition of mother to include anyone who
nurtures someone else. In particular, she recognizes the grandmothers who accepted to
become mothers for a second time by raising their grandchildren. We have seen this in
the case of Selma, but Thelja’s grandmother is another example. As Eve points out to
her, “Ta grand-mère a été ta vraie mère, tu vois…” (177). Likewise, Touma has been
raising Ali’s daughter, Mina, for the past three years since her mother left with a
Frenchman. Touma considers Mina to be her daughter. As she tells Hans, “Ali m’a
donné Mina. Mina, ma fille à moi!” (142). Not a grandmother, but also a nurturer,
Jacqueline has become a mother-figure to many of the young actors in the theatrical
troupe she directs. Irma’s situation is more complex with three possible mothers, only

†¹⁴ “A Marrakech, elle a une grand-mère âgée de quarante ans seulement, trois tantes très jeunes et une
dizaine de cousins-cousines! Je serais remplacée dans la profusion! Je pense à elle d’abord!” (63)
one of which she considers to be her real mother. Told she was the daughter of Jewish parents deported from France and killed during World War II, Irma is trying to find the truth about the past. Lack of documentation about her parents has fueled her suspicion that she is, in fact, the daughter of the resistance fighter who claimed to have rescued her, and so, she has decided to pursue her legal right to “la recherche de maternité” (261).\(^\text{15}\) Rejected by her “supposé mère,” Irma at least comforted by her memories of the woman who came to be her mother, “sa mère adoptive, ‘[s]a vraie mère’” (257, 302). Like Irma’s real mother, many of the mothers in the novel have passed away and yet, their continued presence is evoked throughout the text. Eve feels her mother’s presence when she dreams of Tébessa.\(^\text{16}\) François can feel his mother’s presence in her village, in her house, “la maison maternelle,” and in her room (187).\(^\text{17}\) Drawn to these places even as he goes about his daily and weekly routine, he and Thelja can almost sense “la présence de la Mère” (202). Writing “Mère” with a capital M, Djebar further insists on the importance of this mother-figure by repeating the word several times: “ils sont couchés dans la chambre de la mère, dans la maison de la mère” (375). Indeed, almost every character evokes the memory of his or her mother at some point in the novel. And so, along with the maternal structure, language, and imagery of the text, Djebar also incorporates mothers, motherhood, and maternity into the present and past, into the very memory of her fiction.

\(^\text{15}\) “Cette femme, dont vous portez le nom et que vous dites n’avez jamais rencontrée, pourrait être votre véritable mère, pourquoi pas…?” (300).

\(^\text{16}\) “Maintenant, je comprends, ces rêves ont commencé après la mort de ma mère.” (71).

\(^\text{17}\) “Il est donc là au village de la mère; la mère est morte il y a déjà trois ans, ou quatre.” (76).
Up to this point, we have been laying the foundation for this discussion through our examination of Djebar’s use of complex, traumatic, exiled, and emotional maternity and memory throughout the novel, the very foundation of post-colonial, creole identities. Now, as we shift our focus from memory and maternity to identity, we will begin to see that Djebar refuses essentialized national identities by making it impossible for any of her characters to be defined by simple national terms, and by underscoring the novel’s fluid linguistic landscape. Indeed, each character is transnational, and all are multilingual. What’s more, their post-colonial identities always emanate from more than one perspective, with each character representing both colonizer and colonized, conqueror and conquered, exiled and indigenous on some level. The post-colonial identities portrayed in this novel reside in Strasbourg at the crossroads of Europe. Their very existence is testimony to the legacy left by the colonial conquests and wars of the 19th and 20th Centuries. A statement on identity in general, and post-colonial identities in particular, Les Nuits de Strasbourg portrays even European identities as minor, marginalized, and hybridized. In this last section, we will discuss the last two elements of la créolité outlined in the introduction: orality and multilingualism. We have already offered music as one aspect of orality that is incorporated throughout the novel. I would add that all of Djebar’s references to art, music, literature contribute to this aspect of the text’s hybridity. Another facet of this orality, involves the names and the process of naming apparent in the text. From the names themselves, to the question of who can name, and the refusal to name, we will find it to be an important component of orality and an integral part of the identity formation. We will also explore orality through the
religion and religious symbols including a look at the successful and unsuccessful cohabitation of religions in the post-colonial context. Finally, we will examine the multiple languages that inform this text. From the maternal language of childhood to the language of the other, Djebar demonstrates the importance of speaking, hearing, and being heard in the multilingual, post-colonial world.

Given the novel’s extensive maternal imagery, it is impossible for us to ignore the meaningful name of Djebar’s central mother-figure, Eve. The mother of all mothers in Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve fully embodies the maternity her name implies. Djebar also chooses to reinforce Thelja’s lover’s French identity by naming him François. She also chooses a meaningful name for her main character. Thelja, snow in Arabic, disappears at the end of the novel, just like the snow melting away in the spring. Going against tradition, it was Thelja’s mother who named her. A widow, grieving for her husband, she wanted a boy. Bitter, she said, “Elle s’appellera ‘Thelja’ […] car, depuis cette nuit d’hiver où j’ai dû redescendre pieds nus, des heures et des heures dans cette nuit glacée, j’ai tant souffert de mes pieds gelés, brûlés, et cela, pendant toute ma grossesse!” (176). Thelja’s grandmother accepted to name her according to her daughter-in-laws wishes, but affectionately calls her “ma petite Kenza” (my little treasure) (177).

As for Irma, she is not necessarily looking for the meaning behind her name, as she is longing to hear her name spoken by the woman who might be her mother. She explains her desire in this way:

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18 Eve is Hawa in Hebrew. Thelja uses this version of the name several times throughout the novel in reference to her good friend.

19 “elle transgressait les usages, car l’habitude est, chez nous, que ce soit l’aïeule qui décide du nom!” (176).
Que demandais-je à l’inconnue, la renégate: simplement qu’elle dise tout haut mon prénom et mon nom – ou simplement, mon prénom: en français, en allemand, en alsacien! Si seulement, elle l’avait épelé devant moi, combien le bouleversement que j’en aurais ressenti aurait réparé l’essentiel! Elle a cru, la pauvre femme, elle a cru que je lui demanderais le nom du père, mort ou vivant, et les circonstances de ma naissance, de mon abandon par elle… Comme si toutes ces incidences n’étaient pas ‘roman’ inutile et lourd … Or, je ne quétais que mon nom, ou mon prénom, mais repris par sa voix—dans la langue initiale, celle de la naissance, de l’amour, ou tout simplement hélas celle du vide! (304).

This desire to be named is, in effect, equivalent to wanting to be recognized. Naming in this way, is very important and meaningful in the novel to both Eve and Thelja.

Thelja is initially unable to say the name of her lover, but she does not seem to fully understand why, since the war between their peoples ended, as she says, so long ago. She says, “je ne peux dire tout haut, ni même en moi, votre nom…Pourquoi! Si longtemps après la guerre—je precise ‘la guerre chez moi entre les vôtres et les miens’” (78). If we look back to a passage from *L’Amour, la fantasia*, we might better understand Thelja’s inability, or perhaps her refusal to name her French lover. Djebar writes, “ces Algériennes […] ne se protègent pas seulement de l’ennemi, mais du Chrétien, à la fois conquérant, étranger et tabou! […] L’indigène, même quand il semble soumis, n’est pas vaincu. Ne lève pas les yeux pour regarder son vainqueur. Ne le ‘reconnaît’ pas. Ne le nomme pas” (*L’Amour* 69). Thelja’s refusal to name François may be a way for her to protect herself from feelings of guilt and betrayal. After all, François is a foreigner, as she calls him several times, and to make matters worse, he is French, Christian, conqueror, and taboo. Later in the novel, however, Thelja’s inhibition disappears. On the day Jacqueline was murdered, Thelja spent the evening at Touma’s apartment trying to comfort her, then came back to Eve’s where she slept on a chair near the fireplace.
Before falling asleep, Thelja calls out to François saying three times, “je t’appelle” (349). Her insistence on the fact that she is naming him, saying his name, brings her closer to the place where Eve finds herself with Hans. In contrast to Thelja, Eve does not hesitate to “name” Hans, her “dernier amour” as she calls him. In fact, early in the novel, Thelja is astounded when she hears Eve pronounce his name, “Elle a prononcé ce prénom ‘Hans’ […] Eve qui croyait avoir franchi l’impossible, l’interdit fiché en elle depuis l’enfance, Eve ma plus proche, nomme pourtant son amour…” (78). It is a seemingly impossible love because of her religion, an important aspect of her identity.

Jewish, Eve embraces the ethnic, historical, and transnational implications of her identity even as she shies away from the religion itself. Indeed, the only mention of the Sabbath in the novel was Eve’s uncomfortable meal shared with her cousins on Saturday afternoon. In fact, in the novel, synagogue, temple, and Torah are absent. At the same time, Eve mentions her refusal to convert to Islam at the request of her first husband, Omar. Her unwillingness to give up the religious aspect of her identity seems to have been a contributing factor in the failure of her marriage, since Omar considered conversion to be the only tangible proof of love. The ethnic, historic, transnational components of Jewish identity are also discussed in Irma’s reference to writer Elias Canetti’s meeting with a Moroccan Jew who, through his enunciation of the name

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20 “je t’appelle, François. Je te nomme.” (349)

21 “Je ne suis pas convertie à l’Islam lorsque Omar, à Marrakech, le quémandait comme la seule preuve d’amour tangible: une ‘métamorphose’ ironisais-je alors” (67).
Canetti, made Elias truly understand the reality of their common ancestry.\footnote{“Souvenez-vous […] combien Canetti est bouleversé quand un Juif marocain, entendant le nom d’Elias Canetti, le redit à sa manière […] le son en langue arabe, pour Canetti, avait reproduit l’exact bruit originel!…” (181).} This encounter shows Canetti that he has more in common with a man whom he had never met, one who speaks a language he does not comprehend, than he does with his fellow Europeans with whom he shares a wealth of culture.\footnote{“Canetti comprend que ce Juif de Marrakech lui est plus proche que tous les Anglais et les Allemands avec lesquels il partage pourtant un trésor de culture…” (181).} Assia Djebar explores the repercussion of one’s religious identity, specifically Judaism, on ethnic, historical, and transnational identity. And although these are consequences she does not deal with in relation to the other religions represented in the novel, Djebar does balance her treatment of religion by referencing worship and prayer in other religious contexts, an element noticeably lacking from her discussion of Judaism. For example, the reader experiences the sights and sounds of the holiest night in the Christian calendar, Christmas Eve. What is more, images of Strasbourg’s cathedral return again and again, eventually ending the novel. As for Islam, Djebar makes reference to Selma, who goes to the mosque to pray with her grandmother, and to Touma, who invokes all the saints of her region in Arabic (67, 244).\footnote{“Selma, à ma place, ira prier à la Koutoubia avec sa grand-mère…” (67).} Although Irma was told her parents were Jewish, she remains unsure of her true identity. There is no mention of her being raised in the Jewish faith, nor of her practicing a religion today. Additionally, she only began learning Hebrew at the suggestion of a college professor, and traveled briefly to Jerusalem just one time. Feeling no connection to Judaism, Irma wonders if she is “une mauvaise juive,” or if she is even
Jewish at all (303). Nevertheless, her lack of certitude concerning her religious identity disables her capacity to construct a durable identity with any certain connection to the past, or even to a national or transnational identity.

Irma, like all of the other characters in *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, is multilingual. She grew up speaking French, learned German, then English, and finally Hebrew. A speech therapist, she is fascinated by voices, specifically “à celles qui se cherchent, à celles qui se perdent, celles qui ont brusquement un trou, comme une maille filée…” (182). It is through these many voices, these many languages, that Assia Djebar seeks to tell the stories of innumerable people permanently transformed by the colonial conquests and wars of the last two centuries. We know that Djebar’s own identity is informed by the linguistic plurality that defines her as affirmed so eloquently in her works, *L’Amour*, *la fantasia* (1985), *Ces voix qui m’assiègent…en marge de ma francophonie* (1999), et *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* (1995), just to name a few. The latter, incidentally, is a text that actually interrupted Djebar’s writing of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*. Primarily a protest against the murders of writers and intellectuals in Algeria during the civil war that raged from 1990 to 1998, *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* is also critical of the Algerian government's nationalistic movement, particularly its attempts at promoting “modern Arabic,” while at the same time restricting other languages in the country. She fears this policy will result in a “monolinguisme stérilisant,” a condition that would deny the true heritage of Algeria, which is and always has been multilingual (*Blanc* 274). The international and multilingual landscape of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, coupled with its overt fecundity can also be seen as Djebar’s continued protest against sterilizing monolingualism of
nationalist movements around the world. Assia Djebar’s own multilingualism is immediately apparent from the first lines of her novel, *L’Amour, la fantasia*. It begins “Fille arabe pour la première fois à l’école, un matin d’automne, main dans la main du père” (11). As a result, this little Berber girl is going to school to learn French, a language that has protected this writer and set her apart. Although Djebar is unveiling herself by writing her autobiography, she is sheltered behind a language that is not her own. She writes, “L’autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction, du moins tant que l’oubli des morts charriés par l’écriture n’opère pas son anesthésie. Croyant ‘me parcourir’, je ne fais que choisir un autre voile.” (243). Read with these novels in mind, the multilingualism of *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* becomes all the more significant. Remembering Edouard Glissant’s assertion that identity and identity formation in the post-colonial context resides in the relation or rhizome, multilingual, multifaceted, and diffracted (Glissant 31).

Every character in this novel is multilingual with most speaking at least four different languages is their daily lives. Although it seems that they shift fluidly between these different languages, there is, at times, a reticence about speaking the language of the *other*, and at times, a desire not to understand the language of the *other*. Mina, for example, speaks Moroccan Arabic with her grandmother and with Eve, and she speaks Alsacian with the local children. However, she refuses to speak French. As for Eve, she protects herself from feelings of guilt and betrayal by refusing to go to Germany, and by refusing to speak German, although she is fluent in the language. It is both powerful and significant when Eve is finally ready to speak to Hans in his language. Using “Le
Serment de Strasbourg” both as a marriage ceremony and as a way to move beyond the antagonisms of the past, Eve asks Hans if he would be willing to recite this oath from the ninth-century, each in the language of the other (235). In his article, “Translation and Imperialism in Assia Djebar’s Les Nuits de Strasbourg,” Michael O’Riley asserts, “Speaking in the other’s language, and the translation such an exercise requires, represents a means of forging cultural alliances despite cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences.” (O’Riley 1241). For Eve, this “serment d’alliance” between Louis and Charles is transformed into a “serment d’amour” for her and Hans. Although this is not a wedding in a religious or civil sense, it does function in essentially the same way, by allowing the couple to swear an oath of loyalty to one another. And so, through the words of two brothers long dead, Eve and Hans promise fidelity to one another “pour l’amour de Dieu” (237). Thelja also expresses the desire to love François in a language that she does not understand “Tu ne parlerais aucune des langues que je comprends...” (224-225). She envies Eve who had that experience with Hans in Rotterdam… 3 days without words, beyond words she says. She also betrays her own prejudice concerning an established hierarchy of languages, “elle l’avait désiré, lui l’homme français, mais dans un parler ensauvagé de l’autre bout de la terre!” (227).

As we have seen, Les Nuits de Strasbourg embodies every element of la créolité outlined by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant in Éloge de la Créolité. From “la mémoire vraie” to “l’existence,” “l’oralité” to plural identities and multilingualism, this
text is a creole novel *par excellence*. Written in multiple, creole locations: Paris and Louisiana, by an Algerian author with a transnational, creolized identity, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* is not limited by geography, language, religion, or war. Rather, it is the optimistic anticipation of the future where the contact between cultures can result in mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.
CONCLUSION

Over the course of this dissertation, my aim has been to demonstrate the existence of a new écriture in the novels of a second generation of francophone African writers that has come into being since the end of colonial rule on the continent. I believe there is no question that over the past 80 years, literature in French from Africa has undergone change significant enough to warrant its division into at least two distinct generations. Once characterized as being nationalist and celebratory, this body of literature contributed to the project of igniting a unified, nationalist consciousness, and celebrating one Pan-African identity in order to gain independence from colonial rule. As we have seen, Negritude was an integral component of this project. Indeed, francophone writers of this first generation knew that until the beliefs colonized peoples held about themselves and about those in power were rejected, there would be no hope of ending colonial occupation and no reason for independence. Therefore, through their works, these writers built a sense of a larger, African community based on a celebrated and shared history, common traditions, similar cultural and religious values, and a proud racial heritage. In general, their audience consisted of African intellectuals and Europeans. As a result, these writers produced literature that Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant call “borrowed,” consisting of “une écriture pour l’Autre, une écriture
empruntée, ancrée dans les valeurs françaises, ou en tout cas hors de cette terre, et qui en dépit de certains aspects positifs, n’a fait qu’entretenir dans nos esprits la domination d’un ailleurs…” (Bernabé 14). Indeed, with a style reflective of their European education, even this generation’s use of the French language seems to have been “borrowed,” rather than “lived” as Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant have advocated (46).

With the fall of European colonial empires and the creation of new, independent states in the 1950s and 1960s, this body of literature underwent a major period of transformation consisting of a dramatic change in the structure, language, imagery, and narration, as well as the social and political preoccupations its texts. In the decade following the end of colonial rule, a new generation of men and women began to voice the disillusionments caused by the many unfulfilled promises of independence. Writers belonging to this post-nationalist, critical phase were not satisfied with Negritude’s exclusivist nature and found issues concerning politics, gender roles, racial and cultural hybridity, and class locations too important to ignore under the guise of creating one monolithic, African identity, or in order to perpetuate the façade of national unity. Mariama Bâ and Sembène Ousmane represent some of the first writers to center their novels on criticisms of anti-colonial nationalism. These authors brought discussions of social justice, freedom of speech, women’s rights, equality of chances to the forefront in their novels. They were critical of the first generation’s celebration of tradition as pure, harmonious, and infallible, and recognized the power of some traditions to repress certain members of society: members of particular castes and women, for example. They also
moved away from the private sphere of Laye’s autobiography and plunged their reader into the public domain. This is particularly true of Sembène. While Mariama Bâ’s main preoccupations include issues concerning marriage, family life, and education, Sembène criticizes political corruption. While Bâ laments the poor representation of women in government, Sembène laments continued Western interference in African politics and economy. Indeed, Hal Wylie remarks that Sembène studies “the key role played by the mass media, especially newspapers, radio and television [and] examine[s] the power of outside nations and economic forces and how debt has come to limit the margin for maneuver.” (Wylie 363-364). Both point to the question of caste as a source of division with Sembène giving a political example and Bâ giving the example of divorce—the rupture of an entire family, the foundation of the nation.

Henri Lopes and Assia Djebar bring something else to this generation through their writing: *la créolité*. Rather than celebrating some distant African past, both authors present a realistic vision of present challenges, including an examination of the difficulties and the richness inherent in post-colonial, hybridized, transnational, and creolized identities. This is coupled with a reasoned hopefulness for a Creole future that Djebar manifests in her celebration of Eve’s maternity. As for Lopes, he finds hope in the space just before independence, in the time preceding disillusionment with the new independent African states. As Roberta Hatcher explains,

> It is notable that *Le Chercheur d’Afriques* should be situated before independence, before the wabling of Africa into nation-states, before the disillusion with independence had set in, before the time of *Le Pleurer-Rire*. By turning with evident nostalgia to this moment, Lopes seems, like the writers of Negritude, to be in search of a more hopeful past; yet, unlike the precolonial history Negritude
tried to revive, this recent history is still living and accessible, embodied in people like Uncle Ngantsiala and Joseph. (Hatcher 542).

Like the métis children who “gênaient” the colonial landscape, so Le Chercheur d’Afriques “gène” the nationalist novel by blurring “la ligne de démarcation” that attempts to define national identities strictly within the confines of artificial, European made, borders. What is more, these authors celebrate humanity and human expression in their exploration of sensuality, sexual intimacy, and through their references to literature, art, and music. In Les Nuits de Strasbourg, Djebar closes the gap between colonizer and colonized through her ability to empathize with Karl. His displaced family fled Alsace in 1870 in order to escape the Prussian occupation of Alsace, only to find themselves occupiers in Algeria, where two or three generations later they were force to leave, forced to return home, so to speak, to Alsace, a place they had never lived.

From different halves of the same Africa, Lopes and Djebar write about the same multilingual reality, the same creolized identity. Although they are both from Africa, these two novels would not normally be studied together, because of their respective geographic (Sub-Saharan/North African) and racial (black/white) origins. However, in addition to the fact that Lopes makes multiple references to North Africa and the Algerian War throughout his novel, saying that he is a “fellaga,” Roberta Hatcher makes the argument that Lopes advocated African solidarity based on its common geopolitical situation, and asserts his opposition to the division of Africa based on, what he sees as, purely racial lines. Using a quote from a speech Lopes delivered in Algiers in 1969, Hatcher writes, “As from now we will no longer be able to define ourselves by race…but by geography and above all, by our common determination which is the best basis for
national and international unity” (532). She explains, “by virtue of being spoken from the location of Algiers, it reclaims North Africa as part of Africa, exposing the conflation of geography and race in Negritude’s equation of Black Africa with Africa” (532).

Finally, their common créolité is further cause for our pairing of these two works.

Like the creolized identities we encountered in Chapter Three, the face of francophone literature from Africa is in constant motion. Indeed, from nostalgic and celebratory in the first generation, to critical, and finally, hopeful in the second, francophone writing from Africa has undergone a significant shift, not only with regard to the preoccupations of its authors, but also with respect to the structure, style, and language of its texts. Without a doubt, these post-independence, second generation, francophone writers from Africa have altered this body of literature, creating a new type of écriture. However, this literature, like all literatures, is dynamic and its transformation is not complete. As we move into the 21st century, we must ask if the criticisms of this second generation have been satisfied. Will their works have the impact of those of the first generation, successful in its goal of ending colonization? Will the writings of authors like Mariama Bâ, Ousmane Sembène, Henri Lopes, and Assia Djebar move those desperate for national unity to understand that state-mandated cultural, religious, and linguistic purity, and monolingualism is not the answer? Will their lessons of tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion be heard?
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Mariama Bâ


Assia Djebar


**Henri Lopès**


**Ousmane Sembène**


