The Violence of Identity Construction in French and Francophone Absurdist Theater

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the way in which the Theater of the Absurd, which flourished between the 1950’s and 1970’s, is especially relevant to a discussion of Postcolonial and regional literature in French because of its preoccupation with the recurring themes of identity, violence, and suicide. Important absurdist authors such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet were able to take the philosophical ideas of the Absurd and of Existentialism proposed by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre and create plays that permitted the struggles inherent in the formation of identity to be borne out on stage. In addition to prominent absurdist authors like Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet, authors like Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini were also exploring these same themes in plays that included the additional elements of post-colonial struggle and regional identity. Most recently, author Marie NDiaye has written plays that not only continue to stage questions of identity, but also show an intricate blend of a more traditional Absurdist Theater form and contemporary themes such as interracial family relationships and the changing attitudes towards race in France.

This dissertation will also demonstrate the ways in which the Theater of the Absurd evolved, analyzing plays that were less radical in form but that nonetheless maintained their emphasis on themes of identity, violence, and suicide, and more importantly, on the techniques used to explore them. In evolving, this genre lent itself in even more ways to a discussion of the characters and situations in Postcolonial and
regional literatures. Césaire’s *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, Susini’s *Corvara, ou la malédiction*, and NDiaye’s *Papa doit manger* show the same concern for questions related to the way in which to look back at the decisions made throughout a lifetime as do the characters in Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Ionesco’s *Les chaises*, and Genet’s *Les paravents*.

Through the exploration of these six authors, this dissertation will show how important elements of identity and conflict in the philosophies of Albert Camus and Jean-Sartre have been and continue to be brought to the stage in ways that surprise, occasionally offend, and encourage spectators to consider the place of the important themes of identity, violence, and suicide not only on the stage, but also in the lives of those portrayed in postcolonial and regional literatures.
Dedication

Dedicated to my wife Amanda, Mme Hanni, Mme Brueske, Dr. Keller, and Dr. Stey
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Introduction

How does the concept of identity link authors as diverse as 16th century English dramatist William Shakespeare and 21st century French playwright Marie NDiaye and literary traditions as diverse as the Theater of the Absurd and the Negritude movement? Even more importantly, why does it matter?

The tradition of the Theater of the Absurd dates back to the Second World War, even if it was not necessarily recognized as a literary movement until coined as such by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and brings to mind authors such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet among others. It also calls to mind plays that defy simple description, as these works have been often criticized for lacking plot, character development, and common sense (Esslin 21). Around the same period, in the mid 1950’s and 1960’s, writers such as Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini were writing novels, plays, and poems that expressed the great difficulty of forging an identity in the midst of struggle. Césaire was at the forefront of the Négritude movement, and Susini was herself attempting to define what it meant to be from the island of Corsica, a fiercely independent region of France. Most recently, in the late 1990’s, Marie NDiaye, a woman of Senegalese and French descent, began writing her first plays about the difficulty of defining one’s identity in a modern French society that was itself wrestling with changing attitudes towards race and interracial relationships. In addition, the end of the Colonial era in Francophone Africa can be situated between the early
1950’s and early 1960’s and was marked by a great deal of violence in the Maghreb region of North Africa. In all of these different periods; in the literature of authors such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Susini, NDiaye, and Césaire; in circumstances as diverse as the end of a war and the end of a period of colonization; the questions of “who am I?” and additionally “who are we?” resonate clearly not only as personal questions but as questions facing entire nations.

The Theater of the Absurd, a term first coined in 1961 by Martin Esslin, is the title given to a style of drama that flourished between the 1950’s and 1970’s, and that even Esslin himself was hesitant to define. It is best summed up when Esslin describes each of the dramatists that he included in his original 1961 printing (Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet) as

an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world. . . . If they also, very clearly and in spite of themselves, have a good deal in common, it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world. (22)

I propose that this genre of theater, while Esslin may have originally spoken of plays and male playwrights of the Western world, is especially relevant to postcolonial and regional literature because of its focus on the themes of identity, violence, and suicide, and the techniques through which these themes are not so much discussed, but rather acted out on stage. I posit that a place should be reserved for Aimé Césaire, Marie Susini and Marie NDiaye alongside those writers originally included in Esslin’s seminal
work. Whereas authors such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre explained their philosophies of Absurdism and Existentialism through essays and plays that emphasized plot and precise language, a play like Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*\(^1\) allows its two main characters to *show* rather than to philosophize their existential angst and absurd existence. While the philosophies of Sartre and Camus often engage thinkers and encourage debate over the subject matter of the Absurd, and issues of existence, the plays directly engage spectators with action and emotion. In a postcolonial and regional context, the plays of Césaire, Susini, and NDiaye function as tools of enactment and engagement, encouraging spectators to connect directly with representations of the Absurd and existence that can be found comingled with issues of race, subjugation, and the difficulty of forming an identity in a postcolonial world.

This dramatization of philosophy is evident in Eugène Ionesco’s *Les chaises* and Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, plays that dramatically represent the feeling of a wasted existence in the short but powerful space of a one-act play. Ionesco’s characters move chairs around the stage for guests who are either invisible or imaginary, wasting both time and energy before ultimately ending their own lives, and Krapp spends an evening preparing to record a tape that he ultimately does not finish. In Jean Genet’s *Le balcon* the tenuous nature of power is explored through the unusual setting of a brothel and the assumed identities of the unsavory characters who frequent it, and parallels are drawn between the nature of domination and submission in a sexual sense and domination and submission in a political sense. These themes of wasted existence, existential angst, and

\(^{1}\) All of Samuel Beckett’s works are cited in the original language of publication unless otherwise noted. The English language translations are all cited from volume 3 of the 2006 Grove edition of the complete works of Samuel Beckett.
the absurd nature of power lend themselves especially well to a discussion of the characters and situations often found in postcolonial and regional literatures. They are able to do this especially well because of how they are used to address concerns of identity that can be applied not only in a personal sense, but also in the context of nation and region (re)building. In the postcolonial Caribbean, questions related to the rebuilding of national and regional identities after centuries of colonization sometimes resulted in violent revolutions and equally violent repression carried out by dictators like “Papa Doc” Duvalier of Haiti (and later his son “Baby Doc” Duvalier) and Fidel Castro of Cuba. Not only in the colonies, but also in the various regions of France, traditions and regional languages handed down over the centuries were often ridiculed by teachers and representatives of the state who employed the use of *le symbole*, an object such as a stone or a baton given to a student who was caught using his or her regional language, in order to shame him or her in front of the rest of the class (Hale 446). Questions of identity and shame were thus comingled with a natural desire to take pride in one’s regional identity, leading to confusion and an existential angst that is often expressed in the plays of the Theater of the Absurd.

The figure of the “outsider” or “outcast,” which has often been a title (a form of identity) given to or self-assigned by individuals native to a regional area or colonial or postcolonial territory, is also featured in many of the plays of the Theater of the Absurd. Aimé Césaire explores the notion of the “outsider” in his plays *La tragédie du roi Christophe* and *Une tempête* through his emphasis on the way race is perceived by both dominant and subjugated cultures. In her play *Corvara, ou la malediction*, Marie Susini introduces the “outsider” in her portrayal of a husband and wife who have been
ostracized from family and former community because of the husband’s decision—made long ago and deemed unacceptable—to leave the priesthood. Marie NDiaye portrays the “outsider” in *Les serpents* and *Papa doit manger* in both a literal fashion where a character is prevented from entering a door, and in a figurative fashion where a character is refused acceptance because of racial prejudice.

While not every one of these plays is “traditionally” Absurdist in its form, it is to be recalled that many authors that are accepted as Absurdist playwrights—Harold Pinter and Edward Albee for example—are so considered because of the thematic content of their dramatic works and the way they use these themes to explore the lives and the identities of their characters. If the themes of identity, violence, and suicide are not the sole property of the Theater of the Absurd, the way in which these themes are used in the plays of the six authors I will be discussing here is unique to the Theater of the Absurd and can also be used to facilitate a discussion of postcolonial and regional literatures.

In this dissertation, I do not intend to add to the already copious list of definitions of identity, but rather to glean from what has already been written and allow the ideas explored by each author as to what makes up the identity of an individual to guide the discussion. Theories of identity construction have already been proposed by thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, and Frantz Fanon in their respective works, and, in this dissertation, I will be citing two of these writers in particular, Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon, and their theories to form a definition of identity as I will be using it. Both of these theorists have ties to the rest of this dissertation; Fanon through Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to his *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) and through his Caribbean identity (that is to say, his colonial roots); Lacan
because of his work on defining identity in terms of the relationship between the “I” and
the “Other” and his acknowledgement of the aggression involved in this relationship.
Each one identifies both the importance of the “other”—a concept that Samuel Beckett
uses many times in his plays—as it relates to the concept of the “I,” and also the
importance of what it means to be perceived as an outsider—an especially salient theme
in Jean Genet’s, Aimé Césaire’s, and Marie Susini’s work. Their particular views of
identity also best represent the literal struggle that are often seen on stage in the plays
discussed in this dissertation.

For both Fanon and Lacan, identity rests on a particular type of relationship that
must include the “other.” Lacan describes the precursor to the formation of identity as
the “mirror stage,” which most infants enter between the ages of 6 and 18 months; it is
during this interaction with a reflection that they begin to form the concept of the “I” as a
distinct person.

L’assomption jubilatoire de son image spéculaire par l’être encore plongé
dans l’impuissance motrice et la dépendance du nourrissage qu’est le petit
homme à ce stade infans, nous paraîtra dès lors manifester en une situation
exemplaire la matrice symbolique où le je se précipite en une forme
primordiale, avant qu’il ne s’objective dans la dialectique de
l’identification à l’autre et que le langage ne lui restitue dans l’universel sa
fonction de sujet. (94)

Later, Lacan speaks of the end of this mirror stage as a moment that

...inaugure, par l’identification à l’imago du semblable et le drame de
la jalousie primordiale (si bien mis en valeur par l’école de Charlotte
Bühler dans les fait de transitivisme enfantin), la dialectique qui dès lors lie le \( je \) à des situations socialement élaborées.

C’est ce moment qui décisivement fait basculer tout le savoir humain dans la médiatisation par le désir de l’autre, constitue ses objets dans une équivalence abstraite par la concurrence d’autrui, et fait du \( je \) cet appareil pour lequel toute poussée des instincts sera un danger, répondit-elle à une maturation naturelle. (98)

Lacan is here describing the relationship between the “I” and the “other” as one of identification, contention, and desire. The identity that will be ascribed to the “I” will emerge from these socially elaborated situations to which he refers, and must necessarily include the “other” and its interaction with the “I.” This will lead to the identity of an individual being defined through a relationship dependent upon the recognition of the “other” or the pursuit of the recognition of the “other,” whether that relationship is aggressive, based on desire, or based on some sort of identification with the “other.” Every “I” feels the need to be recognized by the “other” in a reciprocal relationship.

Fanon also finds a certain aggression in the formation of an “I” and the creation of an identity, although his example involves the interaction of the person of color, in his examples the Antillean, with the white. He begins his discussion of the identity of the Antillean in Peau noire, masques blancs (1952), by giving as an example the traumatized reaction of the Antillean scholar who has been accepted at the Sorbonne and who has just encountered the white French population and realized with a certain amount of shock that he is black (138). Fanon poses the question of how this reaction can be explained and then points to the culturally accepted practice of allowing children to release some of
their aggressive nature through the use of games and illustrated magazines. What he discovers is that

ce sont des journaux écrits par des Blancs, destinés à de petits Blancs. Or la drame se situe ici. Aux Antilles, et nous avons tout lieu de penser que la situation est analogue dans les autres colonies, ce sont ces mêmes illustrés qui sont dévorés par les jeunes indigènes. Et le Loup, le Diable, le Mauvais Génie, le Mal, le Sauvage sont toujours représentés par un nègre ou un Indien, et comme il y a toujours identification avec le vainqueur, le petit nègre se fait explorateur, aventurier, missionnaire « qui risque d’être mangé par les méchants nègres » aussi facilement que le petit Blanc. (139)

Fanon explains that because the reader is supposed to identify with the victor in all of these magazines, the young Antillean begins to identify himself and associate all the heroic actions he encounters with the white, and all that is negative with the black man, especially the black African. Having few or no opportunities to interact personally with the white, the initial moment of contact will suddenly reveal the weight of the myth that the Antillean is carrying around with him. “Le nègre l’ignore, aussi longtemps que son existence se déroule au milieu des siens ; mais au premier regard blanc, il ressent le poids de sa mélanine” (142). This is a crushing realization, because the entire psychology of identity formed by the Antillean or any other colonized subject who has spent his formative years learning about “nos pères les Gaulois” (140) is based on distrusting the black African as representative of all that is backwards and in need of being civilized. Fanon explains the gradual although seemingly paradoxical acceptance of these attitudes
as a direct result of identifying with the white through school and indirect exposure to white culture. “Quand, à l’école, il lui arrive de lire des histoires de sauvages, dans des ouvrages blancs, il pense toujours aux Sénégalais. Etant écolier, nous avons pu discuter pendant des heures entières sur les prétendues coutumes des sauvages sénégalais. . . . C’est que l’Antillais ne se pense pas Noir ; il se pense Antillais. Le nègre vit en Afrique” (140).

For Fanon, as for Lacan, the formation of identity is again based on the interactions that the “I” has with the “other.” It is true that Fanon is speaking of the colonized black subject in this particular essay, but his conception of identity is still based upon the same kind of interaction that Lacan identifies in his essay. There is an aggression and a competition between the “I” that is struggling to define—or re-define in this case—his or her identity, and the “other” who is either consciously or unconsciously viewing him or her with the preconceived notions and stereotypes that have previously been assumed to be true. While Lacan does not speak specifically of stereotypes nor of preconceived notions in the article I cited, the idea of a struggle and a competition is present in his presentation of the “I” and the “other.” Fanon concludes that the black man—he singles out the black Caribbean in the cited example—has the cultural habit of depending on the white man for affirmation. “Le Noir cesse de se comporter en individu actionnel. Le but de son action sera Autrui (sous la forme du Blanc), car Autrui seul peut le valoriser. Cela sur le plan éthique : valorisation de soi” (145).

I am using these specific concepts of identity explored by Lacan and Fanon to establish a baseline by which my particular use of these concepts in this dissertation should be judged. Almost every one of the plays in this dissertation has a clear and
established conflict between the “I” and the “other” that is demonstrated through the action of the play more often than through the words used by the characters, and many of these plays show that the psychological conflict between the “I” and the “other” often becomes violent. These plays also demonstrate, through both actions and words, the concept of the absurd, a definition of which was given by Albert Camus in 1942 in his *Mythe de Sisyphe*.

Albert Camus and his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre are both instrumental figures in solidifying the concepts of the Absurd and Existentialism respectively. While neither can be credited with creating these concepts (although they did create their own versions just like many authors before them), both were able to explain them in writing and more importantly, successfully explain them to a broad audience, setting the stage, literally (or should I say literarily?), for the theater of the Absurd. Both wrote and spoke about philosophies that make their writing vital to an understanding of the Theater of the Absurd, and to the themes of suicide and violence in the works of authors such as Marie Susini, Marie NDiaye, and Aimé Césaire.

Violence and suicide have a prominent place in the Theater of the Absurd and this harkens back to the writing of Albert Camus and his philosophical exploration of suicide in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942). The tendency is also explained by Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) where he points out that the Theater of the Absurd places a great deal of emphasis on showing and not explaining (25). If this genre is understood in this way, the focus on violence and suicide can be explained as a literal acting out of the often violent struggle for identity. Jean-Paul Sartre also becomes an
essential part of this discussion as his explanation of the philosophy of existentialism also tends to place emphasis on the aspect of struggle in the formation of identity.

Sartre’s *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, published in 1946, takes the form of a defensive argument meant to correct misconceptions about Existentialism and those who were adherents to it. The basic idea that “l’existence précède l’essence” (20) is repeated multiple times throughout the essay and underscores the most important aspect of existentialism: one must exist and act (or choose not to act) before one can be defined, and one is only as “good” as one’s last act. Everyone starts at zero. Although this well-known quote is essential to a definition of existentialism as it is understood by Sartre and other existentialist atheists, there is of course more to the argument than this one phrase. Sartre also addresses concerns such as the problem of *mauvaise foi*, human freedom, the relationship between the self and the other, and responsibility. The idea of responsibility becomes a major theme for Sartre, as he believes that every decision made not only affects the person who makes it, but also makes a statement of value for the rest of the world. He calls this *subjectivisme* and from this point of departure, he begins to explain how humans interact with the rest of the world. Sartre, although believing humans to be free beings, proclaims them to be alone, without any excuses, and above all, “condamné à être libre. Condamné, parce qu'il ne s'est pas créé lui-même, et par ailleurs cependant libre, parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait” (37). Although Sartre reaffirms time and time again that we alone are responsible for all of our actions and cannot blame other ideologies, people, or situations for what we become (doing so would be an example of *mauvaise foi*), he does recognize our need for human interaction and our dependence on the “other” for much of our self-worth. Although the
quote is lengthy, it is useful to reproduce it in its entirety so that Sartre's words can be seen in their full context.

Nous voulons constituer précisément le règne humain comme un ensemble de valeurs distinctes du règne matériel. Mais la subjectivité que nous atteignons là à titre de vérité n'est pas une subjectivité rigoureusement individuelle, car nous avons démontré que dans le cogito, on ne se découvrait pas seulement soi-même, mais aussi les autres. Par le je pense, contrairement à la philosophie de Descartes, contrairement à la philosophie de Kant, nous nous atteignons nous-mêmes en face de l'autre, et l'autre est aussi certain pour nous que nous-mêmes. Ainsi, l'homme qui s'atteint directement par le cogito découvre aussi tous les autres, et il les découvre comme la condition de son existence. Il se rend compte qu'il ne peut rien être (au sens où l'on dit qu'on est spirituel, ou qu'on est méchant, ou qu'on est jaloux) sauf si les autres le reconnaissent comme tel. Pour obtenir une vérité quelconque sur moi, il faut que je passe par l'autre. L'autre est indispensable à mon existence, aussi bien d'ailleurs qu'à la connaissance que j'ai de moi. Dans ces conditions, la découverte de mon intimité me découvre en même temps l'autre, comme une liberté posée en face de moi, qui me pense, et qui ne veut que pour ou contre moi. Ainsi découvrions-nous tout de suite un monde que nous appellerons l'intersubjectivité, et c'est dans ce monde que l'homme décide ce qu'il est et ce que sont les autres. (65-67)
Through this quote, it is possible to see exactly where the importance of the “other” lies both for the absurd character and for the colonial or postcolonial subject. The “other” acts as a sort of mirror through which the “I” can perceive itself, although it is nowhere as objective as an actual mirror, but rather requires relationship and communication in order to function. As Sartre points out, the “I” is nothing unless the “other” perceives it as such, and it is this inability to force the “other” to perceive that which we desire it to perceive that causes Garcin, for example, one of the three characters condemned to hell in Sartre’s *Huis clos* (1944), to remark that “l’enfer, c’est les Autres” (93). Frantz Fanon will echo these sentiments about the importance of the “other” in the excerpts reproduced above from *Peau noire, masques blancs*, published only eight years later in 1952. Combining the sentiments of Sartre and Fanon in terms of the importance of the other and also in terms of the internal and external conflict that arises when the post/colonial subject encounters the other in the form of the white oppressor, it is possible to see that a great problem arises for the post/colonized when they depend upon the dominating or powerful other for their identity and come to realize that they are seen as or made inferior by this other at the same time. This idea was certainly not new because Hegel defines this sort of interaction as representative of the Master-Slave dialectic, and I will address this further in a later chapter. These definitions of identity in terms of both the white European subject as examined by Lacan and the Black post/colonial subject as described by Fanon, and the concept of the “I” versus “other” as seen in the works of Lacan, Fanon, and Sartre, are essential to an understanding of the terms and concepts I will be using in this dissertation.
There is an additional element of theatricality that arises from Sartre’s notion that “l’existence précède l’essence” (20). Existence precedes essence and the value is placed on action, a rationale that promotes movement and action over thought (because thought by itself can only be expressed through the acts of speech or writing, and can only be appreciated through the acts of seeing, hearing, or reading) and in this way can be seen to promote theater, and especially the Theater of the Absurd and its value of showing and not just telling. Postcolonial writers like Aimé Césaire put this rationale to use in using the space of the theater to act out the struggle of becoming, of discovering personal and national identity, and to stage the violence that is inherent in the conflict between “I” and “other”.

In much the same way that Jean Paul Sartre laid the foundations for the Theater of the Absurd in existentialism, Albert Camus laid a foundation for it with his explanation of the absurd. Along with the definition of what constitutes identity, Camus’ definition of the absurd will prove useful to an understanding of the Theater of the Absurd and also essential to an understanding of why violence and suicide are often the result of the struggle to form an identity in the face of the other.

What exactly is the absurd for Camus? In *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, the author lays out a foundation for the philosophy:

> Quel est donc cet incalculable sentiment qui prive l’esprit du sommeil nécessaire à la vie? Un monde qu’on peut expliquer même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privé d’illusions et de lumières, l’homme se sent un étranger. Cet exil est sans recours puisqu’il est privé des souvenirs d’une
patrie perdue ou de l’espoir d’une terre promise. Ce divorce entre l’homme et sa vie, l’acteur et son décor, c’est proprement le sentiment de l’absurdité. Tous les hommes sains ayant songé à leur propre suicide, on pourra reconnaître, sans plus d’explications, qu’il y a un lien direct entre ce sentiment et l’aspiration vers le néant. (18-19)

Here, Camus makes the interesting choice of connecting the absurd to both the idea of a homeland (une patrie perdue), and the idea of the stage (l’acteur et son décor). At the time Camus published this essay, in mid-1942, Europe was in the midst of the Second World War. France in particular was an occupied country, and the notion of feeling like a stranger in one’s own homeland was relevant to the majority of the population. The choice to reference theater here is not only poetic, but also ultimately useful in making the metaphorical transition from life to stage and vice versa, and it is interesting that Camus did not hesitate to do so. His wording may cause some readers to think of the Shakespearian quote, “All the world’s a stage,/and all the men and women merely players” (As You Like It 2.7.145-46). At the same time, his choice may shed some light on the way he chose to view himself in the midst of this conflict, as one of many actors in the “theater of war.” This passage creates a fascinating portrait of the tension created by viewing the stage as a homeland and conversely the homeland as a stage. An actor on the stage is not only comfortable with his or her surroundings, but also has an assigned role to play that allows the performance to proceed smoothly. The actor knows his entrances and exits, when to speak and when to be silent, with whom to interact and when. In much the same way, the homeland of a person is (or at least should be) a place where he or she is comfortable with both surroundings and the basic “role” that he or she
has taken, even if life is not as scripted as a staged performance. Still, when these settings are disrupted (perhaps by war or colonization in one instance, perhaps by the end of a theatrical run in the other) the discomfort and reconditioning that becomes necessary create a feeling of loss. Nevertheless, an actor may easily be able to answer the question “What happened?” with “The show ended,” while someone who has experienced the loss of a homeland may not find the questions answered so easily, or at all. If this connection between homeland and stage is looked at from the point of view of the colonized, it takes on an entirely new meaning when the problematic notion of “colony as homeland” is addressed.

It is important to remember that in addition to addressing the white European population which would have read this essay during and after the Second World War, Camus could conceivably have also been writing for the colonized populations of Africa and the Caribbean who had experienced far more of a loss of a homeland and a culture than their European counterparts. Given Camus’ background with Algeria and the Maghreb population, it is more than likely that his essay is written with these populations in mind as well as those among whom he was living at the time. Camus published several essays over the course of his life that spoke directly about the conditions in Algeria. “Misère de la Kabylie,” an article published in 1939 for Alger républicain, a daily newspaper, described the conditions of work and pay for the population of Kabylie, and the famine that was ravaging the indigent population at the time. He clearly sympathizes with the population and their inability to earn enough money to afford food, the inaccessibility of basic education, and the seeming impossibility of attaining an acceptable standard of life. Later in life, he gave a speech condemning the actions of
both the French and Algerian factions of the burgeoning Algerian conflict. “Appel pour une trêve civile,” given on January 22, 1956 in Algiers, condemned the killing of non-combatants in Algeria, while it also emphasized the possibility of constructive dialogue that could cut the conflict short.

Camus’ wealth of articles, essays, and discourses on the subject of the Algerian population make a strong case that he identified with the difficulty of adjusting to the loss of a homeland. Camus, as a “pied noir,” or French citizen of Algeria, would certainly have understood the feeling of loss once the idea of major conflict in Algeria became a certitude, and the sentiment of the Absurd was all too familiar to him.

One of the most stirring statements made by Camus during his “Appel pour une trêve civile” concerns the heartbreak that he experienced at realizing that his homeland was on the brink of war.

Si j’avais le pouvoir de donner une voix à la solitude et à l’angoisse de chacun d’entre nous, c’est avec cette voix que je m’adresserais à vous. En ce qui me concerne, j’ai aimé avec passion cette terre où je suis né, j’y ai puisé tout ce que je suis, et je n’ai jamais séparé dans mon amitié aucun des hommes qui y vivent, de quelque race qu’ils soient. Bien que j’aie connu et partagé les misères qui ne lui manquent pas, elle est restée pour moi la terre du bonheur, de l’énergie et de la création. Et je ne puis me résigner à la voir devenir pour longtemps la terre du malheur et de la haine. (181-82)

Camus had twice experienced the loss of a homeland, once when he was forced to leave Algeria when the Alger républicain folded at the end of 1939 after he had written
“La misère de la Kabylie” (Yédes 44), and once again during the Second World War when he inevitably felt lost in an adopted homeland occupied by German forces. In “Lettre à un militant algérien” Camus expresses once more his attachment to his native land, lending even more credence to his personal experience with the absurd. “J’ai défendu toute ma vie (et vous le savez, cela m’a coûté d’être exilé de mon pays) l’idée qu’il fallait chez nous de vastes et de profondes réformes. On ne l’a pas cru, on a poursuivi le rêve de la puissance qui se croit toujours éternelle et oublie que l’histoire marche toujours et ces réformes, il les faut plus que jamais” (Actuelles III 127). In this statement, it is possible not only to hear the depth of despair that Camus must have felt upon seeing his dream for reform dashed against the nearly inevitable conflict, but also to make out the future sentiments of Jean Genet as they relate to power and revolution. Genet suggests (as I will show in chapter 2) that power is not only illusory and based primarily on appearance, but also ephemeral in that it is easily transferred from one group to another. It is also important to recognize that Camus’ letter includes the pronoun “nous” to show that he truly felt that that he was one with Algeria and its people. It is fully understandable why Camus would have written Le mythe de Sisyphe in 1942, after the divorce between the man and his homeland was finalized by this double loss of a country with which to identify, and reasons for this divorce that seemed to make no sense. This truly seemed to be a personal experience of “le silence déraisonnable du monde” (Sisyphe 44) expressed by the French government shutting down the Algerian newspaper for which he worked and thus silencing the voice of the people, and the seeming senselessness of war that silenced the voices of millions.
The majority of Camus’ essay *Le mythe de Sisyphe* is dedicated to discussing the philosophical question of suicide, and this is significant because there are also a great many Absurdist plays that deal with the question of or the action of suicide. Although neither Samuel Beckett, nor Eugène Ionesco, nor even Jean Genet committed suicide—although Genet tried more than once (White 373, 374, 375, 398, 496-97) and experienced the suicide of one of his long-time lovers (White 471-72)—many of their plays either reference suicide as an option, as in Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*, or include it as the culmination of the action of the play, as in Ionesco’s *Les chaises* and Genet’s *Les bonnes*. Although Camus ultimately rejects suicide as a viable option, his description of suicide as the only “problème philosophique vraiment sérieux” (*Sisyphus* 15) does attest to his preoccupation with it. A great many of the plays discussed in this dissertation, as well as a number of other Absurdist plays, present suicide as a response to the struggle for identity. Almost all of them stage violence in some way, again usually in response to the struggle for identity, and I will be demonstrating how the portrayal of violence and suicide in the plays examined in this dissertation is not only one more way to bring the question of identity back to where I began with a discussion of Absurdism and Existentialism, but also how it is uniquely inflected by the culture of each of the authors examined here.

Camus and Sartre, in addition to formulating key postwar ideas about identity and personal responsibility, are also key to understanding the Theater of the Absurd and the sentiments expressed in many of its plays. Nevertheless, their importance is certainly not limited to the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet, but rather their groundwork allows for a better understanding of many other plays that pose hard questions about existence,
identity, and violence. Sartrean notions about personal responsibility and subjectivisme are echoed in plays like Jean Genet’s *Le balcon* and Marie Susini’s *Corvara* when characters are reminded that their personal decisions and personal actions always have an effect on others. Sartre’s insistence that “l’existence précède l’essence” is borne out in the struggle of many characters to define themselves. Camus’ definition of the absurd is as important to understanding what is being done in the Theater of the Absurd as it is to understanding why it is being done. “L’absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde,” he maintains (*Sisyphe* 45), and in many of the plays explored in this dissertation, there is a desire within a character or characters to find answers that will never be given. It is for this reason that I have chosen to begin and end this dissertation with references to Camus and Sartre.

In chapter 1 I will explore the contributions of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco to the Theater of the Absurd; focus on their discussion of perception, memory and alienation as keys to the formation of identity; and briefly discuss how their exploration of these themes is useful to my analyses of selected plays by postcolonial and regional authors. Both Beckett and Ionesco made numerous contributions to helping define French Absurdist theater as a genre and brought aspects of the philosophies of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to the stage in plays that showed their relevance to human life rather than explaining them through dialogue. Beckett and Ionesco both created plays that emphasized the struggle for identity as both deeply personal and at the same time dependent on the “other,” in much the same way that Sartre describes it in his philosophy, where he insists on the role of the “other” in identity formation. Both playwrights also focus on the portrayal of the Absurd as expressed by Camus and stage
plays that visually present the divorce between “l’homme de sa vie, l’acteur et son décor” (Sisyphus 18-19). I will explore Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Happy Days* and Ionesco’s *Les chaises* and *Le roi se meurt* and examine the ways in which each play portrays the identity of each character through the themes of perception, memory and alienation, and also how each play typified the early French Theater of the Absurd with its recurrent themes and forms.

In chapter 2 I will introduce Jean Genet and his contributions to the Theater of the Absurd through his exploration of the role of the outcast and the outsider in his plays. While he maintains a focus on the themes of identity that were explored in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, his portrayal of outsiders and outcasts also links him to the authors—Aimé Césaire, Marie Susini, and Marie NDiaye—that I will be introducing in chapters three and four. Genet’s view of identity, while remaining personal in nature as it pertains to his characters and their interactions with one another, is at the same time more overtly political in nature than the explorations of identity in the works of Ionesco or Beckett, and also somewhat less abstract in staging and dialogue. I will demonstrate how Genet’s plays represent a transition both in subject matter and presentation style from the sparse, personal dramas of Beckett and the word-driven plays of Ionesco, to the more political dramas of Césaire and Susini, to the contemporary social dramas of NDiaye. I will use *Le balcon*, *Les nègres*, and *Les paravents* in my exploration and show how Genet’s work resonates with many postcolonial and regional literatures.

In chapter 3 I will discuss the plays of Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini, two authors whose plays push the boundaries of the Theater of the Absurd and argue that the genre can be made even more relevant to a discussion of postcolonial and regional
In addition to examining the plays of Susini and Césaire, I will also briefly examine the changing nature of the Theater of the Absurd as a genre and make a case for why the plays of Susini and Césaire that I am discussing here belong to this genre because of the way in which they incorporate themes of identity, fear, and dread to express the existential conflicts of their characters. Césaire’s *La tragédie du roi Christophe* and *Une tempête* use the exploration of the nature of identity in the midst of either a colonial or postcolonial environment to speak back to the empire and present the absurdity of existence through action more than through dialogue. Susini’s *Corvara, ou la malédiction* examines the conflict between the nature of personal responsibility as explained by Sartre in his *Existentialisme est un humanisme* and the nature of personal freedom as proposed by Albert Camus in his *Le mythe de Sisyphe* in a play that opposes a woman whose husband has fled into a snowy Corsican night and the family and former community who rejects the husband for a decision he made long before. I will demonstrate how both authors express the conflicts of identity in much the same way as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco—choosing to focus on the conflict of the “I” verses the “other” and dramatizing existential angst more through action than through words—while lending a distinctly postcolonial, colonial, or regional atmosphere to the drama—a characteristic that links both authors and their work to the later plays of Jean Genet.

Chapter 4 will introduce the plays of Marie NDiaye, the most contemporary of the authors studied in this dissertation. I will show how NDiaye uses the stylistic elements of Eugène Ionesco, notably his use of absurd dialogue and (il)logical thought processes, while at the same time allowing a political awareness like that of Aimé Césaire to show the continuing racial tension that exists in contemporary France. NDiaye’s characters
often retain the status of the outsider, sometimes being forced to stand outside of a door and plead with the person inside to be allowed entry. In *Papa doit manger* and *Les serpents*, plays that stylistically share a great deal with those of Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet, NDiaye has not simply reverted to a style reminiscent of “classic” absurdist theater, but rather has blended together the styles of the playwrights discussed in the first two chapters with a contemporary point of view that makes her work both timely and accessible.

In chapter 5 I will bring the dissertation full circle by examining violence and suicide in several of the plays discussed and showing how these themes are directly related to struggles of identity. I will do this by returning to the concept of suicide as explained by Albert Camus in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* to show how the authors in this dissertation use conflict and violence to express the importance of and difficulty of maintaining an identity in the presence of the “other,” and the result of a failure, either real or perceived, of successfully maintaining that identity. I will also return to Sartre’s belief in personal and interpersonal responsibility as set forth in his philosophy of Existentialism and explain the ways in which the authors in this dissertation appear to have drawn from it in their own works. My focus will be not only on the acts of violence and suicide, but also on the unique techniques by which these authors use these acts to bring the existential angst and absurd tendencies of life to stage with a specific emphasis on the ways that Aimé Césaire, Marie Susini, and Marie NDiaye use both suicide and violence to show the struggles of the outsider and the outcast in a new way.

Although I am not proposing a new concept of identity in this dissertation, I am suggesting that a reevaluation of presently held beliefs about the nature of identity and
identity construction in the Theater of the Absurd can exposes perhaps unexplored ways in which readers and spectators of this genre can look at the portrayal of identity construction in a few of the many literatures of the francophone world. My overall goal is to show how a reexamination of the Theater of the Absurd and its focus on and techniques for presenting themes of identity, violence, and suicide reveals it to be a powerful tool for exploring identity construction and the violence of being in postcolonial and regional literatures. If, as Martin Esslin proposed in 1961, the plays of the absurd truly do renounce talking about the difficulty of life and instead choose to portray it (25), much can be understood from a fresh look at of some of the older plays, and an examination of some newer works by more contemporary authors.
Chapter 1: Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco: A Desire To Be Seen

As I have only briefly discussed the major predecessors of the Theater of the Absurd and their influence on the genre, it is necessary to spend a bit more time discussing two of the most important dramatists whose names are inseparable from the genre itself. Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco are without a doubt the fathers, even unwittingly so, of the Theater of the Absurd. Both men incorporated into their dramatic visions many of the themes that were found in the Absurdist and Existentialist theories of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, especially those themes that related to the identities ascribed to individuals. For Samuel Beckett, the themes of identity and being seem to have been preoccupations that haunted him throughout his career, and they take the form of questions that are not asked so much as they are played out in his dramatic works. Martin Esslin points out that even though it is easy to see the results of this angst, its origins aren’t so easily discernable.

It has been suggested that Beckett’s preoccupation with the problem of being and the identity of the self might have sprung from the Anglo-Irishman’s inevitable and perpetual concern with finding his own answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, but while there may well be a grain of truth in this, it is surely far from providing a complete explanation for the deep existential anguish that is the keynote of Beckett’s work and that clearly
originates in levels of his personality far deeper than its social surface.

(29-30)

In Eugène Ionesco’s work, the theme of identity is approached in a similar fashion, but with more of an emphasis on memory and vision. His characters are often seen laboring to recall seemingly routine information and forcing themselves into feats of mental acrobatics that lead nowhere and are nonsensical at best and dangerous at worst. Through the plays of both authors, the identity and existence of the individual and often of the spectators as well is called into question through the use of staging and dialogue. The audiences of both playwrights are often invited to feel and to experience the drama rather than just understand it, because simply understanding this kind of theater in a strictly cerebral sense is often to miss out on the visceral moments that both playwrights have incorporated into their drama.

To illustrate how the Theater of the Absurd often demands this visceral understanding rather than simply a cerebral comprehension of the written material, I reference as an example the English language production of *Waiting for Godot* that took place at the San Quentin penitentiary that reached an audience via experiential knowledge. Martin Esslin writes about the way in which the prisoners of the penitentiary received the English language production of *Godot*, and describes their reaction as one of understanding, and not of amusement or confusion (20). He continues by posing the question that many must have been wondering after hearing about the success of the production.

Why did a play of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts? *Because it confronted*
them with a situation in some ways analogous to their own? Perhaps. Or perhaps because they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theater without any preconceived notions and ready made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense. (21 italics mine)

This is the first of many examples of how the Theater of the Absurd often successfully speaks to those who have a personal understanding of the situations or emotions portrayed in various plays. Although the ability to create a visceral connection between audiences and actors is not unique to the Theater of the Absurd, the fact that this particular genre of theater is able to do so while at the same time being accused of lacking “plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense” (Esslin 21) is a unique achievement that says a great deal about the power of the absurd.

It cannot be overstated that the Theater of the Absurd represents a dramatic shift not only in the style in which plays were written, but also in the way they were meant to be presented and understood. Returning to Esslin’s description of the genre, “The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images” (25). Plotlines in a traditional sense are often eschewed in the Theater of the Absurd, which isn’t to say that there is no plot, simply that it doesn’t always take the expected form. One need only read the text of La cantatrice chauve to understand that Ionesco’s preoccupation was not with creating characters that made sense, but with creating characters that called into question the function and meaning of language itself, and in so doing changed the
conventional notion of what constituted a “character.” Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* loses something of its fundamental nature if it is not understood that the waiting is itself the reason for the play and that the dissatisfaction of the tramps at the end is not meant to be a conclusion but rather a statement of the reality of their condition. For the convicts in the San Quentin prison, the presentation of a reality that was their reality and the feeling of hopelessness that they experienced that allowed them to identify with the characters were more important than any intellectual understanding of the meaning of the play. For these convicts, and for anyone who is willing to set aside intellectual pretension, this visceral understanding is what is experienced through the Theater of the Absurd.

In order to better explain the ways in which these two playwrights present some of the fundamental themes of the Theater of the Absurd through their plays, I will examine several of these dramatic works and focus specifically on those themes that are also found in the works of Jean Genet. Genet will provide an additional dimension to the Theater of the Absurd and also serve as a way to examine how certain themes were shared by and expanded upon by authors like Aimé Césaire, Marie Susini and Marie NDiaye. Although a narrow definition of the Theater of the Absurd would itself be absurd, limiting the discussion to several key themes that reappear in most of the plays will serve to clarify why exactly an understanding of Absurdist drama can facilitate a better understanding of a certain Francophone literary tradition. Certainly key among these themes is the preoccupation with identity and being. Although identity is a complex concept, if it is itself limited to the definitions given by Frantz Fanon and Jacques Lacan that I presented in the introduction, and the idea of the “I” vs. “other” mentality that is felt and seen on stage in Absurdist Drama, it becomes not only more
manageable as a theme, but also helps to bring certain areas of Francophone literature and culture into focus. Characters in Absurdist plays are often found fighting for an identity which will be accepted and validated by another character in the play, and these struggles have not only created plays that are enduring and poignantly funny on stage, but also, often through metatheatricality, that show the spectator the challenges that come with defining his or her own identity. The second of the key themes in Absurdist Drama is that of isolation and alienation and this theme also has direct ties to much of Francophone literature. Within the Theater of the Absurd, this multifaceted theme has been used as a way to further explore and challenge identity and existence, and the evolution of this theme as it is explored by a number of Francophone authors will be presented in later chapters. Both thematic groups also share the trait of being linked to vision and to language in a way that allows for even more in-depth examination of their relationship to Francophone literature.

Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco do not directly address the question of Postcoloniality or regional literature in their plays, but the techniques they use in exploring the facets of identity that I will be discussing here will later also be found in the plays of authors like Aimé Césaire, Marie Susini, and Marie NDiaye. Both Beckett and Ionesco explore the nature of the gaze and the importance of vision in their theater. Both also portray the “outsider” and the “outcast” (although not to the same extent as Genet) and show how characters can use memory and words as weapons to control and gain power over the “other”. If it is generally accepted that Beckett and Ionesco were at the forefront of the absurdist movement, even if I hesitate to use the word influence to describe their effect on the decades of theater that followed, it is certainly not a stretch to
speak of their theater as having opened the eyes of other dramatists to new possibilities in
the creation of drama. In this chapter I will discuss some of the basic building blocks of
the Theater of the Absurd in preparation for a presentation of the ways in which it lends
itself to an exploration of Postcolonial and regional literature.

Identity and its connection to vision and memory can be found in many of the
plays of Beckett and Ionesco, often as a central theme. Martin Esslin has already pointed
out Beckett’s preoccupation with the problem of being and identity and its expression in
his writing, most often through adversarial situations that pit character against character.
Notable examples of this can be seen in two of his most well known works, En attendant
Godot and Fin de partie. Fin de partie even has the distinction of being a French term
that designates “endgame” in a chess match, an adversarial position that pits one player
against another in a fight for survival. Also notable in the use of this chess term is that
the “endgame” more often than not describes the final moves of the eventual winner
against those of the eventual loser of the match, in which the great majority of the moves
before checkmate are a mere formality unless a great error is made on the part of the
player who has the upper hand. Beckett’s characters are often seen fighting for their
identities, struggling against other characters or against the situations in which they find
themselves, even though the struggle is generally perceived as hopeless. This struggle
for an identity is certainly a hallmark of many plays, and not just those of the Theater of
the Absurd, but as with other themes in the latter, it is the acting out of the theme that sets
it apart. Whereas in Hamlet the title character expresses his thoughts on identity through
the famous soliloquy that begins “To be, or not to be—that is the question” (3.1.57), in
Krapp’s Last Tape Krapp’s existential angst is expressed when, at the end of the play, he
suddenly tears off the reel of tape he is trying to record, and desperately returns to
listening to his most powerful memory.  Hamlet expresses his feelings and his existential
crisis in well thought out lines of poetry that clearly belong to the author of the play,
while Krapp uses only a few coherent lines of speech and the desperation of his actions to
express the same crisis.  This pattern of action expressing the same or more than words
will appear in a great many of the absurdist plays that will be studied here, and I will
begin with Beckett’s first staged dramatic work.

In *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon immediately find themselves
having to fight to remember each and every idea and memory they speak of, from the
fates of the two thieves who died next to Christ at the crucifixion (14-15) to where they
are and whether or not they have been there before (17-18).  Vladimir, the only one of the
two tramps who has actually encountered Godot before, he thinks, is uncertain of the
location or the date of the supposed encounter, and even seems uncertain of the activities
of the previous day.  Early in the first act when Estragon points out that they must be in
the wrong place, the following exchange of dialogue takes place showing that Vladimir,
for all his posturing, has no more of a clue of what is happening than Estragon:

Vladimir.  Qu’est-ce que tu veux insinuer?  Qu’on s’est trompé
d’endroit?

Estragon.  Il devrait être là.

Vladimir.  Il n’a pas dit ferme qu’il viendrait.

Estragon.  Et s’il ne vient pas?

Vladimir.  Nous reviendrons demain.

Estragon.  Et puis après-demain.
VLADIMIR. Peut-être.

ESTRAGON. Et ainsi de suite.

VLADIMIR. C’est-à-dire…

ESTRAGON. Jusqu’à ce qu’il vienne.

VLADIMIR. Tu es impitoyable

ESTRAGON. Nous sommes déjà venus hier.

VLADIMIR. Ah non, là tu te goures.

ESTRAGON. Qu’est-ce que nous avons fait hier?

VLADIMIR. Ce que nous avons fait hier?

ESTRAGON. Oui.

VLADIMIR. Ma foi… (Se fâchant.) Pour jeter le doute, à toi le pompon.

(16-17)

In *En attendant Godot*, the acts that are accomplished are more often than not mechanical responses to situations that have likely taken place more than once. Vladimir and Estragon, although they seem resigned to their fate as pawns in a never ending waiting game, do want to escape but find it more and more unlikely that they will ever be able to break out of a cycle that has reduced their humanity to its absurd foundations. The last bastion of their humanity is their desire to remember who they are, what they are doing, who they have met before, and ultimately to be remembered by the powerful(?) Godot. Vladimir seems already to know each time that he encounters the Garçon that Godot, “ne viendra pas ce soir mais sûrement demain” (66), repeating the message himself in the second act (119), and insists that the Garçon transmit only one message to Godot at the end of each of their encounters: “Dis-lui que tu nous as vus” (67), and “tu
lui diras que tu m’as vu …” (120). He even adds at the end of each request a clarifier to make certain that his request is understood: “Tu nous as bien vus, n’est-ce pas?” (67) and “Dis, tu es bien sûr de m’avoir vu, tu ne vas pas me dire demain que tu ne m’as jamais vu?” (121) Each time he receives as his only response a muted, impassible “Oui monsieur,” (67) or the quick flight of the Garçon who leaves with no promises and no guarantees (121). Even with an affirmative response, Vladimir is never assured of an answer as he can never be certain that he has met anyone before since no one will ever remember ever having met him or Estragon.

Although these examples provide a clear indication that the two tramps are desperate to be recognized and remembered, the rules of the land in which they find themselves appear to prohibit any sort of recognition from truly taking place. The two find themselves forced to play along with the other characters who cross the stage and who do not appear to know who they are, although their actions may not be telling the entire story. Lucky and Pozzo, it would seem, are not strangers. Vladimir watches them go at the end of the first act and remarks, “Ils ont beaucoup changé” (62), an offhand comment that reveals a potential previous encounter. Later on, when Estragon insists that Lucky and Pozzo must be different people from those Vladimir claims to know, adding, “La preuve, ils ne nous ont pas reconnus,” (62) Vladimir’s reply is basic and telling. “Ça ne veut rien dire. Moi aussi j’ai fait semblant de ne pas les reconnaître. Et puis, nous, on ne nous reconnaît jamais” (63). Although he appears to understand the way reality works within the universe of the play, Vladimir has realized that there is almost no point in trying to act any differently because he is trapped in a universe where certain rules apply that cannot be broken. It is logical for Godot never to come because tomorrow, by
its very definition, is always one day away and can never actually arrive without becoming today at the instant of arrival. It is this logic that we find humorous if we see a bar advertising “free beer tomorrow,” while the same logic is filled with dark sarcasm within a country that is promised “freedom tomorrow” over the long years of a dictatorship. Although the mention of tomorrow seems hopeful it is itself an illogical concept in the universe of Vladimir and Estragon where the present moment is all that can be grasped firmly. No one will ever recognize Didi and Gogo so long as they are waiting. To fight against the system in place is pure madness. Vladimir expresses his resignation and also his angst at the end of the second Act in a soliloquy reminiscent of that of Hamlet:

VLADIMIR. Est-ce que j’ai dormi, pendant que les autres souffraient ?
Est-ce que je dors en ce moment ? Demain, quand je croirai me réveiller, que dirai-je de cette journée ? Qu’avec Estragon mon ami, à cet endroit, jusqu’à la tombée de la nuit, j’ai attendu Godot ? Que Pozzo est passé, avec son porteur, et qu’il nous a parlé ? Sans doute, mais dans tout cela qu’y aura-t-il de vrai ? (Estragon, s’étant acharné en vain sur ses chaussures, s’est assoupi à nouveau. Vladimir le regarde.) Lui ne saura rien. Il parlera des coups qu’il a reçus et je lui donnerai une carotte. (Un temps.) A cheval sur une tombe et une naissance difficile. Du fond du trou, rêveusement, le fossoyeur applique ses fers. On a le temps de vieillir. L’air est plein de nos cris. (Il écoute.) Mais l’habitude est une grande sourdine. (Il regarde Estragon.) Moi aussi, un autre me regarde, en se disant, Il dort, il ne
sait pas qu’il dorme. (Un temps.) Je ne peux pas continuer. (Un temps.) Qu’est-ce que j’ai dit? (118-19)

Here at last, it is possible to see that if there is a message in this play, it is strikingly similar to those that Beckett will place in other soliloquies. Vladimir wishes simply to be again and to have some sort of an existence, but as he remarks, “l’habitude est une grande sourdine,” and the universe he lives in has reduced his existence to that of a marionette who knows he has strings, but aside from a name, doesn’t know who controls them. He cannot continue, but knows that he must because he has no choice in the matter. He and Estragon will always be in the process of waiting.

The need for a valid identity also appears in Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape, in which there is only one physical character present. In this particular play, the struggle for validation is not between different characters on stage but rather between the past and present of the one character whose life is being reviewed. Beckett creates an entire world out of memory by allowing the character to sit surrounded by darkness while he listens to his past selves on an old reel-to-reel tape in order to put himself in the mood to record his birthday recollections. While there is only one Krapp physically present on the stage, there are effectively three Krapps present. “This old tape, through which Krapp is implicitly on stage as a middle-aged man was made thirty years before after listening to a yet earlier tape, again to get himself in the mood, dating back another twelve years and through which young Krapp is present on stage, even if more remotely” (Breuer 564). In keeping with the spirit of many of Beckett’s works, as soon as there is more than one character on the stage there must be a struggle for power, and the struggle in this case begins as Krapp makes an attempt to convince himself that he still means something after
listening to the evidence of his wasted past. Krapp, who appears at the beginning of the play to be nothing more than a laconic and disinterested drunkard, finds himself emotionally moved by one memory and comes desperately to life as he recalls a time when he actually was something. After returning in memory to a time when he loved and looked deeply into the eyes of a woman, he tears the tape off of the reel to record his new memories of the year, tearing off this new tape as well at the end after pleading with himself to return to a time in which he can once again experience life:

Leave it at that. (Pause.) Lie propped up in the dark—and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. (Pause.) Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. (Pause.) And so on. (Pause.) Be again, be again. (Pause.) All that old misery. (Pause.) Once wasn't enough for you. (229)

Krapp clearly realizes that he “isn’t” anymore, that his existence is not one, but his refusal at the end of the play to do anything but return once more to the one memory he cherishes most of all, one that he has likely gone back to year after year, cements his current nonexistence. The parting thoughts in this play do not belong to present-day Krapp, and in that way are befitting of the somber mood. The Krapp of 30 years past intones at the end of his birthday reel, “Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back” (230). And it is clear from the posture of present-day Krapp, “Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence” (230), that he either does not want them back or realizes that he can never actually get them back. If he
is not yet physically dead, he may as well be. His existence has run out as he has ceased to truly fight for it.

It is here at this moment of hopelessness that another question, derived from the work of Albert Camus, can be asked both of Krapp and of the audience. Is this an example of suicide? In the strictest sense of the word, it is not because Krapp does nothing to actually end his own life. However, it is possible to come to a number of different conclusions, especially given the name of the play itself. The ambiguous title, *Krapp’s Last Tape* is most certainly a double entendre. Was Beckett’s intention to put the emphasis on “last” meaning, final, or “last” meaning, “most recent?” If the meaning is to have been “final” then speculation can run rampant as to the nature of Krapp’s motionlessness at the end of the play. Is he contemplating suicide? Is his ignorance of the clear medical problems caused by his excessive drinking and consumption of bananas an indication that he desires death more than anything else? Does his desire to “be again” and return to the place of motionlessness go hand in hand with Genet’s definition of “being” as unchanging and dead, as it is presented in *Le balcon*? Even if Beckett did not himself address this question, it certainly seems to point towards the finality of the situation, and it is absolutely possible to say that even if Krapp does not commit suicide physically, his body language (that which is shown on the stage) indicates that his life is, for all practical purposes, finished.

For Ionesco, the work of memory and its connection to identity serves as a recurring theme in his plays. One play in which the vital connection between memory and identity is shown to be a literal matter of life and death is *Le roi se meurt*, which was revived on Broadway as recently as spring 2009. Part of the Bérenger series of plays, *Le
roi se meurt shows the degradation and subsequent death of King Bérenger whose kingdom literally crumbles to nothing as he approaches his own end. Although Bérenger was at one time a powerful monarch whose mere verbal commands were sufficient to create or destroy, his death brings with it not only the loss of this power, but also an uncontrollable destruction of both people and objects. Already at the beginning of the play, we learn that the kingdom is beginning to fall apart, a clear sign of the impending death of the king.

MARGUERITE. Il fait froid.

LE GARDE. J’ai essayé de faire du feu, Majesté. Ça ne fonctionne pas.

Les radiateurs ne veulent rien entendre. Le ciel est couvert, les nuages n’ont pas l’air de vouloir se dissiper facilement. Le soleil est en retard.

J’ai pourtant entendu le Roi lui donner l’ordre d’apparaître.

MARGUERITE. Tiens ! Le soleil n’écoute déjà plus.

LE GARDE. Cette nuit, j’ai entendu un petit craquement. Il y a une fissure dans le mur.

MARGUERITE. Déjà. Ça va vite. Je ne m’y attendais pas pour tout de suite.

LE GARDE. J’ai essayé de la colmater avec Juliette.

JULIETTE. Il m’a réveillée au milieu de la nuit. Je dormais si bien !

LE GARDE. Elle est apparue de nouveau. Faut-il essayer encore ?

MARGUERITE. Ce n’est pas la peine. Elle est irréversible. (11-12)

Key to the play are the characters of Marguerite and Marie, the two wives of the king who approach his death with substantially different attitudes. Both women
understand what is happening as the king dies and see his death for what it is, but their personal reactions to it show us who they really are. Marguerite, the king’s first wife, understands that the king’s death is nothing more than a natural step for which he should have been prepared long before the beginning of the play. “Il aurait dû être préparé depuis longtemps, depuis toujours. Il aurait dû se le dire chaque jour. Que de temps perdu” (21). The king’s second wife Marie, who is younger and more beautiful, also understands the meaning of the death of the King and wishes either to say nothing or at least to attenuate the blow. “Dites-le-lui doucement, je vous en prie. Prenez tout votre temps. Il pourrait avoir un arrêt de cœur” (22). Marie sees his impending death as a real threat to her existence. She is terrified that he will forget all about her as he progresses towards death and subsequently she will cease to exist. At one point in the play, shortly before her disappearance, she explains, “Il m’oublie. Il est en train de m’oublier. Je le sens, il m’abandonne. Je ne suis plus rien s’il m’oublie. Je ne peux plus vivre si je ne suis pas dans son cœur affolé” (120). Marie and Marguerite both realize that the death of the king will also bring about the end of their personal existences, although Marguerite is the only one who understands that as there is nothing she can do about it, she must take the responsibility to guide him through to his death with as much dignity as possible. Her approach to the death of the king reveals her desire to make the transition as calmly as possible. Marie regards the death of the king with panic and treats it as a race against time that she must attempt to lengthen. Her concern is for herself and her existence and she tries to do all she can to make Bérenger forget that he is dying, choosing to focus on her own identity rather than on that of the man she loves.
Ionesco makes it clear in this play that memory and existence, and therefore identity, can go hand in hand. The king progressively forgets about various aspects of his kingdom as he dies, and they simply cease to be. Walls crack (12), the kingdom’s borders shrink (21), and even the set pieces representing the castle disappear (157). What does this mean when it comes to the king himself? Ionesco seems to be pointing out that every individual, with rare exceptions, feels s/he has an identity whose importance outweighs the importance of the identities of every other individual, even if s/he perhaps doesn’t consciously experience this feeling, or at least is generally unwilling to admit to it. All individuals have a desire for self-preservation that often leads them to validate their own identity before validating that of the “other.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the moments before death, and few plays present this fact better than Le roi se meurt. This play presents the ritual of death in a way that removes the terror from it and replaces the fear with calmness and order. Although the outward appearance of the death of the king is seen as a cataclysmic event that destroys everything around him as he becomes more and more inwardly focused, once Marguerite finds herself directing the king’s final moments, a sense of calm is restored and the king ceases to be a comic figure whose struggle against death seems pitiful and ridiculous. Instead, her tenderness as she cuts away the strings and removes the burden of fear from the king’s back, both literally and figuratively, makes both her and the king touching figures who go off into death hand in hand (151-154). This ability to move from the comic, to the tragic, to the poignantly touching is what makes Ionesco one of the most important playwrights of the Absurdist Theater. He allows the spectators to see Absurdist theater as multidimensional in its
portrayal of life and its emotions, just as true life encompasses a multitude of emotions and experiences.

At the end of the play, one question may still remain for the spectator: what has happened to him or her at the end of the play? As the king fades into nothing, is the spectator stripped of identity and existence as well? Although it is plain to see that theatergoers are not simply disappearing into the gray mist of the theater, Ionesco’s staging and set direction is such that a spectator who is truly caught up in the action may wonder, even if just momentarily, if the destruction of Bérenger’s kingdom will be confined to the stage, or if perhaps it will continue out into the auditorium and strip the seats, the curtains, and the doors and windows of the theater itself. Is this what the end of existence looks like to an individual who has been forgotten? Although a return to reality is inevitable for all spectators, in its own way the play does fulfill its own premise when at the end of each performance, the spectators disappear from the theater, albeit of their own free will, and when, at the end of the theatrical run, the set is definitively removed from the stage, the lights dimmed, and the theater left dark and empty.

Similar questions about identity might be asked at the end of Les chaises, another of Ionesco’s better-known works. During the course of the play, as the stage becomes progressively fuller and fuller of the chairs in which the invisible guests of the Vieux and the Vieille are seated; as the old couple must shout to be heard over the silent din; and as they become more and more involved with the needs of their guests, the audience becomes less and less certain of whether the guests are real or imaginary. In a way, the play is also comparable to Krapp’s Last Tape. Just as the memories on the tapes that Krapp listens to are able to create real characters, the memories of the Vieux and the
Vieille are made eerily physical when they are combined with the physical objects that occupy the stage. By the end of the play the spectator no longer sees only the chairs, but also the memories embodied in the invisible guests that fill them. As much as existence can be refused to a character on stage if he is ignored or belittled, Ionesco’s *Les chaises* proves that existence can also be given to invisible characters if they are acknowledged. At the same time, the appearance of a physical Orateur who enters the stage after it is already full of imaginary characters is possible only if the Orateur appears false. Ionesco gives the following instructions for his entrance:

[S]i les personnages invisibles doivent avoir le plus de réalité possible,
l’Orateur, lui, devra paraître irréel ; en longeant le mur de droite, il ira, comme glissant, doucement, jusqu’au fond, en face de la grande porte, sans tourner la tête à droite ou à gauche ; il passera près de la Vieille sans sembler la remarquer... (174)

How then does Ionesco once again create an atmosphere where the question of what is true and what is illusion becomes a major problem for the spectators? The answer lies in the disappearance of the Vieux and the Vieille at the end of the play in what is assumed to be a double suicide. Having reached the pinnacle of their lives when the invisible emperor arrives, the Vieux makes a stirring but nonsensical speech that is literally echoed by his wife, and then the old couple throw themselves out of their windows into the water below. Without the support of the old couple’s memories, the chairs suddenly become eerily empty and the room, where only moments before there was a vibrant sense of fullness, seems devoid of life. The presence of the Orateur does nothing to relieve the sense of emptiness as he has already been described by Ionesco as
an unreal character (174), and he now appears to be addressing only the spectators in the theatre with his senseless mumbling. More consideration will be given to this play and to its ability to call existence into question when the topic of isolation is addressed at a later point.

Both Beckett and Ionesco present vision and memory as interwoven forces that can create and destroy as effectively as physical objects. Memories, when combined with the suggestive placement of a multitude of chairs, can create a room full of people who evaporate in an instant when the people creating the memories vanish, showing that the physical object is actually powerless and that memory is the true force and is far more real than the physical world. King Bérenger retains control of his kingdom only in so far as he is able to process it mentally. Without his support, everything in the kingdom is doomed to fail as soon as he is no longer able to remember and identify it. Krapp’s recorded tapes are, by his own admission, more real than his current life. Beckett and Ionesco show that memory and language are forces that can be more potent than physical objects by themselves, and the recognition of this power has been a major tool of both colonizers and colonized peoples at different times in their respective histories.

Isolation and alienation, two related key themes that also find their places in many works of absurd drama, are notable for their tendency to be used as weapons wielded either by characters within the play or by the unseen playwright in the struggle for Identity. Characters are often either isolated by the playwright as in Happy Days! or Les chaises, or somehow exile themselves by their own actions as in Krapp’s Last Tape. They may also find themselves alienated by other characters, as in En attendant Godot, or by circumstances beyond their control as in Le roi se meurt. In all cases, the result is
often an angst that forces the characters to find a way to validate their own existence through searching for a time in which they existed, or presumed they did, or through finding something in their current situation that allows them to remain assured of their continued existence. At times, the characters will fail to find this support, or take refuge in past memories where they felt as if they existed. At other times, the end result of their searching simply presents spectators with a dis-ease about their own existence.

Many plays use vision as a way of presenting both isolation and alienation, often having characters speak of an unseen viewer. In Beckett’s Happy Days! Winnie looks up at the beginning of each Act, in the first to proclaim it “Another heavenly day” (275) before she bows her head in prayer, and in the second to reference the fact that she is being watched. In this second act, as her movement is restricted to her eyes alone and she can do nothing to judge whether or not Willie is present, she seems at times to test whatever or whoever is controlling the bell by closing her eyes and causing the bell to ring (299, 300, 301, 304, 308), almost as if she wishes to reassure herself that someone is still there. At the beginning of Act II she explicitly speaks of these unseen eyes: “Hail, holy light. [Long pause. She closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes at once. Bell Stops. She gazes front. Long smile. Smile off. Long pause.] Someone is looking at me still. [Pause.] Caring for me still. [Pause.] That is what I find so wonderful. [Pause.] Eyes on my eyes” (299). At the end of the second Act, immediately before the end of the play she repeats the same actions with the same effect: “Pause. Happy expression off. She closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens her eyes. She smiles, gazing front. She turns her eyes, smiling, to Willie, still on his hands and knees looking up at her” (308). It would appear here that she relishes the thought of having two sets of eyes on her at the
same time, one set belonging to Willie who has just spoken her name and reaffirmed her existence and her identity, and the second set invisible, belonging to whoever or whatever is controlling the bell. This double affirmation of her identity is sufficient to complete the happy day even if there is no explanation given to her being buried, to Willie’s crawling toward her or the revolver, or to what will happen in the future. Beckett makes it clear that her identity, her emergence from isolation at the end of the second act, and her being watched are more important than any explanation of the circumstances surrounding her situation. Identity is something that is most important in the present moment because the past has gone and the future has yet to come.

*En attendant Godot*, as we have already seen, presents this eternal present that is both a blessing and a curse. Vladimir, in his aforementioned soliloquy, also speaks about being watched. His belief that “un autre me regarde, en se disant, Il dort, il ne sait pas qu’il dorme” (119) both reassures him, as similar knowledge of being looked down upon (in a literal sense) reassures Winnie, but also frustrates him because he feels he cannot just leave without suffering the consequences of his actions. Someone is watching him and this person would know of his departure. Estragon asks why the two cannot just leave and forget Godot; “si on le laissait tomber?” “Il nous punirait,” replies Vladimir (122). The eyes that are on the two of them provide them with an existence, but that existence is for them more of a punishment than anything else and leads to a kind of isolation that reminds us of the preoccupation with identity and being that Beckett demonstrates in many of his plays. As the tramps are neither free to go, nor ever to meet Godot, their existence is one of the loneliness and discomfort that one might experience in a waiting room, in particular a waiting room from which one will never be called. At a
certain moment in the past, names and information were exchanged, but as that moment
retreats further into the past, identity becomes more of a prison than a validation of
existence. Someone knows who you are and holds that power over you and as a result
you are no longer truly free to go, but at the same time, no longer comfortable where you
are. The resulting feeling of limbo fits perfectly with the definition of the absurd as given
by Camus. His solution to the absurdity of the situation is revolt. However, in *En
attendant Godot*, there will be no revolt, only a tacit acceptance of an absurd situation
expressed through the desire to leave and the inability to carry through with the action
necessary to do so.

Vladimir and Estragon, although they encounter Pozzo and Lucky twice
throughout the play, are effectively isolated in their world because they are never
remembered by anyone who encounters them. This curious aspect of vision within the
play leads the audience to the realization that the sight of the characters who encounter
the two tramps is somehow disconnected from their memory. Pozzo, Lucky, and the
Garçon may have looked at Didi and Gogo, but they have never seen them before. This
point is made even more clear in the second act when Pozzo is discovered to have gone
blind in between the two acts, making him doubly incapable of remembering the two.
Vladimir and Estragon find themselves further isolated because they seem at times to
have some sort of a working memory, an ability that is a curse in a recursive universe.
Vladimir insinuates that he and Estragon have most definitely encountered Lucky and
Pozzo before and that he simply plays at not remembering who they are, but also admits
that “nous, on ne nous reconnaît jamais.” (63) Estragon has already remarked that when
it comes to changing, “Il n’y a que nous qui n’y arrivons pas” (62). It would appear that
in entering the absurd cycle that makes up the time frame of this universe, Vladimir and Gogo are not only isolated from those around them but also isolated from time itself and stuck in an eternal present that will never give way to the future and to the relief of being able to change. Their universe, which so far has knit the two acts together like a Möbius strip, is set up so that nothing will ever truly change for the two of them, even as the world continues on around them.

*Krapp’s Last Tape*, much like *Happy Days!*, contains another explicit representation of isolation, although Krapp’s isolation is most certainly self-imposed, as he indicates in one of his earlier tapes. “Seventeen hundred hours, out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20 percent, say 40 percent of his waking life” (224). Speaking of the new light above his table, he calls it, “a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause] In a way. [Pause] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to [hesitates]…me [Pause] Krapp” (223). Krapp continuously tries to convince himself that although his best years are perhaps behind him (230), he wouldn’t want them back, although the hesitations in his speech and his brooding over the eyes of women that he has found beautiful suggest otherwise. Once again, the idea of being seen, being watched, being looked at by someone else suggests that Beckett truly did equate vision with being in a singular fashion.

Although *Krapp’s Last Tape* is one of Beckett’s shorter pieces, Krapp speaks three times of the eyes that at one time looked at him, four times if his returning one final time to the tape at the end of the play is counted. First, he recalls an earlier tape where young Krapp speaks of Bianca, of whom he said little, “apart from a tribute to her eyes.
Very warm. I suddenly saw them again” (224). Later on, remembering a time when he was waiting for the death of his mother, he recalls the sight of a “dark young beauty” who kept looking at him. He makes the comment: “The face she had! The eyes! Like…[hesitates]...chrysolite!” (226). After present-day Krapp recalls this comment, he pauses the recording and broods for a while, as if trying to recapture the memory and the feeling of her eyes.

Finally, Krapp forwards the tape to a section that he has marked in his ledger as “Farewell to—[he turns page]—love” (223). This short recollection is the centerpiece of the entire play, as it recalls a brief moment that could easily be seen as the metaphor for his entire existence. The memory is of the end of his relationship with a woman named Effie, but once again focuses on the eyes of the woman more than anything else. He recalls:

I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [Pause.] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[pause]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over to get them in the shadow and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in. [Pause.] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! [Pause.] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. (227, 229)

Although this passage has been interpreted by more than one critic as a reference to intercourse in the boat, an understandable explanation given the phrase “Let me in,”
and the reference to drifting in among the flags, and hearing them sigh before the stem, I believe that this particular memory has more to do with vision than with sexual intercourse. Already we have heard Krapp reference on more than one occasion the eyes of the women he has loved. In this memory, I believe that his desire to be let in is not sexual in nature, but rather a desire to be looked at and seen for what he is. This is why it makes sense for him to return to the memory following his declaration to “be again.” Although sexual pleasure is not dead in him, he doesn’t truly seem to relish it, because he talks about his current sexual relations with a distinct lack of pleasure. “Fanny came in a few times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn't do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch. The last time wasn't so bad” (228). It doesn’t seem that his desire to be is connected with his sexual pleasure. Beckett, in fact, seems to make light of sexuality with his suggestive use of bananas that seem only sadly phallic rather than bawdy or erotic.

Krapp plays the memory in the boat twice; once before he records his anniversary message, and once again at the end of the play. Eric Levy finds this passage especially important because for him it shows Krapp’s triumph over the passage of time since by dwelling in regret and remaining fixated in one moment in time, he can effectively stop time for himself in the present.

By fixating exclusively on past moments, Krapp reduces the present to the site of rememoration, and thus fortifies his life against change. Through regretting the past that can never return, Krapp renders the future irrelevant. This is his last tape, because there will never be anything new to record. (58)
The passage itself shows the moment when this immobility may have begun for Krapp as he and the girl “lay there without moving. But under us, all moved, and moved us. . . .” (227, 229). Krapp remains motionless while around him, life continues. He has effectively not only succeeded in isolating himself physically from the rest of the world, but also from time itself. Just as Estragon and Vladimir find themselves in a recurring loop of time that they cannot escape, Krapp has succeeded in reducing the sum total of his existence to these few moments of regret. Success and failure are similar creatures in this respect, because while Krapp does distance himself from the passage of time, he also isolates himself completely from any companionship, and any “triumph” seen by Eric Levy is a hollow victory if it is one at all. If Vladimir and Estragon at least have each other to quarrel and make up with eternally, Krapp has only himself and his memories.

Ionesco also uses vision and isolation in his plays, especially as a way of making spectators consider their own isolation in the world and as a way of forcing them to consider their own existence. As we saw earlier, Les chaises does this by stripping the stage of all real persons, excluding the Orateur whose existence is dubious at best, and allowing the spectator visually and viscerally to connect with the emptiness of the stage and the inability of the Orateur to speak or communicate in any way. The old couple, reassured of their value and their existence by memories that are born out of the isolation they have experienced for so many years, throw themselves out of the window in the belief that the message of the Vieux will be transmitted to all humanity by the Orateur.

The main question of Les chaises is one of reality and illusion. Is the isolation we see on stage real or illusory? Are the guests real or just realistic projections of the memories of the old couple? Are our senses to be trusted? Ionesco presents all of these questions on
stage using the entirety of the stage and the décor to do so. The tower in which the old
couple lives is seemingly surrounded by water as evidenced by the sound effects heard
upon the arrival of guests (140). It is semi-circular as Ionesco’s stage drawings show
(130), perhaps with the intent of including the spectators in the other half of the circle.
The play begins with a dialogue between the Vieux and the Vieille full of the repartee for
which Ionesco is known. There is much word play, many double entendres, and the
suspicion that not everything is right in this world. Sure enough, when the first Invitée
arrives, she is invisible, despite what we have heard in the wings. The doorbell rings,
boats are heard gliding towards the tower, and the old couple run around bringing chairs
and entertaining guests until the room seems “archiplein de monde” (161), even if this
crowd is invisible. Although the effectiveness of the illusion is certainly dependant upon
the quality of the actors used, the illusion itself seems intended to both confuse and draw
in the spectator as he or she will certainly see the guests as he or she is able to imagine
them. Ionesco cleverly uses the imaginations of the spectators in the theater to add to the
illusion and to allow them to feel even more keenly the loss of something at the end of
the play because it is of their own creation. It is when the stage is at its fullest that the
isolation of the old couple takes on a peculiar form. Both the Vieux and the Vieille find
themselves stuck at opposite ends of the room due to the pressing in of the imaginary
crowd. Ionesco indicates: “Ils sont enfin arrivés à leurs places définitives. Chacun près
de sa fenêtre. Le Vieux, à gauche, à la fenêtre du côté de l’estrade. La Vieille à droite.
Ils ne bougeront plus jusqu’à la fin” (164). Their isolation has become all the more
evident as they are now visibly alone on opposite ends of the room, but still surrounded
by an invisible crowd that is growing more and more excitable and less and less familiar.
They cry out to one another, trying to find each other in the crowd of people. The disparity between the visible stage and the imaginary world that has been created is enormous, and will only continue to grow as the invisible emperor arrives, bringing with him light and sound that both reinforces the illusion and also illuminates the emptiness of the stage.

Further illustrating the isolation of Les Vieux, the real and visible Orateur appears not to notice the Vieille, even as she reaches out to touch him and make certain that he is real (174). His appearance and mannerisms are meant, as noted, to make him as unreal as the invisible guests are real. He even initially appears to be unreal for the Vieux, who has the following exchange with the Vieille.

**LE VIEUX.** Le voilà

**LA VIEILLE,** *qui l’a suivi du regard et continuera de le suivre.* C’est bien lui. Il existe. En chair et en os.

**LE VIEUX,** *le suivant du regard.* Il existe. Et c’est bien lui. Ce n’est pas un rêve!

**LA VIEILLE.** Ce n’est pas un rêve, je te l’avais bien dit.

The alienation of the Vieille by the Orateur throws the entire play into even further disarray as his actions could perhaps suggest that the Vieille does not exist for him. If the spectators have become comfortable with the imaginary world that has been created by the characters, have perhaps begun to believe in, trust in, and sympathize with them, this sudden and shocking appearance of a visible character who ignores their presence is all the more disconcerting. The suicide of Les Vieux at the end of the play does nothing to relieve this discomfort, because it takes away not only the visible support...
that the spectators have begun to trust, but also strips the chairs of their imaginary occupants. Now, the Orateur is the only character left on the stage and he is of no consequence because the spectator should never have believed in his existence.

Ionesco’s most cunning device is perhaps the set up of the stage, with the empty chairs on the stage blending with the chairs in the theater, directly confronting the spectators with the question of their own existence.

Here again, as in *Le roi se meurt*, Ionesco’s staging remains crucial to the effectiveness of the illusion. Whereas in many of Beckett’s plays there is an acknowledgement of the audience and a breaking of the fourth wall, Ionesco never addresses the audience directly in either *Les chaises* or *Le roi se meurt*, allowing the spectator to become engrossed in the production and possibly to forget his or her position as an audience member. As such, the sight of the empty chairs at the end of the production, even emptier than they were when Les Vieux were present on stage with them, should be even more unsettling. Ionesco himself seems to have acknowledged this fact by cutting the end of his play short during the initial production and allowing the curtain to fall on the senseless mumbling of the mute Orateur, rather than allowing him to attempt to communicate via the chalkboard (87). Any communication or attempt at making sense by the Orateur will destroy the sense of utter hopelessness felt at the end of the production, and perhaps reassure the audience that there is something in the message of the Orateur that has just been missed. Ionesco’s decision to remove this potential for communication shows that his intent is to focus on the emptiness of the chairs and the worthlessness of the message rather than on the potential for redemption. *Les chaises* differs from *Le roi se meurt* in that there is no tenderness and no endearing send off, but
rather a brutal return to reality. The dis-ease felt at the end of *Les chaises* is immediate and stinging, unlike the lingering discomfort experienced at the conclusion of *Le roi se meurt* which demands contemplation and discussion.

Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco present plays that have come to be viewed as typical of the style of the Theater of the Absurd. Although neither man was looking to invent or typify any particular genre of theater, their plays contain both moods and stylistic elements that remain consistent from play to play. As I have shown, one unifying element that appears to pervade the majority of their plays is the theme of the struggle with identity, especially through the use of vision and memory, and the chaos that can emerge from the struggle. They share this struggle with Genet and many of the other francophone and French authors who I will be presenting in subsequent chapters. While death also remains a theme of great importance, especially as concerns suicide, I will not address that particular topic in this chapter, but rather address suicide and murder as they are portrayed overall in the plays I am examining in this dissertation. Beckett’s preoccupation with death, dying, and suicide, and Ionesco’s panicked portrayal of characters faced with their own mortality present interesting questions that will be best examined alongside the different views of death in the plays of Genet, Césaire, Susini, and NDiaye.
Chapter 2: Jean Genet and the Celebration of the Outcast

Jean Genet’s repertoire of plays is notably smaller than that of many other Absurdist playwrights. He wrote only five major plays during his career: *Haute surveillance* (1949), *Les bonnes* (1947), *Les nègres* (1958), *Le balcon* (1956), and *Les paravents* (1961). He was also, like Beckett, a novelist. He remains an important and influential absurdist playwright because of plays that delve into African and Arabic Francophone culture, that speak of colonization and the abuses of colonial power, and that are therefore politically charged. Genet’s theater does use the themes of identity, isolation, and abandonment to create an atmosphere that is absurd in the way Camus spoke of the term in *Le mythe de sisyphe*, but he goes further in allowing the absurd atmosphere to bring to light questions of race, culture, and politics that remain relevant today. The three plays I will focus on in this chapter are *Les nègres*, *Le balcon*, and *Les paravents*. Each of these three plays shows how Genet forms the link between Absurd playwrights like Ionesco and Beckett, and the francophone colonial cultures that his plays sometimes depict.

If Genet’s texts are viewed through the lens of Identity and its function within the absurdist tradition, his predilection for themes related to identity can often be seen through his use of masks and costumes, especially in *Les nègres* and *Le balcon*, plays for which Genet found it necessary to address the topic of disguise and costuming directly. Genet does not seem to care to use masks simply because they are capable of disguise, but rather because he wishes for his characters to be exaggerated in such a way that they
became almost larger than life. In his letters to Roger Blin and other prospective
directors of his plays, he insists on the necessity of applying makeup with care, of making
certain that costumes are excessive but not unrecognizable, of putting main characters on
stilted legs to make them taller and more exaggerated. Genet explains in Comment jouer
“Le balcon,” “J’ai eu l’idée de faire grimper les Trois Figures fondamentales sur de hauts
patins. Comment les acteurs pourront–ils marcher avec ça sans se casser la gueule, sans
se prendre les pattes dans les traînes et les dentelles de leurs jupes? Qu’ils apprennent”
sans les photos prises lors des représentations au Théâtre de Lutèce (mise en scène de
Blin),” so that for the new director “il sera plus facile de s’approcher du style voulu par
nous : le grotesque dominera” (6). Genet’s focus on masking and costuming is extreme,
but essential to a proper understanding of the text. His vision of exaggerated costumes is
meant to emphasize Mme Irma’s explanation of her brothel, although not in the way the
audience suspects. She insists that every visitor to her maison d’illusions wants to be
deceived, but not completely. “Ils veulent tous que tout soit le plus vrai possible…
Moins quelque chose d’indéfinissable, qui fera que ce n’est pas vrai” (73). Genet has
costumed characters in such a way that the “quelque chose d’indéfinissable” appears to
stand out more than the reality of the situation, emphasizing the illusory aspect of the
play. As intended, the grotesque attracts the attention of the audience members with its
flamboyance, and as the excessive and the grotesque dominate the scenery and
costuming, it becomes difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is illusory
because both are portrayed in the same way.
Mme Irma’s desire to deceive is indeed achieved although it is in the opposite of the way she had planned and a successful commentary by Genet on his view of the illusory and grotesque nature of life itself. This mix of reality and illusion is one aspect of Genet’s theater that makes it ideal as a way to link together the Theater of the Absurd and the literature of the francophone authors of the DROM-COM\(^2\) I am exploring here.

Beckett and Ionesco speak extensively of identity and isolation, and their plays may indeed demonstrate the struggle for identity that takes place between the “I” and the “other”, but Genet often makes that struggle less abstract, a trait that allows his plays to be seen in the context of larger and more complex issues that will later be explored in plays like Césaire’s *Une tempête*. In *Les nègres*, these issues are racism and colonization; in *Le balcon*, revolution and political struggle; in *Les paravents*, war, colonization, and racism. The theater of Jean Genet can thus be seen as a combination of many fundamental elements of the Theater of the Absurd, and the important elements relating to identity and conflict within francophone African and Caribbean texts, notably the struggle to define what constitutes legitimate power. His work makes up the important middle ground that will serve as a bridge between similar elements of these two literary traditions.

Edmund White explains several fundamental similarities among the plays of Genet, Beckett and Ionesco and also hints at their differences.

What all three writers—Ionesco, Beckett and Genet—share is an emphasis on the human predicament in general rather than on individual

\(^2\) DROM-COM – since 2003 the acronym designating *les départements et régions d’outre-mer et les collectivités d’outre mer*, the collection of French territories not directly connected to the mainland (*vie-publique.fr*).
characters. . . . They are more concerned with types, masks, predicaments than with fully formed individuals.

The real difference, of course, amongst the three playwrights is a difference of vision, tone and procedure. Beckett is a minimalist whose characters, in each successive play, do less and less. . . . The dialogue is chaste, desperate and mordantly funny. Politics is absent and love is merely the memory of a physical need or the abrasive practice of cheerless mutual dependence. Genet’s theatre, by contrast, is full—full of ideas, of characters, of costumes, of extravagant language and of events. . . . Of the three, Ionesco is the only satirist. (428)

Although White finds Ionesco less relevant than the other two, claiming that “Ionesco, once considered their equal, has come to seem trivial” (428), he finds some common ground between Ionesco and Genet when it comes to their preoccupation with death. Genet’s plays all involve death, and some, such as Les Paravents, use it as a focal point of the play. Ionesco as well examines death in several of his plays, Le tueur sans gages and Le roi se meurt being two noteworthy examples. However, White sees Ionesco as “panicky in the face of the scandal death represents” (427) while Genet seems to ritualize the process as can be seen in the construction of the enormous mausoleum in Le balcon, the voodoo-like act of assuming the role of another character and committing suicide in Les bonnes, the process of breaking through screens as a literal representation of crossing from life to death in Les paravents, and the strange ceremonial execution of the masked Royal court in Les nègres. For Genet, death seems to be a process that must be prepared for and undergone with solemnity. Beckett does not generally present death
on stage directly, but often reminds his audience that death is inevitable. Even if one of his best-known soliloquies, that of Vladimir in *En attendant Godot*, is a long lament about the brevity of life, Beckett’s plays remain worlds of words and sparse actions.

In a comparison of Ionesco and Genet, Josephine Jacobson and William Mueller emphasize a key difference between their plays. Genet does portray non-European societies specifically in two separate instances in plays that contain boldly political overtones, even if he protests that his plays are not overtly political (White 424). Although he sticks to a privileged theme of outcast groups, “whereas the outcasts of *The Maids* represent an occupational group, those of *The Blacks* and *The Screens* represent whole racial or national groups—Negroes and Algerians, respectively. The two later plays are also philosophies of history, dramatic versions of the decline of the West” (Jacobson and Mueller 156). Jean Genet remains one of only a few of his contemporaries in the Absurdist Theater when it comes to portraying colonized peoples, although one can look to Albert Camus as another French author who portrays them specifically in his work.

Genet’s portrayal of specifically non-European groups is unsurprising if readers once again recall that his favorite subjects are always outcasts and deviants. From his first major play to his last, his characters consist of what can be considered the lowest common denominators of society. Pimps and prostitutes, murderers, homicidal servants, jailbirds and visitors to brothels are all major characters in his early plays. Then, with the writing of *Les nègres* and *Les paravents*, he adds colonized peoples to this list of outcasts. If he allows these last two plays to be populated by the colonized subjects of Africa with some overlapping of the roles previously discussed, these characters remain
firmly entrenched in his repertoire of the condemned and demonized. They also, like the rest of his character set, end up being portrayed in some way as heroes (or perhaps more accurately, anti-heroes), turning the spectators’ perception of them on its ear as it becomes difficult to determine who to “root for”. Although it is true that not all spectators were ready or willing to see some of these social “outsiders” as heroes, nor did they believe them to be worthy of being portrayed at all in a theater, Genet’s plays made it clear that his perception of the world was not theirs, for better or worse.

Genet presents more concrete images on stage than do Beckett and Ionesco, both of whom show a preference for the attack of words and the sound of language rather than extensive staging and elaborate costumes. Genet’s view of society as presented in his plays is pessimistic but ultimately much less abstract in its action, while at the same time his portrayal of characters and situations is almost always exaggerated in some way, especially through costuming and extensively specific stage directions. It is this aspect of his work that allows his plays to bring together the world of Absurdist drama and the world of the Colonial and post Colonial subject. Genet’s use of the absurd differs from that of Beckett and Ionesco in that he does not seem as interested in making the sweeping, universalist statements about life, reality, and illusion that Beckett and Ionesco have made, but rather seems to wish to implicate specific groups and speak about situations that are tangible and based on real-world issues and controversial topics. This is not to say that his plays do not speak to a wide audience of people, although they are in general far more polarizing than those of Beckett and Ionesco, but rather that the intent and the subject matter are less abstract. The three plays I will discuss in depth, *Les nègres*, *Le balcon*, and *Les paravents*, all demonstrate this tendency towards focus rather
than generality and will also demonstrate the ways in which Genet’s love for the “other” and the deviant turns into the bridge between the Absurdist theater and the francophone colonial subjects or outcast characters portrayed by Césaire, Susini, and NDiaye.

*Le balcon* does not, at first glance, appear to be a play that has anything at all to do with colonization or Postcolonial literature, and indeed the characters and the setting do not necessarily lend themselves immediately to that particular interpretation. The setting is *le Grand Balcon*, a magnificent brothel, although we do not learn its name until midway through the fifth scene (70). Yet, the ideas within the play can be seen as metaphors for the concept of power and specifically as metaphors for the fragility of colonial power and force. Edmund White suggests that the reason *Le balcon* was not played in France until 1960 (it had its premiere in London in 1957) was because it was seen as “sexually provocative and seemed to be a veiled endorsement of anti-colonial revolution,” (White 418). While it is easy to see the sexual provocation in *Le balcon*, there is little in the play that openly suggests that it was anti-colonial, and my research has turned up nothing that provides either critical commentary specifying the reason that any critic would have held this point of view, or other concrete evidence to support this claim. Although the play was written before *Les nègres*, which itself was completed in 1957, because of its controversial nature, it was still only the second of the three plays to be performed in France (Esslin 216, 228). Genet himself repeatedly rejected the notion that his plays were intended as political, preferring instead to suggest that real action, not that on a stage or screen, was the way to change political situations (White 424). Yet his last three plays (*Le balcon, Les nègres, Les paravents*) were written during an intensely political period and contained political undertones that could not be ignored. The
Algerian war, fought between 1954 and 1962, the end of French involvement in Vietnam following the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the Soviet suppression of Hungary in 1956 began to change French views on colonization, communism, and the Stalinist regime. It is impossible that these events did not affect his worldview and therefore his plays, especially since he read several newspapers a day during these tumultuous years (White 425). If the world was changing around Genet, these changes were not ignored in his writing, as his last three plays involved the topics of colonization, the treatment of Arabs by the French, and government oppression and revolution. *Le balcon* treats the topics of government oppression and revolution, and includes a critique of the nature of power.

In *Le balcon*, the audience is privy to the inner workings of *le Grand Balcon*, situated in the middle of a city rocked by revolution. The focus of the play does not seem to be on the sexual life within the walls of the establishment, as would be expected from a play about a brothel, but rather on the relationship between function and being (*la fonction* and *l’être*). Early in the play, the client referred to simply as *L’Evêque* waxes poetic about his presence in the bordello and the role he has decided to play.

[P]our devenir évêque, il eût fallu que je m’acharne à ne l’être pas, mais à faire ce qui m’y eût conduit. Devenu évêque, afin de l’être, il eût fallu—afin de l’être pour moi, bien sûr!—il eût fallu que je ne cesse de me savoir l’être pour remplir ma fonction. . . . une fonction est une fonction. Elle n’est pas un mode d’être. Or, évêque, c’est un mode d’être. C’est une charge. Un fardeau. . . . aux chiottes la fonction. (44)
Here, the false bishop wishes only to *be* a bishop rather than to perform all the duties of a bishop. His role is one of being, and not of function. He also tacitly makes a distinction between becoming and being (*devenir* and *être*), tying becoming to function, and the act of being to the being itself. His sexual enjoyment of his role in the bordello would be impoverished if he actually had to perform all the tasks necessary to become a bishop, because at that point reality and illusion would become indistinguishable and the element of fantasy would disappear. This relates further to Irma and Carmen’s conversation about the presence of a plumber in the brothel, and explains in part their sense of confusion about the plumber and his role.

IRMA  *Nouvelle sonnerie. Elle appuie sur une autre manette et regarde.*

Fausse alerte. C’est le plombier qui s’en va.

CARMEN : Lequel

IRMA : Le vrai

CARMEN : Lequel est le vrai?

IRMA : Celui qui répare les robinets.

CARMEN : L’autre est faux?

IRMA, *elle hausse les épaules...* (70)

Here, the emphasis is placed not on the being, but on the function that is performed. In Irma and Carmen’s perception of the plumber, function trumps being to the point that the real and the false are confounded and indistinguishable because the role is played so perfectly that there might as well be no difference between reality and illusion. If the plumber fixes the taps, even if he is simply a client playing a role, there is no sense in calling him a false plumber because he has fulfilled the role of a plumber,
taken on his function, and is therefore indistinguishable from the real plumber. Irma’s response in this conversation can be understood in two ways, both of which foreshadow coming events in the play. First, her response could be one of nonchalance, indicating that as long as someone is fixing the taps it doesn’t matter whether he is or is not a real plumber. If in fact, the authentic plumber, the one who has studied to be a plumber and gotten a job as a plumber, is killed in the revolution, it won’t matter so long as taps are being fixed when necessary. What has been done has been done and the function is being performed, so there is no need for Irma to actually worry about who is real and who is false, although there is a danger for the client in becoming so involved in his role that it no longer satisfies a sexual fantasy. This response and the possibilities it suggests foreshadow the eventual nonchalance of the Envoyé upon assigning roles of real(?) power to actors. The Envoyé understands that as long as roles are being played, the actor doesn’t matter as long as he or she faithfully fulfills the assigned role. Even if there is no “real” Bishop, Judge or General, once the function has been fulfilled, these actors might as well be “real” because in Genet’s world, a faithful role-play is just as authentic as the real thing. Although the Envoyé is aware of the inauthentic nature of the power because it is he himself who has delegated it, he is unconcerned. Second, Irma’s response could be one of true ignorance and hint at the fact that because reality and illusion have become confounded by functions performed that resemble those of a plumber, there really isn’t any way to tell which plumber is real and which is false. We as spectators do not know whether the client playing the role of the plumber has actually fixed the taps or not, and Irma’s response gives us no further knowledge. However, if both the plumber and the brothel client perform the same function they become indistinguishable. Irma may well
be admitting that she falls into the same trap as the rest of the citizens of the country when they are unable to determine whether their leaders, religious and political, are authentic or inauthentic. Her response here could serve as an indication of why Irma has made it a rule to include one false detail in all of her scenarios, so that the game doesn’t go too far, that is, so that players and observers don’t confuse reality and illusion as may have happened in the case of her client. She will soon remind Carmen that there is always one false detail in the most realistic ceremonies because the clients desire it to be so.

However, throughout the play, the audience receives the impression that even for Irma, the whole business may be but a game of role play over which she has always had ultimate say, but in which she has allowed herself to become dangerously immersed, to the point of being confused over what is reality and what is illusion. She explains that she sometimes feels herself being overcome by the establishment, that she feels herself leaving reality behind.

Mon chéri, la maison décolle vraiment, quitte la terre, vogue au ciel quand je me nomme, dans le secret de mon cœur, mais avec une grande précision, une tenancière de boxon. Chérie, quand, secrètement, dans le silence je me répète en silence : “Tu es une mère maquerelle, une patronne de claqué et de bouic, chérie, tout (Soudain lyrique.) tout s’envole. . . .salons, filles, cristaux, dentelles, balcon, tout fout le camp, s’élève et m’emporte! (73-74)

She continues this line of thought later on while speaking to Georges, the Chief of Police and her lover, about the revolution that is going on outside of the brothel. Georges
insists that the revolution is nothing but a game, and that each revolutionary loves the role he or she is playing, but Irma fears that the game is too real.

IRMA. Mais si, par exemple, ils se laissent emporter hors du jeu? Je veux dire, qu’ils se laissent prendre jusqu’à tout détruire et tout remplacer.

Oui, oui, je sais, il y a toujours le détail faux qui leur rappelle qu’à un certain moment, à un certain endroit du drame, ils doivent s’arrêter, et même reculer… Mais si, emportés par la passion, ils ne reconnaissent plus rien et qu’ils sautent sans s’en douter dans…

LE CHEF DE LA POLICE. Tu veux dire dans la réalité? (87)

The interplay between reality and illusion is directly linked to the interplay between function and being, and the confusion that will eventually take place between one set of opposing forces will have an equal effect on the other set of opposing forces. When the client performing the role of Bishop is forced to actually become the Bishop (and likewise for the clients performing the roles of General and Judge), the elements of fiction that kept the role from becoming a reality disappear as does the enjoyment of the game. He argues that that the fantasy is no longer his alone, and that, as it is now shared and exposed, it no longer means anything, hinting at the fact that there is no longer any deviant behavior from which to draw sexual pleasure. “Tant que nous étions dans une chambre de bordel, nous appartenions à notre propre fantaisie : de l’avoir exposée, de l’avoir nommée, de l’avoir publiée, nous voici liés avec les hommes, liés à vous, et contraints de continuer cette aventure selon les lois de la visibilité” (118). The General responds in kind, complaining that he no longer has any time to prepare himself for his
fantasy of wearing boots and chaps since the fantasy has become his entire being and he is in essence required to perform instead of just to be.

What then can be taken from this opposition in the play between reality and illusion, performing and being, and can it make the play a “veiled endorsement of anti-colonial revolution” (White 418) as was apparently suggested by certain critics? In Madame Irma’s explanation about what her visitors want (“Ils veulent tous que tout soit le plus vrai possible… Moins quelque chose d’indéfinissable, qui fera que ce n’est pas vrai” (73)) it is possible to make out parts of Homi Bhabha’s understanding of colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86 emphasis in the original). There is still a desire to be able to see the “Other” in the colonized, because in this way there can still be a legitimate reason to subjugate him or her. While for Mme Irma and her visitors, the danger of mimicry lies in its potential to become too perfect and indistinguishable from what it is imitating (and this is why her clients require a slippage in their ceremonies), the danger in the colony is to lose the ability to subjugate because of the total success of the civilizing mission and the creation of a colonial subject who is a perfect imitation of the colonizer and potentially endowed with the same knowledge of self-worth as the colonizer. This could potentially create a subject who is no longer willing to submit and who understands the value of talking back to the colonizer.

As to the discussion of power, is Genet suggesting that colonization and anti-colonial revolution are nothing but games that are perpetuated by our desire to play? Is
he suggesting that all reality is nothing but a game and that our lives are simply roles we agree to play? Mme Irma’s roles throughout the play, her eventual decision to accept the position of queen and her subsequent rejection of that role at what appears to be a mere whim seem to suggest exactly that. Genet suggests that our choices in life are limited to deciding between function and being. Genet makes his most damning statements through the *Envoyé* and his offer of a certain kind of power to Irma, the Bishop, the Judge and the General. His offer is that of an illusion that is best described in a statement explaining the whereabouts and situation of the current queen, who is soon to be replaced by Irma. While looking at the corpse of Arthur, the former bodyguard at the brothel who has recently been killed by a stray bullet, he explains, “Sa Majesté s’emploie à devenir tout entière ce qu’elle doit être : la Reine. *(Il regarde le cadavre.*) Elle aussi, elle va vite vers l’immobilité” (100). Rufus Cook interprets not only this, but the actions of the rest of the characters in the play (and as we shall see, possibly the Colonial power structure) as a quest to attain the immobility of the pure image (122). The queen may have been forced, through death, into this immobility of the pure image, but the rest of the characters are actively seeking the kind of immortality and ease that comes with having attained the status of a pure symbol. “What the visitors are after is the appearance, not the reality, of these roles...They want the form without the function, the essence without the accidents, and this essence can be experienced only in a make-believe realm, insulated from the demands and distractions of reality” (Cook 118). Although the *Envoyé* is seeking people to fulfill positions that are thought to require performance, he needs his actors only to present the images of power that will then be perpetuated as symbols (as in scene nine through the lenses of the photographers) in the minds and the hearts of the people,
although as it has been shown even this minor performance is still enough to disillusion the players because they have only received joy in being *symbols* of power. “Though they refer to it as being, it is actually towards non-being that the characters in the play aspire” (Cook 123).

How does this explain the interpretation of the play as a veiled threat to colonialism? Genet, in his presentation of power as the image that can be presented as pure and unmoving and therefore incorruptible, suggests that power and propaganda are similar enough to be confused with each other. He also suggests that the true source of power in the play is the illusion behind the symbol. Propaganda is used to take the eyes of the citizens off of the reality of the situation, just as Irma and the three major characters in the play are used to hide the true source of power, which doesn’t actually exist at all. As Cook states,

> There is no absolute, no final source of being, just as there is no ultimate ground for political authority. There is instead, only the process of symbolization, motivated by the human need for sanction, whereby a name is endowed with the prestige of being and thus acquires the capacity itself to confer power, authority, or being. . . . There is no substance in the world, nothing on which to stand, just as there is no reality in Genet’s play, nothing by which to distinguish the true from the false, the real from the unreal. All modes of persuasion or justification are circular, dependent on sources of authority which they themselves project. (Cook 120-21)

According to the interviews Genet gave, he was a firm believer in the struggle against colonialism. When he was in the military in Syria in the 1930’s he instantly
grasped the political situation. “For the first time, he saw with his own eyes the confusion and resentment that French colonialism could breed in an Arab population. A comparison between French oppression and the harsh treatment Genet himself had suffered at Mettray [prison] was a parallel easy for him to draw” (White 87). This anti-French stance alone would have been enough to allow his plays to be labeled as anti-colonial by critics, but there may be truth to the label that can be found within the context of this particular play. As the quote by Cook points out, there is nothing but a self-referential power structure at the center of the government found within the play. In much the same manner as the Bishop depends on his own image in the mirror—his reassurance that he is the Bishop—for his authority, the government depends on the image that it projects in order to remain in power. The Bishop really depends on nothing but an image of himself, an image that he himself projects, and the image has no real power but that of existing as a symbol. Genet’s presentation of the government in the play as dependent on the images of power it projects behind which there is no real power makes a strong general statement about the nature of power in situations of revolution. If it is true that the government in Le balcon wields a power that is empty and essentially powerless, it wields this power nonetheless because it is permitted to do so by the people over whom it rules. Yet, at the end of the play the revolution resumes precisely because the people no longer feel that the power of the government is justified. It is a combination of reality, in that revolution occurs for precisely the reason that people no longer believe the power of their governments is justified or legitimate, and illusion, in that for the government of Le balcon, the power is empty and illegitimate. Genet’s play can be seen as encouraging the questioning of the power of governments to act in certain
situations where their power seems unfounded. It can be interpreted that in Genet’s eyes, the power of the French government to colonize was abusive and illegitimate, and it is this power that he appears to target most of all. In *Le balcon* this point of view is certainly more subdued than it is in *Les nègres* and *Les paravents*, but it still sets the tone for these later works.

Still, the illusion of power serves the same purpose as real power in this particular society just as Genet suggests that it does in our own society. If the real queen, general, bishop and judge are dead, society doesn’t need *actual* replacements because there is no need for citizens to know that they have ever been gone, just an occasional reminder that the symbol still has something behind it regardless of whether this something has any real power. The *Envoyé* suggests simply that appearances need to be kept up for the sake of society, and that the average citizens notice nothing of power beyond what it is that they see. When the chief of police, worried about the safety of the queen, insists that he is willing to sacrifice everything to protect her and what she represents because it is on her that his power relies, the *Envoyé* responds, “Si vous tenez à sauver la Reine—et plus loin qu’elle notre drapeau, et toutes ses franges d’or, et son aigle, ses cordes et sa hampe, voulez-vous me les décrire?” (101). The response of the chief of police shows that even he, a major member of the power structure, has little idea of what it is that he is serving, other than power itself. “Jusqu’à présent, j’ai admirablement servi ce que vous dites, et sans me soucier d’en connaître autre chose que ce que je voyais. Je continuerai” (101). This response is the crux of the play itself. It is clear that Genet is suggesting that power, be it sexual or political, is based only upon appearance.
This portrayal of power is problematic in a certain sense because it tends almost towards an anarchistic view of society by presenting all power as empty and meaningless. If this is taken to be the case, then there can be no legitimacy for a “just revolution” of any sort as the power taken by the revolutionaries (or in Genet’s other plays, the power taken by the blacks or the Arabs) is just as empty as the power they wished to overthrow.

It is possible to see that Genet himself recognizes this problem if we analyze the end of the play. The Envoyé may command a certain amount of power in Le balcon as a representative of the government, but he is just as easily dismissed by Mme Irma (and it is important to note that he is dismissed by Mme Irma, not by Mme Irma’s incarnation of the Queen) as the Judge, the Bishop and the General, who hold only the power that they have been given. The melding of illusion, appearance, and power both creates some of the most pressing questions (is the entire play a self-aware illusion? Has Mme Irma created the revolution, the maison d’illusions, and the conflict between the two? Is the Envoyé just an actor?) and also undercuts the message at the same time. The biggest problem with this portrayal of power is that while it makes a good case for the overthrowing of unjust governments whose power is based on propaganda and ideology, it does nothing to support the revolutionaries and in the end simply feeds them into a cycle of revolution that cannot end because there will never be a legitimate source of power.

This notion, like the themes of identity, suicide and violence, is also not exclusive to the Theater of the Absurd. Indeed, it was an attitude widely shared in popular culture and typified in the music of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Perhaps the best example of this can
be found in the lyrics of The Who’s “Won’t get fooled again” in which Roger Daltrey sings:

I’ll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around me
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I’ll get on my knees and pray
We don’t get fooled again. (The Who)

He then concludes the song with an anguished scream and the final words “Meet the new boss/Same as the old boss.” These sentiments seem to echo Genet’s own portrayal of power in *Le balcon*, *Les nègres* and *Les paravents*, and present the same problems of revolution bringing no change, only more of the same. Still, while it is important to recognize these fundamental problems with such a portrayal of power, it is equally important not to throw the message out entirely. It is perhaps better to acknowledge a fact that is later corroborated by Aimé Césaire in *La tragédie du roi Christophe* and *Une tempête*: power can be “legitimized” through the use of force.

*Les nègres* continues Genet’s portrayal of power structures and revolutions, while changing its location significantly. Here the action takes place in a colonized country and the actors fulfill similar roles. It might be more accurate to say that the play changes locations, but the play remains almost the same in its theme. Even if Genet replaces the location of a developed country with one of an underdeveloped colony, and the white actors in *Le balcon* with Black actors in *Les nègres*, the story remains essentially the
same. A revolutionary action, of which we see nothing, only the effects in fact, is taking place outside the space of the action of the play. Once again, the actors are portraying actors; the power is never in the hands of those in whose hands we assume it to be; and the end of the play hints at the fact that nothing has changed but the positions of the actors. Yet, the portrayal of a uniquely colonial world represents another important step in the construction of the bridge between the Absurdist Theater and aspects of the plays by francophone authors that I will analyse in the next chapter.

*Les nègres* opens on a stage occupied by the white court, sitting high above the stage, and the blacks below, standing around what looks like a coffin draped with a sheet and covered with flowers. Archibald, the leader of the blacks, introduces all of the blacks to the audience (18) and is interrupted the queen, who wonders about the fate of the occupant of the coffin (19-20). The audience is informed by Archibald that the blacks have murdered a white woman, and are on stage in order to entertain the audience with this crime (25). Yet, it soon becomes apparent that there is something else going on behind the scenes that Archibald is attempting to hide from the spectators when he sends away a black named Ville De Saint-Nazaire to make certain that those behind the scenes “fassent leur travail comme nous allons faire le nôtre” (26) although nothing further is explained. The audience soon learns that Village, one of the blacks, is the man accused of having killed the white woman (71), and it becomes clear that the murder must be acted out on stage again to prove that the act was committed in a spirit of hatred (75). Village, one of the blacks, calls for several of his fellow blacks to play assigned roles in this dramatic reenactment of the murder. Diouf, who has appeared timid and soft spoken, is chosen to portray the murdered woman (81), and he bids farewell to his fellow blacks
before being adorned with a wig, gloves, and white mask. The entire scene of the seduction and murder of the white woman is acted out (84-113) and eventually interrupted by the entry of Ville de Saint-Nazaire who updates Archibald on the happenings behind the scene. During this conversation the audience learns that there is a trial going on in which a black is being tried for a crime and will likely be executed (115). At the conclusion of the representation of the murder, Diouf appears alongside the white court, still masked (125). Soon, the white court leaves their perch above the stage (128), supposedly to go confront the blacks to judge them for their crimes (122), and leaves Diouf behind, where he eventually tells the rest of the blacks below what life as a white is like (128-33). At last, the court returns to the stage, drunk and walking backward (133). Once they are at long last confronted directly with the blacks, they demand a trial (138), and immediately it is revealed that not only has there been no crime committed, but also that the coffin was nothing more than a sheet draped over two chairs (139). In the place of a trial, the white queen and Félicité, another of the blacks, debate the importance of the white to the black, and vice versa (146-59). This debate is only interrupted by the entry of Ville de Saint-Nazaire who announces that the trial behind the scenes has concluded, and the black traitor executed (160). At this news, the white court removes their masks to reveal that they are black (160) and only puts them back on so they can be symbolically executed by the other blacks (171-80) and the play concludes with the queen’s warning that an analogous situation will one day play out with the roles reversed (180).

Genet’s portrayal of colonization in *Les nègres* has become secondary, it would seem, to his portrayal of race. Genet acknowledges first and foremost in his introduction
that the play is exceptional in nature because of its author and its intended audience.

“Cette pièce, je le répète, écrite par un Blanc, est destinée à un public de Blancs” (13).

The play stars only black actors, and even the white masks are created with the express
desire of not completely masking the black skin behind them. The masks are also taken
off at one point during the play to reveal to even the least observant theatergoer that the
actor wearing the mask is indeed black. Genet makes no attempt to hide the skin color of
the actors he is writing for, and in this respect, the play can be seen as either extremely
bold, or extremely offensive. As he himself says in another of the prefaces to this play,
“Un soir un comédien me demanda d’écrire une pièce qui serait jouée par des noirs.
Mais, qu’est-ce que c’est donc un noir? Et d’abord, c’est de quelle couleur?” (8).

This curious comment is explained by Freida Ekotto and Bénédicte Boisseron as a
reminder to readers and spectators (who may have read this preface in the playbill) that
Genet wants himself to be omnipresent in the proceedings (103). “The preface informs
the reader that Genet leaves the trace of his white voice superimposed on the black voice
intentionally just as he leaves the black skin around the white mask on purpose. At this
point, the spectator or reader must speculate on the nature of blackness, not only as a
colour of some person’s skin, but also as a thing or quality in its own right” (103). Even
while I agree with this statement, I believe that Genet goes even further in his subversion
of race, claiming that blackness is not a color, but rather a state of mind, and also—
because of the theme of oppression and subversion in the play—that the black has been
made synonymous with the outcast and therefore can be found in anyone who has been
oppressed or dominated. Genet, in whatever capacity he has to do so—and Ekotto and
Boisseron do bring up the question of legitimacy of his putting words in the mouth of the
— almost seems to be attempting to take the first steps towards a post racial view of humanity. Controversial? Absolutely! But would Genet have settled for less?

Although the plays of the Absurdist s often have a great deal of humor in them, this particular play does not appear as if it was written to provoke laughter. The play has moments that should be funny, such as the appearance of the court in ridiculous masks that clearly do not disguise the black actors behind them, but Genet has written the play in such a way that the only laughter is in fact calculated and orchestrated, even on the part of the audience. There is no free and easy laughter, only laughter that is meant as a way to relieve tension. In 1900 Henri Bergson wrote a treatise on laughter, Le Rire, that addressed it as both a social necessity and a corrective gesture indicating that something is amiss (20). This essay is rife with racist dialogue and the title itself hints at the backward nature of the thought processes contained in it, however, some of the ideas surrounding the nature of laughter fit exactly with those presented by Genet in Les nègres. One of Bergson’s points addresses the issue of why skin color has such a profound effect on a viewer.

Pourquoi rions-nous d’une chevelure qui a passé du brun au blond ? D’où vient le comique d’un nez rubiconд ? et pourquoi rit-on d’un nègre ? Question embarrassante, semble-t-il, puisque des psychologues tels que Hecker, Kraepelin, Lipps se la posèrent tour à tour et y répondirent diversement. Je ne sais pourtant si elle n’a pas été résolue un jour devant moi, dans la rue, par un simple cocher, qui traitait de « mal lavé » le client nègre assis dans sa voiture. Mal lavé ! un visage noir serait donc pour notre imagination un visage barbouillé d’encre ou de suie. Et,
conséquemment, un nez rouge ne peut être qu’un nez sur lequel on a passé une couche de vermillon. Voici donc que le déguisement a passé quelque chose de sa vertu comique à des cas où l’on ne se déguise plus, mais où l’on aurait pu se déguiser. (24)

Bergson himself certainly does not seem to be guilty of propagating a dialogue that is as intrinsically racist as the dialogue of the driver in this passage, nor does he appear to share his opinion, although he does nothing to explain the injustice of the situation. If his statement is examined on the basis of what its intended audience was to take from it, Bergson’s use of the ‘on’ can be seen as a way of distancing both himself and his reader from the inherent racism contained in the essay. This ‘on’ can easily be translated in the mind of the reader as ‘someone else’ and therefore perhaps reads as an observation of another civilization, or another social class. It can also be read, perhaps less desirably for both the author and the reader, as a general implication of society in which case both reader and author find themselves guilty of the same racism as the driver. It is this particular reading of the essay and the ‘on’ contained within that allows Bergson’s argument to resonate with Genet’s Les nègres. Genet seems to wish to implicate everyone in a racism that he sees as institutionalized, and to show that the laughter of Les nègres is a corrective gesture that is meant only to alleviate dis-ease and tension, although it often does not succeed.

Les nègres is full of direct references to skin color, to racial stereotype and to racist colonial discourse, although it does not (or at least is not intended to) provoke laughter. Genet makes certain that the audience sees the black actors on stage during the production carefully applying black makeup, and even mentions in his introduction to the
play that this particular action is of the utmost importance. “Quand Bobo enduit de cirage la figure de Village, elle doit le faire avec beaucoup de soins. Elle peut utiliser des cirages noirs, jaunes, rouges et blancs afin de réussir un maquillage assez sauvage” (5). Clearly, his focus on blackness and the stereotypical view of the black African as a savage hunter is taken to its absurd extremes. And yet, laughter does not seem to be the goal. Genet takes away the humor of laughter by once again taking it to its absurd extremes in the opening lines of the play. Archibald, who will serve as the emcee, introduces himself to the audience and is immediately stopped by laughter, but not the kind that the audience expects. “Mesdames, Messieurs… (La Cour éclate d’un rire très aigu, mais très bien orchestré. Ce n’est pas un rire en liberté. A ce rire, répond un même rire, mais plus aigu encore, des Nègres qui sont autour d’Archibald. Déconcertée, la Cour se tait)” (17). Since we have already been informed that the play is to be played for white people, the response of the masked court greatly informs the mood of the white audience members and thrusts the audience into an uneasiness that will not let up over the course of the play. As the use of polite language seems ridiculous in the mouth of a colonized subject such as Archibald, the white court responds with uneasy laughter that is immediately cut off by the responding laughter of the surrounding Blacks. It becomes clear from the outset of the play that the Blacks are in control of the action even if it is they who are supposedly to suffer judgment at the end of the performance. The tension created by this reversal of what were assumed to be typical roles was such that Ionesco himself had to leave the theater halfway through the production because he claimed that he felt insulted as a white man (Ekotto and Boisseron 98, White 428). Yet, when the play opened in New York and drew a large African American audience, it often provoked the
opposite effect. Director Gene Frankel is quoted as saying, “Occasionally when there are too many Negroes in the audience, the performance changes tone. There’s more laughing and less stunned silence” (quoted in White 439). Actor Godfrey Cambridge, a member of the first American troupe to play Les nègres and who incarnated the role of Diouf, also felt that the dynamic changed with the shift in audience saying, “I think that they [the black playgoers] are mesmerized by the surface excitements and do not recognize the pungent hostility that the play gives off” (quoted in White 439). The assessments made by these two members of the first production of Les nègres emphasize what is seen to be a shift in perception that is experienced when the material is presented to different races although it is certainly not a sentiment shared by everyone who saw the production. Genet had found a play and a voice that allowed his words to have the divisive effect he seemed to seek. It was only later during the run of Les paravents that Genet would have an even more divisive play that would lead to violence and death threats. Les nègres, while controversial in nature, seemed to balance violent acts that occurred on stage with eloquent speech and elaborate costuming to create a play that usually inspired dialogue and not protests. Les paravents, with its controversial scenes, expansive cast and long running time was certainly a more overt and pointed critique, but the message was often muddled in the waves of protest and the cries for censorship, and also lost in the enormous complexity of the play itself. Les nègres showed Genet’s continued desire for theatricality, but remained brief enough to maintain its powerful effect from beginning to end.
Les nègres was not universally acclaimed, however, and did spur some very negative reactions among certain individuals who saw Genet’s work as the work of a con man. Ed Bullins, a black playwright, wrote:

The editors of Black Theater magazine do not think that any Black people should see “The Blacks.” Jean Genet is a white, self-confessed homosexual with dead white Western ideas—faggoty ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people. His empty masochistic activities and platitudes on behalf of the Black Panthers should not con Black people.

(quoted in White 441)

What Bullins may not have understood when he wrote his article condemning Genet, is that the play itself was likely not initially destined (whatever it may have eventually become) to be a propaganda piece for American Blacks, and certainly not originally destined to promote the activities of the Black Panthers, even if the group did see Genet as a way to promote itself. Nor was the play meant to directly address the civil rights struggle. In this case it is important to separate Genet’s personal activities from his works because the two can become all too easily conflated. If the scenario of the play itself is looked at, Les nègres, although written in 1958 and premiered in New York City in 1961 at the height of a period of intense racial tension, does not portray the situation of American Blacks but rather those of colonized African countries. This is not to say that Genet did not ever intend for his play to speak to American Blacks, only that the scenario specifically outlined in the play itself does not specify it. Whereas in some of his plays Genet instructs directors to attempt to portray characters in a way that would make them reflect the current time period and location of the performance, as he did in Les bonnes
(269-70) and *Le balcon* (275-76), often intending to facilitate the ease with which his message passes between the stage and the audience, he gives no such instruction to the director of *Les nègres*. His portrayal of Blacks is simply a portrayal of the colonized subject, regardless of where they may have been situated, and destined to speak more broadly about the problems with colonization, rather than pointing out specific instances of colonial abuse. It may well be that Genet saw no need to portray colonization in such a way as to make it more relevant to his audience, because it was not for his audience that the play was truly intended. Even if Genet insists that the play was written for an audience of whites, he certainly does not seem to intend for them to have a theatrical experience to which they can easily or comfortably relate. As well, the décor of the play need not change in any case because, to him, the situation for the colonized Black was also unchanging. Nevertheless, despite the criticism and the controversial subject matter that provoked it, and despite the fact that Genet did not seem to have a desire to make the play easily palatable, the scandal eventually worked in Genet’s favor as *Les nègres* went on to become the longest running Off-Broadway non-musical of the 1960’s (White 440).

Setting aside the outside reactions to the play, how does the play make its mark as commentary on Francophone and Colonial issues of the era? Once again, the play references power and revolution, as did *Le balcon*. Once again, the play presents the outcasts and the underdogs as heroic and eloquent, and those who are in power as stilted and undeserving of the power they possess. Where Genet turns everything on its ear is in his use of masking and the subversion of stereotypes. There is almost nothing in the play that is not somehow called into question. The masks are designed to reveal the black
faces behind them, which Frieda Ekotto sees as a doubly deceptive gesture on the part of Genet.

The white Genet…is behind each black voice like a prompter dictating to the black cast how to play Negroes, ‘how to play The Blacks’. Moreover, Genet the white playwright tells the black cast how to play Negroes who themselves play Whites. The subversion is complete. Genet wants each superimposition of black and white to remain apparent in the dramatic collage in order for his own white voice to play an active part in the tension of the play. (102)

Genet subverts the context of the play yet again by allowing the entire work to be a deceptive act that is meant to hide what is going on behind the scenes, much as he hides and subverts the truth behind the first four scenes of Le balcon. The periodic interruptions of the action of the play, already subversive in its subject matter, continue to indicate to the audience that there is a sort of revolutionary action going on in the wings as is hinted from the outset of the play. Only a few minutes into the play, after having carefully explained the murder of the white woman for which the Blacks are to be judged, and after explaining the subsequent acting out of this murder as the pretext under which the action is proceeding, Archibald turns to a fellow Black and says

(Cependant que tous les autres Nègres sont immobiles, et écoutent, il se tourne vers Ville de Saint-Nazaire.) Et vous, monsieur, vous êtes de trop. Tout, étant secret, il faut foutre le camp. Allez, mais allez donc les prévenir. Dites-leur bien que nous avons commencé. Qu’ils fassent leur
travail comme nous allons faire le nôtre. Tout se passera comme à l’accoutumée. Je l’espère. (26)

Immediately, it becomes clear that something else, something to which the audience is not privy, is happening behind the scenes. As Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller point out, whereas in *Le balcon* this revolutionary action concerns only the players until the last moments of the play where Mme Irma directly addresses the audience and implicates them in her game of reality and illusion, *Les nègres* allows the audience to become involved immediately in the subversive game and permits them to know that another action is taking place behind the scenes (157). As if the idea of revolution were not already disconcerting enough, the idea that the hidden action might directly affect the audience makes the play all the more discomforting.

The revolution in this play, much like the revolution, in *Le balcon* concerns the shift of power from the so-called superior group to the outcasts. As has already been seen, the roles are similar in both plays as Genet has provided the roles of Queen, Judge, Governor in place of a Chief of Police, Missionary in place of a Bishop, and also introduced a Valet. Once again, the power wielded by all of these characters is illusory and comes to nothing, even if the entire play is nothing but a game from the outset (although one might say the same of *Le balcon*). The audience is never permitted to forget that the white court is made up of Blacks wearing masks, and therefore may assume that the power of the Whites has already been called into question from the beginning of the play, but the symbolic subversion of power remains important nonetheless. Although the “white” court insists on posturing, stereotyping the Blacks, whom they regard as inferior, displays a desire to judge and sentence, and presents a
patriarchal attitude towards the Blacks’ ability to speak well and behave in a courtly manner, it is they at the end of the play who find themselves entering the Africa of the Blacks drunk and walking backwards (133). It is they who will eventually be judged and sentenced to death, not those upon whom they wished to bring judgment. The role reversal once again suggests that what society has accepted as power is illusory and ephemeral. The Blacks are clearly triumphant at the end of the play, having confused and distracted the white audience and having performed the ritual execution of the entire white court, but their victory is hollow. The White Queen, even if she is meant to garner little sympathy from the audience and from the rest of the Blacks, explains before she is executed, “Nous partons, nous partons, mais dites-vous que nous resterons engourdis dans la Terre comme des larves ou des taupes, et si un jour… dans dix mille ans…” (180). Her speech resonates within the context of the majority of Genet’s plays because in them, there is rarely a complete victory in any revolution. For Genet, the word itself suggests cyclical movement that does not simply stop its rotation at 180 degrees, but continues to describe an entire circle and then another and another. I will discuss this concept of cyclical revolution, an appropriately redundant description of many of Genet’s works, further after a discussion of Les paravents, surely the most complicated and most epic not only of the three plays described here, but also of Genet’s entire œuvre.

As did Les nègres and Le balcon, Les paravents caused a great deal of controversy, much more in fact than the other two plays combined. Its subject matter certainly did nothing to silence the critics: addressing the hot topic of the Algerian conflict in print in 1961, a full year before Algerian independence was granted, raised the hackles of many critics and citizens alike. Even if the play was not staged in France until
1966, it still rivaled the great theatrical scandals in French history, “the premiere of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* in 1830 or the first night in 1913 of Stravinski’s ballet *The Rite of Spring*” (White 481). Critics saw the play as anti-French and were angered that such a play was permitted to run in a state-supported theater. The right-wing press expressed concern that a theater supported by public taxes “was subsidizing a play in which a dead French officer is saluted by the farts of his men while Arab revolutionaries are presented in a sympathetic light” (White 492). Eventually the complaints reached the highest levels of government, and the issue was presented before the *Assemblée Nationale*. In addressing critics and protestors, André Malraux, then minister of culture, compared Genet to an author who had been censored years before for his depiction of a rotting corpse but who was now considered one of the great French-language poets. Citing a verse from Baudelaire’s *Une charogne*, one of several censored pieces by the poet, Malraux showed that individual citations were only part of a greater whole. His point in so doing was to indicate that although parts of a work could well be considered objectionable, it was the *œuvre* as a whole that was to be judged for its artistic merit. He then explained further:

> Je ne prétends nullement – je n'ai d'ailleurs pas à le prétendre – que M. Genet soit Baudelaire. S'il était Baudelaire, on ne le saurait pas. La preuve c'est qu'on ne savait pas que Baudelaire était un génie. Ce qui est certain, c'est que l'argument invoqué : « cela blesse ma sensibilité, on doit donc l'interdire », est un argument déraisonnable. (Malraux)

Malraux concluded his argument by insisting that, “nous n'autorisons pas *Les Paravents* pour ce que vous leur reprochez et qui peut être légitime ; nous les autorisons
malgré ce que vous leur reprochez, comme nous admirons Baudelaire pour la fin d'Une charogne et non pas pour la description du mort” (Malraux).

Critics such as John Killinger and Dorothy Altman agree that in some ways Les paravents is as much an autobiographical portrait of Genet’s relationship to society in general as it is a portrayal of Genet’s disdain for the colonial system and its ills. Critics such as Edmund White have pointed out that there is a linguistic connection between the main characters in Les paravents, the Orties (or Nettles in the English translation), and Genet’s last name, both of which share botanical ties—le genêt being the broom plant (487). The main characters in the play, the Orties, are wanted by no one and are outcasts even among the outcasts. Saïd is a thief who is too poor to afford any but the ugliest of brides, Leïla, who is so hideous that she must wear a hood to conceal her face. The mother, far from being a sympathetic figure, is harsh and grating towards everyone she encounters, insulting her daughter-in-law, ridiculing her son, and constantly bickering with the local women. Eric White argues that Genet has a strangely symbiotic relationship with this play that is not displayed as much in his other works. He writes that Genet had been quizzed by a former lover about his last name and its relationship to the weed-like broom plant (le genêt), and draws this conclusion: “If Genet belonged to no one, then he must have been born amongst the Nettles, a family that dramatizes his simultaneous and conflicting needs to mother people (harshly), to betray everyone, and to serve his intimates” (487). Genet himself speaks of these conflicting needs through the figure of La mère who describes her relationship with nettles, and he is perhaps speaking of himself more than of his characters.
Orties ! (*Soudain lyrique.*) A travers les Mortemarts, Joyeuse, La Tour d’Auvergne, remontez jusqu’à la Fée et jusqu’à la Vierge, moi je sais depuis mon enfance que j’appartiens — par les filles peut-être, et Saïd par moi — à la famille des Orties. Près des ruines, mêlés aux tessons, leurs buissons était ma cruauté, ma méchanceté hypocrite que je gardais, une main derrière mon dos pour blesser le monde. Apprivoisées elles retenait leur venin, elles rentrait leurs aiguilles. Dans leurs feuilles je trempais mes mains délicates : la ciguë ne m’aurait pas glacé les veines. Ce qui est méchant dans le monde végétal m’était gagné. Passant au-dessus et parmi les orties, le vent s’irritait la peau, moi pas. (173-74)

This play also suggests that Genet is once again identifying with the outcasts and the deviants, but more specifically it reveals his desire to identify more with the colonized than with the colonizer. Still, as Malraux indicated in his defense of the play before the *Assemblée Nationale*, although Genet may have identified more with one group than another within the context of the play, his portrayal of everyone remains resolutely misanthropic (Malraux). There are no likable or admirable characters, only those who choose to do what they feel is right, and those who choose to do what they must to survive. Saïd falls squarely between the two camps, choosing both to betray his own people, and also becoming in spite of himself a hero to those Arabs who have already died, although he eventually makes his choice to remain faithful to no one but himself.

The revolution in this play is presented from both sides of the conflict. The Arab rebels are presented poisoning wells, burning down orange groves, and slaughtering
livestock and people. The French army is presented as being on a suicide mission with the goal being to kill and to spill the blood of as many Arabs as possible. Here, as in *Le balcon*, the idea of the immutable and indelible image is held up as the ultimate symbol of purity. The Lieutenant explains to his troops that victory is pointless because France has already conquered and has therefore:

... proposé une image ineffaçable. Donc, pas vaincre, mais mourir. Ou mourir à demi, c’est-à-dire rentrer éclopés, pattes en moins, reins perdus, couilles arrachées, nez mangés, faces rôties... c’est aussi très bien.

Douloureux, mais très bien. Ainsi dans l’image de ses guerriers qui pourrissent, la France pourra se regarder pourrir. ... (180).

The dead Arabs, and many of the living as well, hold up Saïd as the ultimate symbol just as they held up Si Slimane, another outcast and deviant, before him. Leïla, or rather her ugliness (perhaps they are one in the same), encourages Saïd to choose only evil and hatred in his life, to lead her unflinchingly to the land of the shadow and of the monster (169). Saïd does exactly this and becomes a traitor to his people, a symbol of all that is underhanded and inassimilable, although he does not initially take this role of his own accord. Saïd is first suspected of being a thief (52) and then accused and branded as a thief (55) before he fully embraces this role. It is unclear whether or not he has stolen before when we encounter him working alongside his fellow Arabs in the forth chapter. After Sir Harold has departed and left behind his glove to spy on the workers, Saïd has the following conversation with Habib who wonders aloud how Saïd intends to get money to travel overseas.

HABIB. ... *(Silence.)* Et l’argent pour la traversée?
SAÏD, *inquiet*. Tu me soupçonnes ?

*Dès ce moment, dans le fond de la scène s’élève un praticable.*

*La nuit se fait peu à peu.*

HABIB, *ironique*. Pas encore. Mais un homme qui a formé le projet grandiose de traverser la mer salée… Hein ? Pas à la nage ?

SAÏD. Je vais travailler. *(Frissonnant.)* Y a le vent qui se lève.

*Les deux hommes imitent avec la bouche le bruit du vent, et grelottent.*

HABIB. Quand le soleil s’est couché, avec une lanterne ou un briquet tu vas sarcler les betteraves ?

SAÏD, *inquiet*. Donc, tu me soupçonnes ?

*Sur le praticable du fond, apparaît le paravent blanc de la prison du cinquième tableau.*

*La nuit est totale.* (52-53)

Genet has designed the scenery to be an integral part of his play, spending a great deal of time exchanging letters with Roger Blin over details of the way the screens were to be placed and moved, so the significance of the prison appearing immediately after Saïd voices a second time his worry of being suspected as a thief is not to be ignored here. Just as the ideas of destiny and fate allow La Mère to proclaim herself a part of the nettle family (173), Saïd appears to be destined to take his place within the family. He has already taken to fighting with other men at the local bars because of the ugliness of his wife (44), but his descent into the abject is not made clear until his release from prison, when his mother notices that he has changed (59). From that point on, it is as if he decides that he will become what he has been branded and that he will not only
become abject, but excel at becoming abject and treacherous. His transformation is so stunning that even Leïla asks him “Tu as vraiment pris la décision d’aller jusqu’au bout?” (169), and his reply, several lines later is to ask Leïla if she can ask the dragon of her sleep (an appropriately poetic and abstract image) “ce que je peux dire, ce que je peux vendre, pour être tout à fait dégueulesse” (176).

Saïd’s trajectory appears to follow the pattern of Genet’s own life, as noted by critics. Dorothy Altman speaks about how Genet’s decision to take up a life of crime was his own, but was also spurred on by society. Accused at the age of 10 of a theft he did not commit, Genet reacted in a way that dramatically changed the course of his life.

Hurt and proud, Genet rebelliously fulfilled society’s expectations. Like Pierrot in Funeral Rites who forced himself to chew and swallow the worm he accidentally put in his mouth, Genet willed himself to be a thief. Repeated infractions led to his incarceration in the Mettray Reformatory when he was fifteen; there he encountered squalor, brutality, and homosexuality. (4)

Altman is here speaking of another of Genet’s works, but similarities also exist within the context of Les Paravents. As if Saïd’s decision to become a criminal after being accused of being a criminal isn’t similar enough to Genet’s own life, another critic, John Killinger, remarks, “Probably Genet intentionally made Saïd analogous to himself, who, having once chosen degradation as a way of life, now found himself pardoned by the President of the Republic and lionized as a literary figure” (215). Saïd discovers at the end of the play that he is a hero because of his treachery, and that his mother and his
wife are also hailed for their association with him. Ommu, an old woman who communicates with the dead during her hallucinations, praises the family for their filth.

On avait toutes la chair de poule, à savoir que sa sainte famille s’enfonçait dans la pourriture… Et, encore maintenant, ce qu’il me reste de peau et d’os a la chair de poule. Les seigneurs d’autrefois le diront aux seigneurs d’aujourd’hui que rien ne doit être protégé comme un petit tas d’ordures.

(265)

Saida does not, however, accept this praise with gladness. In fact, one of his great fears throughout the play is to not be punished justly for his crimes. When he comes before a Cadi in scene 7, the Cadi shows no desire to judge him for his crimes because he doesn’t see anything in it for himself. “A toi, ça servira. Après le jugement et après la peine tu sera transformé—un tout petit peu—mais moi, si après le jugement, si après ta peine je reste le même. . .” (80). In the English language version, there is an interesting addition of several lines where the Cadi threatens not only to withhold judgment, but also to pardon Saida for his crimes, “in the name of God and the people,” to which Saida replies, “You’d be killing me” (52). Saida, even at this early point in the play has already taken to his role as a thief and sees his punishment as a natural part of his being. To be deprived of the punishment that he feels he is due is painful and leaves him feeling as if he has been deprived of a part of his essence. Although the French text leaves out this part of the conversation, it is still evident within the text that Saida feels the need to fulfill part of his identity by going to prison, while the Cadi seems to feel as if upholding his part of the bargain has ceased to provide him with any essence. This exchange is reminiscent of the conversation between the Judge and the Thief in scene two of Le balcon where the Judge
is frightened that his Thief will refuse to be a thief and thus deprive him of his very essence (52-53) and points to the larger themes of identity and power in Genet’s work. Killinger suggests that in the larger context of Genet’s own life, “It is ironic when the little boy who has scribbled obscenities on the sidewalk is punished by being praised for what he has done; and Genet evidently feels that this is the case with him” (215).

For all the excitement and controversy Saïd stirs up among both the living and the dead, he refuses to be the symbol that everyone wishes him to be. Confronted by both the living and the dead at the end of the play, he is forced to make a choice as to his final destiny. The soldiers with whom he has been collaborating as a traitor suggest that he belongs with them. The dead Sergeant, revered by the French soldiers for his beauty and ferocity, even explains to Saïd that he himself has received a plaque for all that he did during his military career. “Tu tiens le bon bout, Saïd, fais comme moi ! Moi, toutes mes saloperies me rendaient lumineux. J’ai relui, Saïd !” (274). This statement is corrected, in part, by the Academic who explains that the Sergeant is receiving a plaque only because he has died. He further explains that the plaque is really being given in spite of what he has done, because no one actually knows about all the awful things he did during the war. The Sergeant has become nothing more than a symbol in the same way that the Chief of Police becomes nothing but a symbol in Le balcon. In this way, Genet again points out the importance of the symbol as immutable and eternal, and therefore dead and unchanging, and highlights the difference between the Sergeant’s death and Saïd’s eventual choice of death. Saïd dies, defying the orders of the living Arab combatants, and the wishes of the dead, but does not cross over into the land of the dead as proof of his desire to remain isolated and also as proof of his desire to not become a symbol.
In *Les paravents* we can see that power and revolution retain their places as the most important themes in Genets œuvre and allow us to see society through his eyes. His praise of the abject, of those who are outcasts, and of those who revolt against what they see as an abuse of illusory power, serves to illustrate his view that power is abstract, illusory and temporary. Saïd does not have the appearance of, nor does he act in a way befitting a hero, but Genet is able to transform him into a hero by changing what is going on around him. Saïd’s victory is in remaining true to himself and not becoming, as do the soldiers, a mere replica of those who were in power before. Ommu criticizes the Arab combatants for becoming mirror images of the French soldiers who came before them, saying “...être leur reflet c’est déjà être eux...” (203). Genet’s victorious characters are almost always those whom we have come to distrust or been conditioned to distrust as a society, but their victories are never without a caveat. Here, he again reminds us that revolution means an entire turn of the wheel and not just the turning over of a leaf. Saïd serves as a reminder that, just as the Blacks in *Les nègres* execute one of their own for a crime against them, the outcasts have their outcasts and are in a way destined to repeat the history they have fought against.

In concluding this chapter, I want to speak in depth of the implications of power and its treatment in these three works of Genet. As we have already seen in the three plays, power is seen as an illusory device used by those who somehow have been endowed with the right to use it even though this power rests on nothing. Even considering the potential problems with such a portrayal as I discussed them above, Genet’s work can still be seen as subversive for its radical view of power. His presentation of power as little more than a tool, and more often than not an illegitimate
one, is in itself a revolutionary act that could have been at times perceived as a threat to French colonization. His use of figures that strongly resembled both those who had been colonized by the French and also those who colonized was another threat to the Colonial ideal, because it hit far too close to home for comfort. Although Genet was notoriously fickle in his interpretations of his own work, and although it must be pointed out that he never specifically spoke or wrote of a link between his work and the political acts of active revolutionaries or the Algerian revolutionary forces, his plays were interpreted by many at the time as subversive and dangerous to the established order.

It is in this theme of power and illusion that Genet’s work in part allows readers to see and appreciate with greater clarity the continuity of drama from the absurdist dramas of Beckett and Ionesco through to the dramatic works of Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini in the DROM-COM regions, and the works of Marie NDiaye. The three plays discussed in depth in this chapter are all critical of what passes for power in their various scenarios. In each play, ceremony and illusion are used to mask the ineffectiveness of the powers that be and costuming is used to ridicule those in power. In addition, Genet warns spectators not to be drawn in by well-crafted illusions but rather to question power in all its forms. In *Les nègres*, costuming, masking, and ceremony contribute to the illusion of power. The play is, in essence, nothing but a ruse that is intended to distract the viewer from the fact that the Blacks are fully capable of governing themselves without the supposed superior power of the colonizing force, and the viewer discovers as much at the end of the performance. In *Le balcon*, the idea of costuming and role-playing is key. The viewer is left, much as they are at the end of *Les chaises*, with the impression that reality and illusion have become indistinguishable, and that power may only be real because it
has been allowed to be real. In *Les paravents*, the ridicule of stereotypical roles is vital. Saïd is valued for his underhandedness and the governing forces, the landowners, and the army, both French and Arab, are seen to be nothing but laughable stereotypes who are treated by Genet with as great a disdain as they themselves reserve for the Arabs. In this, they are once again almost analogous to the figures of the Court in *Les nègres*, and the figures of the Judge, General, Bishop and Queen in *Le balcon*. Death is presented as the only true equalizer, reducing all worries to nothing and allowing the audience to see that at the end, the distribution of power in life meant little.

In addition to this view of power as an illusory force, Genet also portrays it, as we have seen, as ephemeral yet unmoving. Simply by showing that the roles remain the same, even if the players change, Genet is able to show that the same games have been going on for years and that very little has changed about the way power is handled regardless of the people in power (it is worth noting that Aimé Césaire will have much to say about this fact in his *Tragedie du roi Christophe*). It is also through the use of the interdependent relationship that Genet is able to show that power often depends as much upon the powerless as upon the powerful. In *Le balcon*, the Judge finds himself not only frustrated but also frightened when his “criminal” refuses to behave as he wishes. He explains:

> Mon être de juge est une émanation de ton être de voleuse. Il suffirait que tu refuses… mais ne t’en avise pas!... que tu refuses d’être qui tu es—ce que tu es, donc qui tu es—pour que je cesse d’être… et que je disparaisse, évaporé. Crevé. Volatilisé. Nié. D’où : le Bien issu du… Mais alors?

> Mais alors? Mais tu ne refuseras pas, n’est-ce pas? Tu ne refuseras pas
d’être une voleuse? Ce serait mal. Ce serait criminel. Tu me priverais
d’être! (52-53)

Genet recapitulates this idea in the majority of his plays, as he does in the
conversation between Saïd and the Cadi in *Les paravents*, and shows a great deal of
respect for the balance that must occur between opposing forces (something that I will
reiterate through an exploration of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic in chapter 3),
often to the detriment of what is perceived as moral. If his plays tend at times to elevate
the obscene or to show the balance tipped towards what is considered the “immoral” side
of life, they do so while maintaining all the while that the balance will tip back towards
the other side eventually so that nothing remains constant. *Les nègres* shows these two
sides through the characters of the Queen and Félicité. Félicité reproaches the queen for
her attitude towards the color black, insisting that attitudes are changing and must
change. “Tout change, ce qui est doux, bon, aimable et tendre sera noir. Le lait sera noir,
le sucre, le riz, le ciel, les colombes, l’espérance, seront noirs—l’opéra aussi, où nous
irons, noires, dans des Rolls noires, saluer des rois noirs, entendre une musique de cuivre
sous les lustres de cristal noir…” (155). Although the play ends overwhelmingly in favor
of the Blacks, the queen does not leave without a word of warning that as soon as
Félicité’s prediction comes true and complacency sets in, the Whites will emerge from
their oppression. Genet does not allow her to finish her phrase, but the warning is clear.
The balance of power will one day shift again even if it takes ten thousand years, and
then in a play written by a black voice the white savages will face white actors with black
masks before a black audience.
Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini differ widely from each other in terms of their backgrounds and their critical reception. Aimé Césaire is widely regarded as one of the fathers of the négritude movement, was a politician who advocated for the departmentalization of the former French colony of Martinique, and is known worldwide for his poetry and his theater. Marie Susini is much less widely known outside of France, where she was a friend and colleague of editor Jean Daniel (Renou 77), and she is known mainly for her novels, having written only one play; *Corvara, ou la malédiction* (1955). Césaire and Susini are, however, connected through the themes that run through their plays and their status as French outsiders. Susini, as a Corsican, belonged to a culture with a long tradition of fierce independence that was often perceived negatively by those on the mainland, and Césaire, through both skin color and his origins in the former French colony of Martinique, was a polarizing figure both for those on the French mainland and also for those in Martinique.

The plays of both Césaire and Susini are connected to the Theater of the Absurd more strongly through their themes rather than through their form. Susini spent much of her life in Paris in literary circles that included Jean Daniel, editor of the literary journal *Caliban*, a literary journal whose spirit was based on the post-war desire to encourage a better understanding of the world and serve the ideal of peace (Renou 76). Marie Susini also had contact with Albert Camus (as he was also involved with *Caliban*), and wrote a
great deal in her novels about identity and its relationship to nationality. Césaire, who also lived in Paris, where he encountered the other major authors who would be important figures in the Négritude movement, wrote extensively about identity and its connection to race and nationality. Susini’s *Corvara* uses fear to create a theatrical atmosphere of foreboding that will later be used to great effect by playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. Césaire uses historical and historically inspired events in the two plays that I will discuss here, and in this way his plays are more similar to those of Jean Genet than to those of either Beckett or Ionesco. His recreation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* takes the focus off of Prospero and his revenge plot and places it on Caliban and his struggle against colonization, and his *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963) takes the historical events surrounding the early days of Haiti’s independence and expresses the difficulty of reshaping the identity of a people that has recently emerged from colonization.

The three plays in this chapter do not closely resemble the Theater of the Absurd *in form*, but it is important to remember that form is only one part of any movement. The French absurdists are certainly known more for their experimentation with form and language, as can be seen in the plays of Ionesco and Beckett, while the absurdist plays that were written by playwrights like Harold Pinter and Edward Albee retain many of the recurring themes while showing an evolution in form. Pinter, an Englishman, and Albee, an American, both began writing towards the end of the 1950’s during the height of the absurdist movement, and show a gradual evolution away from the focus on absurdity in form, and more towards a focus on recurring absurdist themes. Pinter retains some of the experimental forms, choosing to use bizarre scenarios, disconnected logic, and extreme
shifts in emotion throughout many of his plays. His early plays are typified in such scenarios as can be seen in *The Homecoming* (1965) and *The Room* (1960), and he often uses language as a weapon (much like Ionesco), as seen in the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party* (1959). Language and the extreme difficulty of communication are central to many of his plays, even as the form of his theater tends to be slightly less absurd than the form of Ionesco or Beckett. Edward Albee retains the difficulty of communication in a great many of his plays, notably *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) and *A Delicate Balance* (1966), while his form does not often stray into the absurd. Even so, he is considered to be an absurdist playwright because of the thematic elements of his work, and his early plays such as *The Zoo Story* (1958) do tend more towards the absurd in both form and theme. As far as Albee’s early theater is concerned, critic Paul Hurley describes the difference in his theater and that of most American absurdists as a fundamental difference in culture.

The primary difference between French and American absurd theater, then, is simply that even though our playwrights have employed avant-garde dramatic techniques, they have been incapable of adopting the basic commitment of absurdity. Let me put the point this way: French writers have produced plays which have successfully dramatized the meaningless of life—probably because the tendencies of French culture have aided and abetted such points of view. But America, even though its playwrights have employed the same methods, has presented plays different either in form or content because the tendencies of our culture do not surrender themselves to a belief that life is absurd. In America we are quite willing
to believe that society is ridiculous, but not life itself. The French are capable—even willing, it often appears—to accept the absurdity of existence; but Americans do not, perhaps cannot, relinquish their belief that man and society can be changed and improved. (635)

Jan Kott, another influential theater critic from Poland has been quoted in various sources as having explained that in Polish theater, Bertolt Brecht was performed when actors and directors wanted fantasy and Samuel Beckett was performed when actors and directors wanted realism (Perloff 76, Bentley 47), again confirming that cultural differences influence not only the writing of but also the reception and understanding of various genres of theater. What Kott is explaining here is based on the same logic that made the prisoners of San Quentin penitentiary receptive to the production of Waiting For Godot. In the communist country of Poland, everyday life resembled a scenario out of a Beckett play and the actors and directors, even if they perceived the plays as “absurd”, recognized that Beckett’s dramas were in some way analogous to real life under the thumb of the oppressive communist regime. With this understanding of the differences inherent in the cultural heritage of each playwright, I will state my case as to why Césaire and Susini should be considered to be a part of the Theater of the Absurd through both theme and, at times, technique.

The theme of masking, as we have already seen in the plays of Genet, is important in the Theater of the Absurd. It is also a hallmark of classic Greek theater and is a fundamental element of many African theater traditions as well. Césaire makes it an important theme in his Une tempête, (1969) a play based on Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and draws upon both the culture of the dominant and the culture of the dominated to
show this classic English drama in the light of the very real colonial drama that was playing out as Césaire wrote this play. A summary of the plot and the differences between the Shakespearian original and the adaptation by Césaire can be found in A. James Arnold’s excellent article “Césaire and Shakespeare: Two Tempests.” Arnold points out that little is changed in the structure of the play itself, but rather the focus has been shifted to make Caliban into the protagonist of the play (240). I will leave to Mr. Arnold the summarization of the Shakespearian original and focus only on the adaptation here.

Césaire’s adaptation begins with a prologue where the meneur du jeu instructs the actors to choose their masks before the play begins (9), is followed by the shipwreck in scene one, and then by the exposition in which Prospero reveals his origins to his daughter in scene two. Shortly following this exposition scene, the audience is introduced to Caliban, who has been transformed from “Shakespeare’s deformed and sorry creature” (Sarnecki 282) into a vibrant and revolutionary character. Caliban wastes no time in revealing his desire to liberate himself from Prospero’s grip (24), and is in this way distanced from the soft spoken and cautious Ariel who prefers the thought of making peace to that of openly revolting (37). While Césaire keeps many of the scenes involving Gonzolo, Sebastian, Alonso, and Ferdinand, he does little with them aside from showing Prospero’s fickle humor and love of power. In act two, scene two, for example, Prospero first instructs Ariel to show food to the starving shipwreck survivors and then take it away from them as they are about to eat (42). Then, once he sees that his tactics aren’t working as he has planned, he forces food upon the captives, trying to stuff them until they burst (43). Ariel questions his motives, and Prospero shows his hand by saying,
“Trève de raisonnement ! Mon humeur est changée ! Ils me léseraient de ne point manger. Qu’ils se sentent manger dans ma main comme des poussins. C’est une marque de soumission que j’exige d’eux” (43).

Act three opens with a romantic interlude between Miranda, Prospero’s daughter, and Ferdinand, who has become Prospero’s slave. At the end of this scene, Prospero relieves him of his servitude (55), setting the scene for the wedding between Ferdinand and Miranda two scenes later. Before the wedding however, in scene three, Caliban encounters Stephano and Trinculo, the drunken buffoons from the Shakespearian original, and is once again given a different role from that proposed by Shakespeare. Caliban, realizing that the two men are drunken fools, convinces them to help him overthrow Prospero (64). The wedding scene contains the only character added by Césaire to the storyline, the devil god Eshu who interrupts the wedding ceremony and who serves not only to show Prospero’s true lack of magical power in his inability to control this Yoruba spirit (Arnold 247), but also as a representation of “an invigorating infusion of African and Caribbean vitality from Jacques Roumain, Senghor, and others” (Porter 376). The following scene shows the confrontation between Caliban and Prospero (79) and ends with Caliban and his band of drunkards being taken prisoner.

Scene five is the final scene in which Ariel receives his liberty (83), and Prospero, planning to leave the island, offers liberty and forgiveness to Caliban (87). However, as foreshadowed in Act two, scene two, when Caliban refuses to accept the forgiveness of Prospero (87-89), Prospero, demanding submission, decides that he must stay on the island and fight the battle of civilization to the bitter end (90). The scene, and the play,
ends with a portrait of Prospero, grown old and tired, still attempting to defend civilization, while Caliban sings his freedom song in the distance (92).

As I noted, Césaire uses all the characters in the original drama, with a few additional notes about the racial makeup of Ariel and Caliban, and with the interesting addition of a character representing the Black Devil god Eshu. His description of the play is equally interesting, because he writes on the title page that the play is supposed to be an “Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre” (5). This description may bring to mind the specific instructions that Genet included at the beginning of his Les nègres, another play in which masking was prevalent, in which he explained explicitly that his play was destined for an audience of whites. It also draws the attention of the reader to the importance of race in the play. Lawrence Porter notes both the importance of masking and race, and this connection with Genet in a 1995 article on Une tempête.

Moreover, after having overtly subtitled his play “Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre,” Césaire simultaneously introduces the racial differences that reflect the Caribbean social hierarchy of the colonial era, by specifying that Caliban is black and Ariel mulatto, and denounces these differences as superficial by using masks. Likewise, Jean Genet, for example, had a few years earlier exposed the speciousness of sociopolitical hierarchies in his anticolonial play Les Paravents. (Porter 365)

Césaire’s interest in race has already been made apparent in La tragédie du roi Christophe (1963) where he takes care in the preface to the play to alert the spectator to Christophe’s status as nègre and Pétion’s status as mulâtre.
The masking of the players in *Une tempête* is a significant detail that could well be missed if one were not at a live performance of the play or if the stage directions were not carefully read. Césaire notes at the very beginning of the play, on the page where the roles are explained, “Atmosphère de psychodrame. Les acteurs entrent les uns après les autres et chacun choisit un masque à sa convenance” (7 emphasis mine). He then continues by adding a brief preface to the play that does not appear in the Shakespearian original, where the *meneur de jeu* speaks to the actors about the importance of their masks. “Allons, Messieurs, servez-vous… A chacun son personage, et à chaque personage son masque” (11). In Jean Genet’s *Les nègres* and *Le balcon*, the masks and costumes are used to hide and disguise. Genet had specific ideas about how the masks were to look, and how they were to be used in conjunction with makeup and costuming. However, Césaire gives no specific details about costuming, allowing the actors to choose masks at their leisure.

This does not diminish the role of the masks in the play but rather enhances both the concept of masking and the meaning of the play itself. As Judith Holland Sarnecki points out in her analysis of *Une Tempête*, Césaire’s title is not a direct translation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which would require the definite article *la*, rather Césaire uses the indirect article *une*, which would make his play, *A Tempest*, “just one among many, singular as opposed to universal” (283). Sarnecki also points out that in previous analyses of the play the “*meneur de jeu*, who calls upon the actors to choose their roles by donning masks as the play begins, recalls the artificiality of both the category of ‘race’ and the racialized social hierarchy under colonization” (282). As the actors in the play are at liberty to choose whichever mask suits them best on a particular evening, it is
entirely possible that each evening, each actor might choose a different mask than he or she had chosen the night before. Although the play would remain the same in its actions and its dialogue, the visual image could change each evening with the swapping of masks. When the variety of masking is coupled with Césaire’s less universal title, an interesting change takes place that allows Césaire’s focus on colonization to rise to the surface in a surprising way. If, each evening, the masks chosen by the actors are changed, the image of colonization changes during each performance. Imagine if during two subsequent performances, the masks that Prospero and Caliban chose were to be swapped for each other. Although people who did not attend both performances would be unaware of this switch, anyone who attended both performances would have to mentally adjust to the idea of who is the master and who is the slave. Although no mask is assumed to represent either master or slave according to the directions given by Césaire, the actor behind each mask would give his or her mask its significance, and the audience would look at that particular mask as representative of the position of its bearer. If the mask were then switched with that of an actor playing the opposite role, anyone seeing the play twice would also have to alter his or her perception of what the mask represented. In a way, each performance will reflect the varied face of colonization throughout the world, challenging each viewer’s perception of what colonization might look like in various places throughout the globe. Césaire’s production allows us to see colonization not as one isolated incident, but as a collection of events. If the play is seen in an even more contemporary sense, as a metaphor for oppression in general rather than as a metaphor that specifically points to colonization, the swapping of masks becomes even more poignant and perhaps even more relevant to the world as it is today.
The concept of masking and disguise is certainly prevalent in *Une tempête* and serves to link the play to the plays of Genet as far as the Theater of the Absurd is concerned, as well as to a great deal of traditional African theater. However, another important aspect of this play that links it with the Absurd is its focus on identity and alienation as these themes have already been discussed in the previous chapters. Both Caliban and Prospero are exiles in their own way; Prospero from his Dukedom of Milan, and Caliban in his own island home where he finds himself dominated. Joseph Khoury points out that even in the Shakespearian version, “we often forget the irony that Prospero himself was displaced, uprooted, banished, just as he has displaced, uprooted, and banished Caliban” (23). Shakespeare himself already sparks discussion on this issue of colonizer/colonized with his presentation of Caliban as rebellious and poetic, although his audience would have seen the relationship from a strictly European point of view. Césaire problematizes the relationship further as he is writing both for the colonizer and the colonized. It is through the exploration of this relationship in particular that the sentiment of the Absurd can be found, especially in the treatment that it receives in Césaire’s version of the play. In much the same way that Jean Genet problematized the relationship between the French and the unnamed Arabs that they had colonized in *Les paravents*, Césaire complicates our view of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban in a way that Shakespeare did not. Both Caliban and Prospero find themselves isolated from their peers in different ways. Caliban is isolated from Ariel through his desire for freedom without compromise (38), and even isolated from Trinculo and Stephano, those men with whom he has chosen to work to overthrow Prospero, through his connection to nature, which seems to confuse and disorient them (76). Prospero has
already been isolated through his placement on the island, and in his first scene is forced to admit to his daughter that he has been lying to her about her origins since she was born (20). He is the master of those on the island, but remains isolated from them for the same reason. At the end of the play he chooses to remain on the island rather than return to Europe, and in so doing chooses isolation over community. Both he and Caliban are so linked through the Master-Slave dialectic that they cannot exist apart from each other, and at the same time cannot have real relationships with those around them because of their preoccupation with their status. In other words, their identities lead to their isolation.

Alexandre Kojève provides an explanation of Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic that allows it to be seen in terms that emphasize the importance of what Césaire has done in his portrayal of Caliban and Prospero. Kojève explains that the desire of the Master to be recognized as superior will always end in disappointment, because in order to be seen as the Master, he must either kill the “other” or make the “other” his slave. However, if he kills the “other”, than he cannot be recognized because a dead body has no capacity to recognize the victor as Master (20). However, the supposed Master encounters similar difficulties if he makes the “other” a slave. “Mais l’Esclave est pour lui un animal ou une chose. Il est donc “reconnu” par une chose. Ainsi, son Désir porte en fin de compte sur une chose, et non—come il semblait au début—sur un Désir (humain). . . . il n’est pas ce qu’il a voulu être en engageant cette lutte: un homme reconnu par un autre homme” (25). Césaire shows this playing out of the dialectic in the inability of Prospero and Caliban to kill one another, and in the desperation that Prospero shows at the end of the play to have his power recognized, so much so that he gives up a kingdom to pursue this impossible
goal. Hegel’s dialectic can also be seen to apply to Genet’s concept of power as revolutionary, because it creates a paradox that cannot truly be resolved, and it is this constant struggle to be recognized that emerges in the White queen’s statement that “Nous partons, nous partons, mais dites-vous que nous resterons engourdis dans la Terre comme des larves ou des taupes, et si un jour… dans dix mille ans…” (Les nègres 180). The struggle cannot end because these two sides are locked in a battle where they see each other not as equals, but as rivals that must be bested.

We have already seen the way that identity is treated in the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet, and the greatest difference in its treatment in the plays of Césaire is the colonial context in which it is situated. Both here in Une tempête, and also in La tragédie du roi Christophe, the importance of naming becomes central to the identities of the characters. When Caliban is first introduced, far from appearing as a subservient and grudging slave, his first word is uhuru (24), the Swahili word for freedom (Sarnecki 281, Porter 372). In addition, he ends his first interaction with Prospero by insisting that he will no longer respond to the name Caliban. Rather, he suggests,

Appelle-moi X. Ça vaudrait mieux. Comme qui dirait l’homme sans nom. Plus exactement, l’homme dont on a volé le nom. Tu parles d’histoire. Eh bien, ça, c’est de l’histoire, et fameuse ! Chaque fois que tu m’appelleras, ça me rappellera (sic) le fait fondamental, que tu m’as tout volé et jusqu’à mon identité ! Uhuru ! (28)

Significantly, Caliban’s first appearance in front of the audience begins and ends with a cry for freedom. The name that he chooses is an immediate reminder of Malcolm X, who was an influential political figure at the time the play was published and an
advocate for black rights. Caliban’s position as a slave does not make him in any way an ignorant servant, nor is he portrayed as uncivilized. On the contrary, he recognizes in his subservience what it is that he has lost.

PROSPERO. Sans moi, que serais-tu ?

CALIBAN. Sans toi ? Mais tout simplement le roi ! Le roi de l’île ! Le roi de mon île que je tiens de Sycorax, ma mère.

PROSPERO. Il y a des généalogies dont il vaut mieux ne pas se vanter.

Une goule ! Une sorcière dont, Dieu merci, la mort nous a délivrés !

CALIBAN. Morte ou vivante, c’est ma mère et je ne la renierai pas !

D’ailleurs, tu ne la crois morte que parce que tu crois que la terre est chose morte… C’est tellement plus commode ! Morte, alors on la piétine, on la souille, on la foule d’un pied vainqueur ! Moi, je la respecte, car je sais qu’elle vit, et que vit Sycorax. (25-26)

Césaire referenced this idea of true identity, of the identity that might have been possible without the interference of others, in his earlier play *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, where he combined the importance of naming and the idea of identity into one key theme. *La tragédie* is based on the true story of Henry Christophe, king of Haiti from 1811 to 1820, and examines the difficulties of a young nation transitioning from a period of colonization to a period of independence and the identity crisis that ensues.

Césaire begins the play by explaining several of the key elements of the story through the use of a presenter (who is much like the *meneur de jeu* in *Une tempête*). He first explains the importance that race plays in the story, opposing Christophe, a black former slave, to his political rival Pétion, a mulatto. In this play there are no masks to hide the actors, and
as readers or spectators, we are made keenly aware of this system of racial classification as it existed in the Caribbean. Césaire also points out the importance of naming through the transition that Christophe makes in his own life, changing his name from Henri to Henry once he becomes king (14 and 16). The transition is significant, because the substitution of a y for an i is an Anglicization of the French spelling, and a symbolic rejection of the former French colonization that Christophe had experienced. However, ironically, it is also a symbolic acceptance of another form of cultural domination in the rejection of one Western symbol (French language and cultural domination) and the acceptance of another (English language). As Christophe believed, along with his advisors, that the French had little respect for republics (28), he wished to create a kingdom that would earn the respect of the French and the world in general. As part of his formation of a kingdom, Christophe decided to create a court that would emulate the courts of Europe, and created titles of nobility in the process. Ruby Cohn points out that this particular gesture links the play to Genet’s Le balcon. “Christophe’s kingdom is as false as Genet’s Balcony—and as real. Christophe emulates the pomp and ceremony of Europe, and at the same time he mocks them through his titles—Duke of Lemonade, Marquis of Downwind, Count of Stinkhole, Madame Syringe” (44). Nevertheless, as much as Christophe seems to mock the nobility of Europe through his creation of laughable titles and names, his desire to shape the kingdom and follow protocol is deadly serious and, at its heart, linked to a desire to undo the damage done to the identity of the people of Haiti through colonization. In a soliloquy that precedes the coronation ceremony in which Christophe officially takes his Anglicized name, Christophe explains to his court that the names he has chosen for them are essential because they replace the
names that were given to them by those persons who stole their true African names. He even goes so far as to return the favor, stripping the identity from the colonizers and slave traders and replacing their titles with the general anonymous pronoun *on*.

CHRISTOPHE : Ces noms nouveaux, ces titres de noblesse, ce couronnement !

Jadis on nous vola nos noms !

Notre fierté !

Notre noblesse, on, je dis *On* nous les vola !

Pierre, Paul, Jacques, Toussaint ! Voilà les estampilles humiliantes dont *on* oblitéra nos noms de vérité.

Moi-même

votre Roi

sentez-vous la douleur d’un homme de ne savoir pas de quel nom il s’appelle ? A quoi son nom l’appelle ? Hélas seule le sait notre mère l’Afrique ! . . .

Allons

de noms de gloire je veux couvrir vos noms d’esclaves,
de noms d’orgueil nos noms d’infamie
de noms de rachat nos noms d’orphelins !

C’est d’une nouvelle naissance, Messieurs, qu’il s’agit ! (37 emphasis in the original)

Christophe reminds his citizens that their names not only allow others to identify them, but also that their names call them to be certain people, and he laments that they
will never know their rightful names and identities. In the place of the veritable names that they cannot recover, Christophe vows to give them names of glory and pride and promises that he will usher in an era of rebirth. In a symbolic gesture of his attachment to his people, he uses the inclusive pronoun, *nous* and its possessive form *nos*, including himself in the process of naming. It becomes more and more clear throughout the play that his identity is completely intertwined with the success of his people. He needs their support and their love in order to survive, and once he feels that he has failed, it is then that he realizes that his own life must be offered as a sacrifice.

It is through Césaire’s portrayal of the transformation of Haiti from a republic to a kingdom that this play can be connected to the Theater of the Absurd. As Ruby Cohn points out, the court and the kingdom in which it resides are both as real and as false as Jean Genet’s Balcony. At the beginning of scene III in which the black court is receiving its instructions from a white man, it is apparent that the court feels as if it is simply playing a role.

*(Contorsions simiesques et ironiques des courtisans.)*

PREMIER COURTISAN. Monsieur le duc!

DEUXIEME COURTISAN. Monsieur le comte!

TROISIEME COURTISAN. Oh! mon prince!

*(Eclats de rire.)*

PREMIER COURTISAN. Quelle histoire. Ce roi, ce royaume, ce couronnement, on n’arrive pas à y croire!

DEUXIEME COURTISAN. On n’y croit pas, mais on le sent. C’est harassant.
VASTEY. Ce roi noir, un conte bleu, n’est-ce pas? Ce royaume noir, cette cour, parfaite réplique en noir de ce que la vieille Europe a fait de mieux en matière de cour! (30-31)

Everything said in this scene seems to be expressed through irony. The court appears to realize the absurdity of the situation and does not hide its amusement. The members also recognize that they are merely actors in the middle of the situation. Their reaction is in a way reminiscent of the scene in *Le balcon* where the Priest, the General, and the Judge lament their new lives and their new identities (113-18), and a reminder that the power structure created by Christophe is exactly that—an artificial power structure created simply to fill the needs of a country in transition. Just as Genet’s characters realize that it is their images and their fulfillment of certain roles that keeps the power structure from collapsing, the court is being instructed only in the fashion in which they should carry themselves, and the way they should walk rather than in the way they should exercise their duties as members of the nobility. Their roles consists entirely of being seen as a faithful replication of “ce que la vieille Europe a fait de mieux en matière de cour” (30). As an even more blatant reminder that it is image, appearance and perception that matters for the emerging country, the French emissary—a white man of course—sent to train the court reminds them that the ceremony in which they are participating is “Une cérémonie importante. Capitale, Messieurs, sur laquelle les yeux du monde entier sont braqués” (30). When Christophe enters this scene and gives his soliloquy on the importance of naming, he seems to accept willingly the absurdity as necessary, much as the representative of the queen in *Le balcon* sees the creation of the three primary figures and the queen as a necessary, and indeed desirable, illusion.
Christophe, in refusing here to acknowledge the absurd nature of the situation he has created, and in later forcing the black people to the brink of exhaustion in an attempt to make them understand their worth, can be seen as either a hero—and indeed an elegy is sung to him at the end of the play—or as an insane tyrant who cannot see past his own needs and his own desires, and ties the destiny of his country to his own self worth and his own life.

In a scene that I will analyze more fully in the final chapter, Christophe takes his own life, but not before he announcing his impending suicide to his page boy, Congo. His decision to commit suicide is taken from an African proverb, which states “Toute fleche dont tu sais qu’elle ne te manquera pas, bombe du moins la poitrine pour qu’elle y frappe en plein.” and to emphasize his decision, he continues, “Tu entend : en plein!” (140). His death is narrated by Hugonin, who has dressed as Baron Samedi, whom Césaire reminds us is the Haitian god of death (147). Whether or not Hugonin has actually dressed as Baron Samedi specifically for the occasion, or whether he is only meant to represent the Haitian death god is not made clear in the notes. It is interesting to note that Césaire does not simply use another actor to represent Baron Samedi, but rather uses a known character who has been an important advisor to Christophe during the play. The significance of this detail and the use of an eerie voodoo ceremony immediately preceding the death of Christophe gives the episode an eerie, fantastic, and absurd feeling that once more may remind readers and spectators of the costuming and ceremony of Le balcon.

I have chosen the two plays by Aimé Césaire that are most rooted in history. Une tempête draws from one of the most celebrated English language dramatists of all time
and is based on the historical reality of colonization in the Caribbean, which had begun immediately following Columbus’ landing, and *La tragédie* draws from the history of Henri/y Christophe. This historical modeling is significant not only because it shows that the theater of Césaire continues to share some similarities with that of Jean Genet who also based two of his later plays on vaguely historical facts, but also because Césaire was writing for both a European and Caribbean audience and therefore both the dominant and dominated. Genet did not, of course, use historical figures in any of his plays, but his plays use the same tactic of realism to implicate audiences in the action, and also portray (even if there is no concrete evidence that they were written for) both the dominant and dominated.

In addition Césaire’s characters share certain traits with many of the characters later created by Marie NDiaye, who share a sense of entitlement that often leads to their downfall. King Christophe, Prospero, Papa (in *Papa doit manger*), and Madame Diss (in *Les serpents*) are all certain that they deserve recognition either for services rendered or because of how they were treated in the past. Christophe refuses to become the president of Haiti because he believes himself entitled to become the emperor. He believes that the people of his country are entitled to a better future because of what they have suffered, and his desire to see them restored to their past glory turns him into a despot who, in spite of the love he truly has for his people, emulates the rulers who came before him in an attempt to force the people to be “better” than they were. The result of his entitlement is bitter disappointment and ultimately the decision to take his own life. Prospero believes that he is destined to civilize the island on which he finds himself marooned, and also believes that he deserves justice because of the political treachery he has suffered. His
quest for justice leads him to maroon his rivals on his island and sets the story in motion. His sense of entitlement, believing himself to be the superior race on the island, leads him to abandon his true kingdom in Naples and grow old and unhappy attempting to “fix” Caliban. Papa and Madame Diss believe that they are entitled to money and food because of their family connections. Papa believes that because he is the father of the family and because he has suffered much at the hands of France that he is entitled to return to the family he abandoned and to take from them what he is owed. Madame Diss believes that she deserves to see her son because she is his mother. She believes that he must give her money and water because she is related to him. Her stubborn attitude leaves her a broken woman by the end of the play, just as Christophe’s attitude destroys him at the end of the play, and her attitude suggests that she will never be able to leave the house unless she sees her son. Although she begins the play as a powerful woman with a great deal of influence over the other characters with whom she interacts, her belief that she is entitled to the power she has weakens her over the course of the play.

Césaire’s plays are excellent examples of why the Theater of the Absurd and its recurrent themes lend themselves particularly well to a discussion of Postcolonial literature. In the two plays I have discussed here, Césaire takes the themes of identity, violence, and suicide that are common throughout literary history, and uses them in such a way that the existential angst of his characters is felt rather than explained. The absurdity of Christophe’s situation in La tragédie is expressed through the ridiculous nature of his court and the self-aware attitude they take towards their position as nobles, the violence he uses to urge on citizens who had already experienced the violence of colonization, and the surreal portrait of a suicide narrated by a Haitian death god. The
scene is expertly painted as absurd. In *Une tempête*, Césaire takes a play which comes from the continent of empires, and uses it to talk back to the empire about the evils of colonialism and oppression. Prospero and Caliban lend even more relevance to the discussion of oppression through Césaire’s emphasis of the complex dynamic that exists between them as Master and Slave, and his emphasis of race in the cast of characters and subsequent dismissal of race through the use of masking to remind the audience that while race remains relevant, it is ultimately the relationship between people that causes the greatest amount of conflict.

Marie Susini wrote only one play of note during her career, *Corvara ou la malédiction* and included it in her *trilogie corse*. *Corvara* begins with a simple dedication to Albert Camus. Research into this dedication turns up little in terms of concrete evidence as to its origin, although it has been suggested that the concept for the play itself came from advice that Susini received from Albert Camus. She would have likely received this advice because of her proximity to a group of intellectuals in Paris that included Jean Daniel (Renou 77), who was a friend of Camus in the years following the Second World War. Daniel, whose given name was actually Jean Bensaïd, was one of the founders of the literary review *Caliban*, named after the character in the Shakesperian play, whose staff included many of his good friends, many of whom had either lived or continued to live in Algeria (Renou 77). The journal established the unique habit of publishing “un texte intégrale” in each of their issues, in response to the creation of the French version of the Reader’s Digest, which edited works to make them more easily accessible and also displayed a tendency towards anti-communism (Renou 76). Camus, who took an interest in the journal in part because of the common origins
that he shared with the editors—being himself a *pied noir*—and even made some financial contributions to it (78), soon became a contributor.

Whatever the true origins of the dedication and the work itself, the themes in *Corvara* are closely related to themes in Camus’s work on the Absurd although the play has as much to do with the existentialist philosophy of Sartre as it has to do with the absurdist philosophy of Camus. Susini was Corsican by birth and therefore a French citizen living closer to the French mainland than any of the other writers from the DROM-COMs. However her position as a female writer from Corsica gives her a unique perspective into the culture of a region that is arguably as different from France as Martinique or Guadeloupe. In Susini’s *Corvara*, a snowy winter’s eve is interrupted by the sister-in-law of le Père who announces to the entire family that her husband Francesco, the brother of le Père, has disappeared into the snow. She has brought her blind son with her, and begs the family to help her locate her husband. While le Père and neighbor Tchatcha head into the night to search for the man, la Femme, whose name is revealed to be Corvara, remains behind with her son and seeks to understand the reason her husband was marked by *la malédiction*. The play is broken into three acts. The first act is marked by Corvara’s entry into the scene, and her conversation with the maid where she first seeks to understand her husband’s actions, and the reasons he was ostracized by the community after his decision to leave the priesthood. The second act consists of a conversation between the a neighbor and the mother, and their discussion of Francesco’s sin and exclusion from the community, and the third act consists of a conversation between Corvara and the mother, and ends with Francesco’s body being brought back to the house.
While this play is not an absurdist play in the vein of plays by Beckett, Ionesco, or Genet, the theme of the play is certainly rooted in absurdist philosophy and the quest for identity and answers in the face of the silence of an unjust world. Marie Susini’s play is, in my opinion, a version of the theater of the absurd that will later appear in the plays of dramatists like Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. The absurdity of the piece is rooted less in form, and more in content. Instead of the absurd conversational style of Ionesco or Beckett, the reader sees dialogue that is measured and logical in its form and contains few of the non-sequiturs that mark many texts of the Theater of the Absurd. However, as with most Absurdist plays, the sense that not all is right with the world pervades the drama. The entry of Corvara into the scene is marked with a dread and a foreboding that is not entirely explained. Although the audience quickly understands that Francesco is an estranged brother, and that he has fled into the snowy night and must be found and rescued, they also sense a feeling of panic and fear that is not completely due to the immediate situation. Corvara explains that she feels as if she has been part of the greater design of fate or of God to punish Francesco for his sin, but also questions the reasons for which the community refused him any help or charity. Her conversation is punctuated with despair and with a constant fear that cannot be explained.

I believe that the situation is metaphorically a representation of the philosophies of Camus and Sartre, set off one from the other. La femme seeks the reason why her husband was shunned by an entire community for a personal decision he made long before to depart from the path to priesthood. She also wonders why exactly he was not allowed to be free to choose his own identity. This tension between responsibility and personal choice, two overarching themes in Sartre’s personal philosophy of
Existentialism, and the equally important tension between a desire to understand why and the silence of the world in response to her questions, two opposing forces within Camus’s view of Absurdism, is an excellent representation of philosophical conflict that isn’t easily resolved. This argument is set against the backdrop of family and community conflict. Early in the play, in a moment alone following the entry of Corvara into the house, the maid exclaims quietly to herself,

Une parole peut faire plus de mal qu’une pierre en plein front… *(Un temps.)* Ils l’ont chassé… ils lui ont fait comprendre que sa place n’était plus ici, là où il est né, qu’il devait aller ailleurs… *(Un temps.)* Tout se tient en une longue chaîne… *(Un temps.)* Mais n’empêche, quand on craint le malheur, on n’hésite pas à sortir de la maison et à marcher tout ce chemin dans la neige et la nuit. Quand on est frères… Même si on l’a chassé à cause de ce que les gens racontent… Parce qu’on le montrait du doigt… Il lui faut porter la croix jusqu’à sa mort… Mais quand on est frères… *(Un temps.)* Tout se tient en une longue chaîne… Et ce qui lie à la maison ne rompt jamais… (41)

This statement echoes sentiments related to family that will also appear in the plays of Marie NDiaye. Even though Corvara and Francesco knew fully that they were not welcome at the house of their family, as they had been exiled and disowned, Corvara still believed that she could eventually turn to Francesco’s brother to ask for help. The mother has not ever even met him, affirming “Quand je me suis mariée, il y avait longtemps déjà qu’il avait quitté le village. Et sa mère et son frère évitaient d’en parler. Pire que s’il avait été mort” (91). Certainly there is a difference in Papa returning after an
absence of 10 years to the house of his wife in *Papa doit manger* feeling as if he has a right to ask anything of his family, and Corvara making a journey to a house she has never been to before in desperation, but the family connection remains the link between households that otherwise have little reason to ever be joined together again.

Once the play concludes with the dead body of Francesco being brought back to the house—and it should be noted that the only way that he is able to return to the house is in death—the readers and spectators are permitted to see the eerie foretelling of this death in the image of the opening curtain rising on two lit lamps in the family home. At the beginning of the play the mother warns her daughter Paolella that two lamps should only be lit if there is a dead body that needs to be watched over, warning “ça porte malheur”, and Paolella quickly extinguishes one of them (13-14). It certainly seems as if the superstition becomes reality at the end of the play when two lamps are once again lit as the community watches over the body of Francesco (133). The play begins and ends with these lamps, although the significance of the opening cannot be fully understood until the end of the play.

As I mentioned above, *Corvara* can also be understood in the context of the philosophies of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. The themes of absurdity and responsibility are present throughout the play, and often opposed to one another through the dialogues of the characters. An excellent example of this opposition of philosophies appears in the following dialogue that takes place between Corvara and her sister-in-law.

LA FEMME. Il n’est pas coupable.

LA MERE. Coupable ou pas coupable, il était responsable!
LA FEMME. Mais il leur a laissé leur foi! Mais il n’a jamais nié ce qu’ils affirmaient!

LA MERE. Il a troublé l’ordre!

LA FEMME. Vous avez tous ce mot-là à la bouche.

LA MERE. Bien sûr que c’est sa paix à lui qu’il a brisée, mais aussi celle des autres. Il a fait chavirer leur confiance. Lui croyait et les autres croyaient en lui. Il a rompu l’équilibre!

LA FEMME. Mais c’est par sa vie, c’est par sa souffrance qu’il témoignait de Dieu!

LA MERE. Quand on s’engage, on ne revient pas en arrière. Il devait l’exemple. (106-07)

Key existentialist concepts are apparent here. Responsibility and engagement make up a great deal of the ethos of Sartrean Existentialism, and the Mother places Corvara (and Francesco by proxy) in front of their responsibilities. Corvara’s argument throughout the play is that Francesco was only being true to himself when he left the priesthood, and had no intention to do any harm to anyone. The Mother’s argument is that Francesco’s action has an effect not only on him, but on the rest of his community. Her words mirror those of Sartre in *L’existantialisme est un humanisme* when he declares that an action of any sort is a conscious choice not only for the individual, but also for all of humanity.

Quand nous disons que l’homme se choisit, nous entendons que chacun d’entre nous se choisit, mais par là nous voulons dire aussi qu’en se choisissant il choisit tous les hommes. En effet, il n’est pas un de nos
I would argue here that Marie Susini seems to be placing the mother and the maid in the position of Jean Paul Sartre and his existentialist philosophy, and Corvara in the position of Albert Camus and his absurdist philosophy. The Sartrean attitude of the community suggests that Francesco’s abandonment of the priesthood was a devastating event because his decision was not only his but also projected an “image de l’homme telle que nous estimons qu’il doit être” (Sartre 26). His responsibility once he chose his path was to remain steadfast in his decision. The Camusian attitude taken by Corvara (and by proxy Francesco) emphasizes the need for freedom. While she does not deny the responsibility that Francesco had as a man of God, Corvara’s insistence that attitudes and desires are changeable may remind readers of Camus’ explanation that philosophical suicide takes the form of adhering so closely to something that it removes the need to struggle against the absurdity of life (54) and that true freedom consists in living each moment free from the constraints of believing that life has a stated goal (81-82). Francesco’s abandonment of the priesthood was in a sense a step towards absurd freedom, because he disengaged himself from a life goal and set out into what must have been for him the unknown.

If this idea of absurd freedom seems less restrictive than the Sartrean notion of being forever condemned to responsibility and to projecting a vision of what we believe to be ideal, Camus reminds us that “Chercher ce qui est vrai n’est pas chercher ce qui est souhaitable” (61). The absurd life is painful and we are constantly reminded that to
engage ourselves on the path to absurd freedom means constant revolt and constant struggle. Corvara experiences the depths of despair to the point of becoming hysterical when it becomes clear to her that her fate and that of her husband were in a way predestined. This comes as she mulls the statement she made that forced him to leave, believing it to have been some sort of sign. “Oh. . . je lui ai dit… (D’une voix désespérée.) Je lui ai dit : Sois maudit entre tous, toi qui portes le malheur” (40) She receives no answers to her questions about the reasons for her husband’s condemnation at the hands of those around him except from those who point out that “il a fait ce que personne n’aurait fait à sa place” (43), or “il a fait ce qu’il ne devait pas faire” (111 and others). What she truly seeks more than anything else is the ability to make sense of what has happened. She exclaims at one point:

S’il revient, je saurai enfin… Il faut que je sache !… Il faut que je comprenne !… On est moins malheureux, quand on comprend … Lui sait, mais moi, il faut que je comprenne !… (La tête dans les mains :) Il faut trouver le sens de tout cela. Le sens !… Il doit y avoir une erreur quelque part !… (Un silence.) J’ai voulu servir de guide à un malheureux et j’ai été l’instrument d’une vengeance !… J’étais là pour ça ! (121).

Here, it is possible to see echoes of Camus’s statement that “Un monde qu’on peut expliquer même avec de mauvaises raisons est un monde familier. Mais au contraire, dans un univers soudain privé d’illusions et de lumières, l’homme se sent un étranger,” (Sisyphe 18). Corvara and Francesco would not feel so isolated if there was at least a sense to their exile, but as Corvara has discovered, and as Francesco has known for a long time, reason has no place in their world.
Susini appears to endorse the philosophy of Camus over that of Sartre. Although we learn that the end result of Francesco’s “sin” is death, the portrait of Corvara and Francesco is much more sympathetic than the portrait of those around her. The mother, the neighbor, and the maid are all painted as having been unwilling to extend any sort of sympathy to Francesco after his fall from grace, in spite of their extolling the man that he was before. Their inability to explain exactly what it was that he did that merited the harsh punishment he received is further accentuated when Paolella, the young daughter, asks a neighbor what exactly Francesco did and cannot get a satisfactory response. The first part of their exchange already hints at the complicated circumstances of the relationship between Francesco and his family and former community, and also reveals the absurdity of a situation that cannot be explained.

PAOLELLA. Mais qu’est-ce qu’il a fait ?

LA VOISINE. Il s’est perdu.

PAOLELLA, elle la tire par la manche. Mais qu’est-ce qu’il a fait ?

LA VOISINE, d’un geste las. Rien. (84-85)

Paolella’s direct questioning frustrates both her and the neighbor, and after having asked three times, “Mais qu’est-ce qu’il a fait?” she asks one last time “au comble de l’exaspération” and is finally told by the neighbor, “C’est un malheureux. (Paolella lâche brusquement son étreinte.) Un malheureux” (87). The hardness of heart towards Francesco is almost superstitious in that family and community appear to have avoided even interacting with him lest his fault become theirs as well. They can only see that his initial decision to become a priest engaged him on a path that he had a responsibility to
follow, and they accept no deviation from this path. He is condemned to live with his
decision to leave the priesthood for the rest of his life, and to suffer the consequences.

As for Francesco and Corvara, their life together is marked by a divorce from the
life they lived before they were married. Corvara is in one sense correct that Francesco is
a marked man, although this mark appears to come from those around him and not
necessarily from God. His having been labeled as a marked man does in fact lead to his
being forced to live life as a marked man. His desperation to live as a normal human
being is met with nothing but resistance from those around him. His is the ultimate
experience of the “I” verses the host of “others” who refuse to accept his new identity,
and the end result of his struggle against this absurdity of life is a suicidal flight into the
snow. Although there is the question of his fault being found in his son having been born
blind, and a strong undercurrent of religious superstition in the play, the initial fall from
grace was not initiated by God, but by the community who refused his new identity and
answered his cry for acceptance with an unreasonable silence. The community is
portrayed as being at fault for not having embraced the identity shift that Francesco made
upon leaving the priesthood. If her plays do blend together the existentialist philosophy
of Sartre and the Absurdist philosophy of Camus, and even if it certainly appears as if
Susini favors Absurdism, the outcome of her play makes the injustice of the situation
even more poignant in displaying the result of holding too firmly to one single
philosophy. The community is able to see that their withholding of grace and their
inability to see beyond their own personal beliefs has resulted in the death of a real man
whose body is now laid out before them. We as an audience are made all the more aware
that suicide, even if it is not encouraged by Camus, can be a very real result of being unable to cope with the absurdity of the world.

Susini’s use of dread, fear, and anticipation to create an almost unbearably tense atmosphere in the play is a tactic that will later be used by playwrights like Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* creates an atmosphere of tension that is only resolved when the games of George and Martha end with the death of their imaginary son. *Virginia Woolf* is set in the sterile atmosphere of the University, and quickly escalates from the portrait of a dysfunctional couple trading barbs over their differing senses of humor (12-13) to an all out war in which the animalistic nature of both George and Martha and their younger guests Nick and Honey, is on full display. Although the audience is given a clue at the beginning of the play as to the existence of a child in George and Martha’s marriage (18-19), the nature of the child is not revealed until the end of the play when George admits that the child was a fictional creation (238). Even so, the reaction of the characters in the play to the announcement of the death of the child is no less visceral than if he were actually real, and the tension surrounding any mention of him almost palpable (180).

In another of Albee’s plays, *A Delicate Balance*, tension is created by the arrival of Tobias and Agnes’s daughter Julia, arriving home after her fourth divorce, and accentuated by neighbors Harry and Edna arriving at the residence after fleeing an unknown fear at their house. Harry and Edna admit that although “nothing happened” they simply became afraid and couldn’t remain at home (48-49). While there is no reason for their terror, it is real and creates an atmosphere of dread that is all the more frightening because there is no explanation for it. Susini’s creation of tension
surrounding the unknown fate of Francesco has at its core the same fear of the unknown, and the withholding of information until a character is ready to reveal it. Corvara cannot, at first, reveal what it was that she said to Francesco to make him flee into the night, seeming to fear that it will again conjure up some sort of evil. The maid and the rest of the household do not initially reveal what Francesco did that he should not have done. The tension is not relieved until Francesco’s body is brought back to the house, and only then is it replaced with a sense of grief that serves as a release.

Francine De Martinoir writes in *Marie Susini et le silence de Dieu* that,

“*Corvara* est à la fois attente d’un retour, dévoilement progressif d’une vérité (qui est le personnage que l’on attend?) et mise en place d’un univers religieux. La pièce est, en effet, centrée sur l’attente. Quelque chose se passe, durant le temps de la pièce, devant les spectateurs. Des femmes attendent deux hommes, partis à la recherche d’un troisième. Et elles ne disent que l’essentiel. (58)

This indication of the importance of waiting becomes especially significant when *Corvara* is compared with other works of the Theater of the Absurd. Although Martinoir does not compare Susini with any other authors, her literary analysis creates some strong links with other plays that were written around the same time. *En attendant Godot*, published only three years earlier in 1952, is another play whose focus is almost entirely devoted to waiting. Martinoir’s description of the action that takes place in *Corvara*, “Quelque chose se passe, durant le temps de la pièce, devant les spectateurs” (58) could easily have been the description written by Beckett in describing the plot of *Godot* (or any number of Beckett’s plays) because it is, effectively, the best description of the play.
that can be written. Didi and Gogo debate the significance of their lives while they are waiting, discuss the pros and cons of suicide, and Didi wonders whether or not there is anyone who is watching him sleep. Corvara debates the reasons for the disability of her child, argues with other women about the treatment her husband received after leaving the priesthood, and wonders why it is that God seems to have listened only to the curse she pronounced over Francesco that caused him to flee into the snow. Although she does not doubt that there is a God, she questions both his silence and his goodness. The conversations between Didi and Gogo, much like those of Corvara and the other women in the play, are incapable of moving the plot forward, and are essential insofar as they present a picture of what the two tramps are like. In both plays, the only action—and I use this term loosely to describe what happens in *Godot*—takes place somewhere offstage. Corvara does nothing but set the plot in motion, much in the same way that Estragon’s concern for his feet gives *Godot* a starting point. Another important plot device shared by both plays is the introduction of a main character who never appears on stage—or in the case of *Corvara*, who never appears on stage alive. There is a great deal of despair and hopelessness in each play, and Corvara and Didi share similar thoughts about this keenly felt sense of despair in significant statements made towards the end of each play.

Vladimir says, “A cheval sur une tombe et une naissance difficile. Du fond du trou, rêveusement, le fossoyeur applique ses fers. On a le temps de vieillir. L’air est plein de nos cris. (Il écoute) Mais l’habitude est une grande sourdine” (119). His statement is in part echoed by Corvara, who also finds significance in both birth and the cries that follow. “Quand on est marqué, on l’est dès qu’on sort du ventre de sa mère et
déjà le cri qu’on pousse en naissant est celui du désespoir” (128). For both characters, the pain and difficulty of birth are simply signs of what is to come in life, although there are certain differences in their points of view. If Vladimir finds himself deafened to the cries of the world because of the daily acceptance of the disappointment of life, Corvara still finds herself crying out in despair. Vladimir gives an indication that the difficulty of life is universal, while Corvara seems to indicate that certain individuals will receive more than their share of punishment by virtue of the fact that they have been marked. What they share, however, is the awful knowledge of what it means to be trapped in a world where sense has been stripped away.

There are certainly other differences between Corvara and En attendant Godot, including the endings of each piece. While it is significant to debate the place of suicide at the end of each play, and I will do so in chapter 5, it is notable that Godot ends with Vladimir and Estragon still waiting for Godot to show up, while Corvara ends with Francesco being found, albeit dead. Corvara does not end on a hopeful note, but there is an end to the waiting. Nevertheless, Susini’s play does have a conclusion of which Beckett himself may have approved. As the prisoners in the San Quentin penitentiary pointed out, Godot would have been a disappointment if he had come (quoted in Esslin 20), and the death of Francesco, while certainly more than just a disappointment, is a fitting conclusion to a life “plein de nos cris” (119).

Aimé Césaire and Marie Susini are authors of a theater that often takes the ideas of the absurd and places them in unique cultural contexts. Aimé Césaire has taken a play from one of the great European playwrights and created a dramatic work that is more than a simple rewriting of the original idea, but rather a discussion about colonization that
is rich with the cultural heritage of the Caribbean. His portrayal of both colonizer and
colonized as isolated in their own ways, and his reminder in both *Une tempête* and *La
tragédie du roi Christophe* that naming can be a form of dominance, recalls similar
themes of identity that are found in the works of Genet and Beckett. *La tragédie*
juxtaposes elements of realism and absurdity in a unique format that emphasizes the
incredible difficulty of the formation of identity; not just that of a person, but also that of
an entire nation. It also brings to mind once again the tenuous nature of power in the
midst of revolution that has been portrayed in Genet’s *Le balcon* and *Les paravents.*
Marie Susini’s *Corvara* presents a difficult philosophical discussion about the nature of
God and the nature of humankind in a play that incorporates some of the same theatrical
devices that were used in *En attendant Godot.* While she does not write in the same
manner as Beckett, her discussion incorporates much of the same despair and dread that
is found in the writings of Beckett, and that will later be found in the plays of Albee and
Pinter. Her creation of an atmosphere filled with tension emphasizes the frustrating
nature of a world that cannot be explained, “même avec de mauvaises raisons” (Camus
18). Her characters present a true example of the absurdity of life, and in chapter 5, I will
be exploring how Susini and the rest of the authors I have discussed in this dissertation
allow their characters to react to this realization of the absurdity of life. In the following
chapter, I will be exploring the plays of Marie NDiaye and the way in which she
continues this discussion of identity and absurdity, while at the same time modifying the
cultural and historical context to incorporate more modern issues facing France today.
Chapter 4 – Marie NDiaye and the Modern Identity Crisis

Marie NDiaye is, in terms of her style of writing, more closely related to absurdists like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet than she is to playwrights like Marie Susini and Aimé Césaire. She is the most contemporary of the playwrights in this dissertation and the only one who is still living. In fact she did not begin writing plays until after the deaths of the rest of the playwrights I have discussed here, having written her first play, *Hilda*, in 1999. Her success in French theater has earned her the rare distinction of being one of the only living playwrights to have a play, *Papa doit manger* (2003), admitted into the repertory of the Comédie Française. Erika Rundle further specifies, “She is one of only two women to have done so in the institution’s 325 year history,” (79). NDiaye’s plays have clearly touched a nerve in France, much like the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet a full half-century ago.

Her writing is both modern, in that it often takes up a discussion of the current societal ills, and timeless, in that it also emphasizes the difficulty of forming an identity and maintaining that identity in the presence of the other. Her characters, while they may remind us of the characters in the plays of Ionesco through their dialogue, are perhaps more approachable and more recognizable in terms of their personalities. A spectator may not see much of himself or herself in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Smith in Ionesco’s *La cantatrice chauve*, but may more readily identify with the difficulties encountered by Papa or Zelner in *Papa doit manger*. NDiaye has blended the elements of
the Theater of the Absurd that allow a spectator to see the frustration of modern life with the elements of everyday life that allow a spectator to recognize familiar characters and situations on stage. Two plays in particular showcase this blend of stylistic elements especially well: *Papa doit manger* and *Les serpents* (2004).

*Papa doit manger* seems, at times, to be almost entirely based on the inability of characters to communicate directly with one another. It opens with the attempt of Papa, a black man, to re-enter the home that he had left ten years before (9-16). His attempt is nearly thwarted by his daughter, Mina, who initially refuses him entry and engages in a verbal jousting match that recalls many of the exchanges between characters in Ionesco’s plays. Upon gaining entry to the house, he encounters his other daughter Aimé and Maman’s lover Zelner, a white man, (18), neither of whom is able to understand why he has returned and what he desires. Finally, Papa comes face to face with Maman, a white woman who returns home from her job at the hair salon (28). Once all of these characters are introduced and Papa’s power is cemented through his appearance and command of language, we return, in a scene reminiscent of Genet’s *Le balcon*, to the reality of the situation: the apartment where Papa has been living with Anna and the son he conceived with her (38-48). We learn that the premise of the first four scenes has been based on an illusion that Papa has created, presenting himself as successful and world wise, in order to steal money from his first family. Throughout the rest of the play, we witness the fallout from the lies and the deception that Papa has sowed in both of his relationships and also the fallout from Maman’s admission that she still loves her husband and would take him back. The conversations among characters throughout the play often take the form of competing monologues, and while they are not nonsensical in the way that
Ionesco’s dialogues often lacked continuity, they do not lend themselves to communication. Maman refuses to listen to the racist arguments of her white parents and her white aunts, who disapproved of her decision to marry a black man (48-60). Papa returns again to the house to admit to Mina that he is going to deceive the entire family and doesn’t wish to do it, while Mina covers her ears so as not to hear the admission of guilt (60-64). Zelner discovers the truth about Papa, goes to visit Papa’s mistress, and admits that he cannot decide whether Papa is to blame for his miserable situation or if it is the fault of those who have subjugated the Black population in France (64-69). These conversations are brought to an abrupt end by the Aunt’s description of Maman’s violent knife attack on Papa at the hotel where he planned to swindle her out of the remainder of her money and abandon her once again (70-78). The brutality of the attack leaves Papa partially blinded as Maman cuts him across the eye, and tears his lip and cheek open.

At the culmination of the play, two scenes allow the spectator to see the final outcome of the situation. In the first, Mina describes the burden that her father has become to her and her husband because of his destitute condition and explains that she has been forced to take Papa into her own house. Her conversation is one sided, but supposedly takes place in the office of a lawyer or a social worker to whom she is appealing to find some sort of solution to her problem (80-89). The second scene takes place immediately following the death of Zelner, and comprises a conversation between Papa and Maman in which the two characters come to a mutual understanding that they will end up living together for the rest of their lives (89-95). Interestingly, the most cohesive conversation takes place during this last scene and suggests that even though Papa and Maman appear to be natural enemies because of their past conflicts, they belong
together because they are the only two characters between whom actual conversation takes place during the play.

This play contains many of the hallmarks of the Theater of the Absurd through its emphasis on the difficulty of communication among characters and in its use of characters who are almost parodies of themselves because of the exaggerated nature of their personalities. Zelner, a caricature of the stilted intellectual, is so perfectly exaggerated as to make him both endearing and frustrating at the same time. His use of logic to command his reactions to any situation is not only illogical but patently absurd. NDiaye’s decision to allow Zelner to think aloud during his conversations with Papa, Maman, and Anna lends itself to an even stronger critique of the tendency of “talking heads” to discuss *ad nauseum* the racial situation in France without actually coming to a decision about it.

NDiaye opposes these intellectuals to the equally absurd and upsetting portrayal of the attitudes of a portion of the older generation of French citizens regarding the influx of African immigrants in the *banlieues* of Paris. To these latter she gives dialogue reminiscent of that of Jean Marie le Pen in his racist political discourses. Again, these characters are exaggerated just enough to make them absurd, although they are certainly recognizable in the landscape of modern day France. NDiaye’s blend of the exaggerated realism of Genet’s plays and the difficulty of communication found in Ionesco’s plays creates a modern version of the Theater of the Absurd that allows audiences to see current challenges in French society in a new way.

The exchanges between characters at the beginning of each of the plays discussed here are composed of vague factual statements, often repeated several times, with little
regard for what the other character has to say. *Papa doit manger* begins with the following exchange that sets the stage verbally for the rest of the play.

**PAPA.** – C’est moi, mon oiseau. C’est moi. Papa est revenu.

**MINA.** – Retirez votre pied, ne coincez pas la porte, s’il vous plaît. On m’empêchera de descendre jouer pendant trois jours.

**PAPA.** – C’est moi, enfant. Je suis Papa et je suis revenu.

**MINA.** – Mais maintenant, partez, partez ! Chut. Je serai punie.


**MINA.** – Maman veut de l’ordre et du chic, Maman veut que la perfection nous garde et nous sauve. Soyez gentil. Il faut partir bien doucement, s’il vous plaît.

**PAPA.** – Laquelle de mes deux filles es-tu ? L’aînée ? C’est impossible à dire. Eh bien ?

**MINA.** – Je suis Mina.

**PAPA.** – Mina, Papa est revenu. C’est moi, papa. Mais qui est Mina ?

**MINA.** – Ma sœur Ami a dix ans. Maman a beaucoup de talent pour coiffer, alors est-il juste qu’elle ne soit qu’une shampouineuse parmi les autres ? Non, elle nous apprend à penser que c’est mal fondé et injurieux. (9-10)

It becomes readily apparent from this basic exchange that communication will in no way be straightforward. Information is brandished as if it were a weapon, much like
the language in Ionesco’s plays. Papa asks to be let in, demands his right to be allowed to return by simply using the phrase, “Papa est revenu,” (9) like a sort of verbal battering ram that he hopes will gain him access to the apartment. After his first verbal volley, Mina replies by stating her desire to avoid punishment, saying first “On m’empêchera de descendre jouer pendant trois jours,” (9) and then after Papa’s second attempt to enter, by saying “Je serai punie” (9) As this exchange proves fruitless for both parties, Papa attempts to boost his credibility by asking Mina to tell him who she is and then by saying “Mina, Papa est revenu,” (10) as if the addition of her name will somehow open the door to him. Mina replies by offering additional information about her mother, while still refusing to open the door, but it appears that Papa’s tactic is beginning to work. As the flow of information between the two characters is slowly established, Mina becomes less and less resistant to her father’s desire to enter the apartment and eventually gives in.

Is this exchange surprising? If a young girl, upon seeing a man she doesn’t recognize who claims to be her father, refuses to open the door to him, it would seem a normal defense mechanism. However, there is something uncanny and absurd about the whole exchange that demands our attention. Papa begins with tenderness, calling Mina “mon oiseau,” then regresses to mere formality by using “enfant,” and finally reverts to insult by using “perfide,” and “petite méchante” (10) In addition, he asks which one of his children she is, but instead of greeting her as a caring father would, he asks, “Mais qui est Mina ?” (10) as if he has no idea who she is. Decidedly, this is a man who is not to be trusted. As for Mina, her frightened and hushed tone seems initially to be evidence that she is wary of a man she does not recognize at her door. Yet, her initial refusal to open the door gives way to disjointed conversation about Maman, Zelner, and the financial
situation of the family, and once she has been convinced that Papa has brought gifts and money, she allows him to enter. This is all the more disturbing as he yet again acknowledges that he has no idea who she is, saying “Mon enfant ! Ma petite ! Pardon, je suis fautif, laquelle es-tu ?” (16). Mina seems to be a child who desires peace above all things, and once the play progresses into the second and third scenes, it becomes clear that she wants nothing more than to make the house harmonious. She responds to Ami’s vehement refusal of the candies Papa has brought by exclaiming, “Pas de colère, pas de mots, je vous en prie !” (21). Additionally, she reacts to Papa forgetting her name yet again (22) by repeating her name in four of her subsequent interjections (24, 26, 27).

Mina has gone from being a fearful but forceful sentry at the door to becoming a willing parrot in the conversation, repeating herself incessantly (“Maman est drôle, Maman est drôle.” (32) and “Parle-lui d’abord de l’argent. . . L’argent, l’argent, l’argent.” (33)). These verbal exercises recall much of Ionesco’s early absurdist theater, especially that found in La cantatrice chauve, and Le leçon, where language is above all a weapon or a tool rather than a simple means of communication.

Mina’s repetition of words throughout this scene follows a logical pattern that owes some of its origin to Eugène Ionesco. Her actions may remind the reader or spectator of the professor in Ionesco’s La leçon who repeats himself like a parrot immediately before he kills his student. However, the idea of an Ionesco-like logic may lead the audience to the conclusion that Mina has learned through the experience with her father forgetting her name: the more often she says something, the more likely it is that she will be noticed. She therefore decides that the best way to interrupt a conversation that has become uncomfortable is to repeat herself like a parrot. This sort of logic, based
on faulty and unreliable experiences, may remind a reader or spectator of a similar logical
game that was first seen in Ionesco’s *La cantatrice chauve*. The two couples in Ionesco’s
work get into a terrible argument about the doorbell and its significance. Mme Smith and
Mme Martin claim that when the doorbell rings, there is never anyone there, basing this
logic on the fact that the first three times the doorbell rang, there was no one there (35-
36). M Martin and M Smith claim that when the doorbell rings there is someone there,
basing this logic on M Smith’s explanation “Moi, quand je vais chez quelqu’un, je sonne
pour entrer. Je pense que tout le monde fait pareil et que chaque fois qu’on sonne, c’est
qu’il y a quelqu’un” (36). The whole experience is forgotten once the Fireman arrives
and explains that both conclusions are true sometimes.

LE POMPIER. Je vais vous mettre d’accord. Vous avez un peu raison
tous les deux. Lorsqu’on sonne à la porte, des fois il y a quelqu’un,
d’autres fois il n’y a personne.

M. MARTIN. Ca me paraît logique

MME MARTIN. Je le crois aussi.

LE POMPIER. Les choses sont simples, en réalité. (40)

His allowing both parties to be correct also seems to be reflected in Mina’s desire
to pacify all parties present in the conversation, and while the audience of *La cantatrice
chauve* never really learns much about the Fireman apart from what they see on stage, the
audience of *Papa doit manger* is made fully aware of the consequences of Mina’s desire
to reconcile and bring harmony to all situations.

Some twenty years after the beginning of the story, Mina attests in a conversation,
supposedly with a lawyer,
Maman ne doit rien à mon père. Elle a divorcé de lui, puis elle a épousé Zelner. Ils vivent à présent tous deux dans notre vieil appartement de Courbevoie. Maman n’a plus avec mon père aucune espèce de lien légal. Cependant ce lien existe encore et pour toujours entre lui et moi, sa fille Mina, ainsi qu’avec Ami, car si Maman a pu cesser d’être la femme de mon père, nous ne pouvons cesser d’être ses enfants. Cela aussi, oui, c’est la loi. De sorte que notre colère s’accroît de se sentir impuissante. (81)

It seems here that she has finally realized that her desire to seek harmony and peace with the world has ultimately resulted only in her own unhappiness. She regrets having tried to help her father but almost seems resigned to the fact that she had no choice. She explains:

Pourquoi, au début, m’a-t-il paru impossible d’abandonner dans sa maison de vieillards cet homme qui était mon père mais ne m’avait jamais aimée, moi, sa fille Mina, pourquoi m’a-t-il paru si nécessaire de venir en aide à cet homme au seul motif qu’il était mon père ?

Je suis en colère, mais faible aussi.

Les yeux de mon père sont les miens et son front haut et l’implantation de ses dents un peu jaunes, comme les miennes. (86)

For Mina, the quest for identity begins with the return of her father at the beginning of the play, and only comes to a partial conclusion at the end when she realizes that her opening the door to Papa has made it so that she can never put him outside again. Although she is a minor character in the play, it is through her actions that the drama begins, and it is through her that we are able to see how Papa and Maman are changed by
his reappearance. Her identity is literally shaped by her father’s return, as she is forced to identify herself again and again to him at the beginning of the play and finds herself unable to rid herself of him at the end. Her realization that she is truly linked with her father in a way that no one else in the play is linked to him is tragic both in that she does not truly love him and also because she feels compelled by a responsibility that is the result of the shared blood in their veins. Her identity is not her own.

Zelner may appear at first to be an innocuous character who is generally powerless although well meaning and concerned for the safety of his wife and adopted children, and he certainly appears preferable when compared to the brash and dangerous Papa. Nevertheless, his concern goes beyond a simple desire to protect his wife and children and enters into a distrust that borders on stereotypical racism. His character is portrayed as stilted and wooden, much like the characters in Ionesco’s *La cantatrice chauve*. Upon learning what Papa intends to do in order to return to his place as head of the household, he exclaims, “Je comprends chacun des mots que vous employez, mais, le sens de la totalité, je ne le comprends pas. Je suis professeur de lettres. Rien de ce que vous représentez ne doit exister pour nous” (26). A few lines later, he again expresses his distrust, saying, “J’enseigne le français, la littérature et le latin. Ce que vous êtes n’existe pas” (27). Much like at the beginning of the play where the introduction of characters takes on an absurdly factual nature, Zelner seems to believe, in the same way as Papa, that presenting factual information of an important nature will make his statements more powerful and perhaps cause the situation to resolve itself. As a professor, his desire for logic as the guide for every situation combined with his belief in what a black man in
France *should be* clashes with what he sees before his eyes. His disbelief should in some way translate into an ability to remove the identity and the being from Papa.

This stilted conversation is reminiscent of the introductory statements made by Mr. and Mrs. Smith in *La cantatrice chauve*, and especially reminiscent of the introduction in that play of Mary the maid who says upon entering scene II, “Je suis la bonne. J’ai passé un après-midi très agréable. J’ai été au cinéma avec un homme et j’ai vu un film avec des femmes. À la sortie du cinéma, nous sommes allés boire de l’eau-de-vie et du lait et puis on a lu le journal” (25). Her introductory statement “Je suis la bonne” is much like Papa’s “Je suis Papa et je suis revenu” and seems to serve the same general purpose of legitimizing the presence of a character in a given location. While the factual information in *La cantatrice chauve* is meant to emphasize the ridiculous nature of communication between people, the factual nature of the information in *Papa doit manger* takes on a different cast as Zelner attempts to deconstruct Papa into the factual and fictional parts of his nature and to reconcile his own feelings of distrust, hatred, and desire towards the black man. When Zelner finally figures out that Papa is a fraud he goes to Anna, Papa’s mistress, and explains his internal conflict to her.

Je croyais n’avoir pas le droit de le haïr. Toute haine à son encontre, me disais-je, est politiquement condamnable.

C’est un homme intéressant, me disais-je, et digne de ma compassion.

Il s’est mal comporté, soit. Mais un Noir, me disais-je, n’est pas responsable de ses actes car un Noir est avant tout, et essentiellement, une victime. . . .
En tant qu’être, ce Noir n’existe pas, pensais-je. Ce Noir ne peut avoir ni caractère, ni personnalité.

Comment, alors, lui demander des comptes ? Comment aurait-il un sens moral ? (65-66)

Zelner takes an extreme view of the situation trying to rationalize the behavior of Papa by making his actions the fault of the country. He goes so far as to categorize the black as nothing but a symbol and therefore incapable of any culpability, and explains that it was natural and right for Papa to leave his wife, blaming her instead of him (66).

Yet, he both hates and admires him at the same time. Now that he knows the truth about Papa, he admits

Je dois lui dire qu’il est à présent pour moi un personnage véritable et accompli, je dois lui dire que je le hais et le méprise au plus haut point.

Il me faut le retrouver pour le lui dire.

Et si j’osais, je lui balancerais mon poing dans la figure.

Mais peut-on frapper un Noir ? Je n’en suis pas encore sûr.

Je cognerais mollement, par gêne, et lui aurait tout loisir de m’assommer ensuite.

Oh je voudrais être lui, ce sale type. (66-67)

Zelner’s identity is tied up in his ability to understand and to process the information that he is given. His actions and words indicate that he possesses little emotional capacity, and that his desire is to use his intelligence and his logic to interact with the world. It may well be that his desire to be Papa runs parallel to his wife’s desire to be with Papa. He wants what he cannot have and what society declares to be
unacceptable. Although he logically determines that Papa’s behavior is wrong, just as Maman realizes that her love for Papa is unacceptable and inexplicable, he is unable to rid himself of the desire to be something other than that which he is.

What then can be said about Maman? Her desire for her former husband has shaped everything about her and put her at odds with her family. Does she deserve the blame for what has happened to her? While it is clear that her family has abandoned her at crucial times in her life (55), and while it is clear that even Zelner exploits her by forcing her to learn academic materials for money (35), Maman initially returns to the man who has left her financially destitute. She freely admits that she is humiliated by her love for him (34), and later confesses that she believes nothing he has said to her and that she will never be able to forgive him (51, 54, 57, 58). It would certainly seem that she acts with the eventual intent of disfiguring Papa in the hotel room—she does bring a knife to their encounter and her aunt’s description (75) seems to indicate that she had all but decided to kill him before she had even arrived—and it must also be remembered that she humiliates him for years after the attack by allowing him to come to her home and witness the life she is able to have without his support. Still, at the end of the play, before Zelner has even been cremated, she admits to Papa that she will take him back and wishes that he was the one she had been married to all these years.

J’aimerais avoir passé toutes ces années avec toi et me trouver dans le deuil de toi aujourd’hui. Je préfèrerais que tu sois celui qu’on va brûler tout à l’heure, mon premier et unique mari avec qui j’aurais vécu tout ce temps-là – que tu sois celui-ci, même mort aujourd’hui, plutôt que l’homme qui, vingt ans après, me demande de le reprendre, et avec qui
j’aurais vécu si peu. Je vais vivre si peu et si mal avec toi. Comme cela me désole. (92)

Her identity is also closely tied with that of her husband, but she must at the same time contend with the opinions and actions of her family. NDiaye allows some bitter humor to enter into the play through the stereotypically racist characters of the Grand Père, Grand Mère, and the two Tantes. All openly discuss the frightful color of Papa’s skin, one of the traits they find most repugnant. After claiming that they have no general prejudice towards foreigners (“Ce sont des créatures également divines. Nous les respectons” (52)) they unleash a torrent of abuse towards Papa.

Mais ton mari, ma petite fille, nous a toujours révoltés. Il n’existe rien au monde qui soit aussi noir que sa peau. De ce seul fait, nous n’avons jamais su comment nous adresser à lui.

Tu t’en souviens?

Nous le regardions et ce visage inhumain nous rentrait les mots dans la gorge. Il était comme une bête pour nous, mais une bête d’une espèce inconnue et répugnante. (53)

NDiaye describes multiple layers of prejudice here. Papa is unacceptable because of his skin color, but also because of his lack of formal education. After Maman insists that the father of her children is “beau et intelligent” (53), the grand mother again criticizes his skin color and then worries that Maman is leaving “le brave Zelner tout enluminé de sa profonde honnêteté, pour ce puits de mensonges, de mystères sinistres (54). Later on the grandmother also criticizes his hygiene and the hygiene of the black population, saying
Et cette odeur, cette odeur qu’il avait, cette odeur qu’ils ont tous.

Tiens, je la sens sur toi. Tu en es tout imprégnée.

Reculez, les tantes ! Ne la laissez pas vous toucher.

C’est répugnant. Cette femme est répugnante, elle est ma fille. (59)

Nevertheless, it seems that the aunts, as horrified as they are about the situation in which Maman finds herself, and as repulsed as they are about Papa and his return, have no desire to follow Grand Mère’s instructions because they realize that they can’t get their hair done as cheaply anywhere else in town (59). They are willing to tolerate Maman so long as it benefits them. NDiaye allows this dark humor to highlight another aspect of racism prevalent in this play. The aunts find it so natural to condemn what they do not understand, that they do not even realize the hypocrisy of their actions. In the section when the aunts are discussing the attack on Papa, Tante José even seems to question whether Tante Clémence might desire Papa for herself, asking her multiple times why it is that she is crying over news of the attack (72, 73, 75), reminding her that she was obsessed with knowing whether or not Papa had slept with Maman before the wedding (73, 74), and reminding her that Papa probably would not have wanted to have anything to do with her if she had propositioned him (77). Tante Clémence, while claiming that she does not care, wonders where he is and whether or not someone is taking care of him (76). Their racism borders on voyeurism and obsession, and their desire to know everything about him seems as strong as their desire to destroy him.

Finally, what can be said of Papa himself? If he has returned to the family, it appears that he wants nothing more than money, but is his identity wrapped up in money
alone? In one of the few moments where we might find some sympathy for the character of Papa, he explains to Mina why he came to France in the first place.

C’est pour me venger de la France que je suis venu, ma fille, en France, il y a dix ou quinze ans de cela.

Je suis venu dans la colère, la frustration, le sentiment de faiblesses et de servitude, en me disant : De toute cette fureur contenue, de cette amertume et de cette sorte de honte indéfinissable, je vais me faire payer.

La France entière va payer—je lui ferai rendre gorge. Voilà ce que pensait le jeune homme vindicatif, aigre, rancunier. (62-63)

Although he admits that his fury towards France itself was forgotten when he met Maman and fell in love with her (63), he still left her out of a desire to relieve himself of a family life that “m’étouffait et ne me vengeait en rien mais, au contraire, se vengeait de moi, sur mon dos” (64). As Maman admits earlier in the play, “J’étais la France entière pour lui. Pas un être, pas une belle fleur immobile et fraîche, pas un objet d’amour” (34), so when Papa’s anger returns, she becomes his symbolic victim and a way for him to take revenge on the country that mistreated him. However, Papa laments the fact that upon leaving one woman, he immediately ran to another, Anna, realizing that he was incapable of solitude. His identity is defined by a desire to rid himself of the frustration, anger, bitterness and undefined shame that he brought with him to France, and complicated by the realization that he does not know how to accomplish this. His admission to Mina is an indication that he realizes that he will never be content, and he seems to accept his fate. This is made all the more evident by the fact that he does not react to Maman’s
attack in the hotel, remaining silent while everyone else screams and cries (75-76). His
defeat comes before the attack even if the physical reminders of his defeat come later.

NDiaye’s Les serpents (2004) has at its core a similar family situation. Mme Diss
comes to see her son on the 14th of July, the French national holiday, in order to ask him
for money and water, and is unable to gain access to the house because of her daughter-
in-law, France, who fearfully guards the door. The situation is almost identical in nature
to the opening scene in Papa doit manger and once again the conversation remains highly
disjointed and reminiscent of Ionesco’s logical games. France believes that Mme Diss
has arrived for the fireworks display and tells her to wait outside, even after Mme Diss
insists that she has come only to see her son and borrow money from him (10). When
France finally goes back inside, Nancy, the ex-wife of the son of Mme Diss, arrives.
Although she is initially confrontational and treats Mme Diss with contempt (21-24), the
situation is quickly turned around when Mme Diss reminds Nancy that she no longer
belongs in the family (24) and begins to talk about Nancy’s son, Jacky (25). Nancy loses
all power over the situation because of her desperation to learn about her son, whom she
abandoned, and pays Mme Diss a great deal of money for this information. We learn that
Jacky was abused by his father (26-34) and eventually killed by the serpents with which
his father forced him to sleep (35-38). Nancy and Mme Diss then confront France
together (44-50), once more demanding access to the house. Nancy insists that she must
go with the father to her son’s grave so she can ask forgiveness for abandoning him (47),
and Mme Diss continues to insist that she be allowed to enter the house to get money and
water from her son. France eventually comes out of the house to continue the
conversation (60) and finds that she can no longer go back inside (62), so Nancy enters
the house hoping to meet and care for the children who are supposedly currently living there (73). However, once she has entered the house she finds no evidence of anything living (79), cannot figure out a way to leave the house, and comes to the realization that time is rapidly passing outside. The final scene shows us an encounter between France and Mme Diss. France returns to the house and discovers Mme Diss seated outside, guarding the house much like France was doing at the beginning of the play. Mme Diss has also apparently returned to the house and seems to have become its prisoner (90). Her final request is a plea for France to remember her and to return for her in the springtime (91-92).

The play uses the theme of family dynamics in much the same way as *Papa doit manger* and shows a similar tendency to use the logic (or lack thereof) in the plays of Eugène Ionesco. The arguments of each character are logic-driven to the point of preventing communication, and NDiaye also uses competing monologues to show how characters are perfectly capable of talking with one other without actually listening. For example, France’s obsession with the fourteenth of July, the French national holiday, is so powerful that she continues to talk about it even after Mme Diss explains that she has not come for the fireworks, but rather that she only desires to see her son. When Mme Diss confronts her over this obsession, and asks her what her life will be like after the fireworks are over, France responds in a highly technical and, at least in appearance, logic-filled explanation.

Mais je peux bien, avant comme après, vivre dans l’attente du 14 Juillet [sic], puisque cela finit toujours soit par arriver soit par revenir. Il suffit d’en être certaine. C’est un désir perpétuel et toujours comblé, aussi ne
croyez pas que je retombe, non, la vigueur de cet élan ne cessera qu’à ma mort, la joie qu’existent, chaque année, un 14 Juillet [sic] et un feu d’artifice inéluctablement. (10-11).

The beginning of the play leaves little doubt as to how it will progress. France is a frightened and subservient character who wishes to keep the peace at all costs, and relies on logic to guide her actions. She is the grown-up version of the frightened Mina that was encountered at the beginning of *Papa doit manger*. Maman cannot see past her dual desires to enter the house and to be in control of the situation in some way much like Papa believed that he was entitled to return to his apartment and once again become the head of the family. Although Mme Diss does not succeed in forcing her way inside of the house, despite her insistence and her threats, her conversation with France reveals a key aspect of the identities of both women. France is obsessed with the changes she has made to her appearance after having become the wife of the son of Mme Diss (11-12). She explains time and time again how she has changed and become thinner and more beautiful. Her identity is contained in her appearance and her subservient attitude towards her husband. Mme Diss is obsessed with money and with the idea that because she is related to her son, she is entitled to receive money and recognition from him. When Nancy, one of her son’s former wives, arrives at the house, Mme Diss immediately tries to take the upper hand by reminding her that she has a stronger bond with her son than Nancy.

*Mon fils a été ton mari pendant un certain nombre d’années et plusieurs hommes ont été, successivement, chacun son nombre d’années, mes maris.*

*Le dernier m’a reproché d’avoir été mariée trop de fois, c’est un peu fort.*
Mais, Nancy, il n’est plus ton mari, il demeure mon fils. (23)

It may be recalled that NDiaye has used this logic before in *Papa doit manger*, although in that particular play, Mina recognizes that although her mother is no longer married to her father, she remains, as does her sister, his daughter.

Following Nancy’s appearance in the play, the themes of memory and recollection of the past, both important in the theater of both Beckett and Ionesco, begin to emerge in *Les serpents*. As we have already seen in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, memory is often found to be faulty if not entirely false. Here in *Les serpents* we are once again not entirely sure who we can trust. Nancy, whom we learn is the mother of a young boy named Jacky, is cruelly exploited by Mme Diss in return for memories of her son. It seems that Nancy, who abandoned the family some time after the boy was born, remembers nothing about him and asks Mme Diss if she recalls anything. Mme Diss refuses to remember, saying only “Je ne me souviens de rien pour rien” (25), and then subsequently coerces the woman to give her all of the money she has in her purse, and also forces her to write a check before allowing her to know about the abuse and death of the young boy. After hearing the entire story, Nancy affirms that the reason she has come to the house is not to view the fireworks, but rather to grieve the anniversary of the death of her son. She wishes only to accomplish this one task before leaving and never returning to the house again, although she remains unsure of many details regarding this ceremony. She hesitates when speaking of wanting to visit the boy’s grave, explaining, “nous allions, le père et moi, sur la tombe (c’est un tombe ?) pour qu’ensemble nous nous inclinions bien bas au-dessus de la petite âme du garçon” (40). Later she insists that the visit is necessary:
Nous pouvons encore, avant le feu d’artifice, nous rendre au cimetière (c’est un cimetière ?), nous avons encore le temps, nous nous excuserons auprès du pauvre garçon… Quoique nous sachions mal le faire, nous fléchirons le genou… puisque nous avons failli… manqué… auprès de ce petit Jacky, notre garçon. (41)

It is apparent that she is not certain if the boy has a grave or is even buried at a cemetery; she is only aware of what sort of ceremony must be undertaken to assuage her guilt. Mme Diss responds to this confusion about whether there is a cemetery or a grave by adding her own parenthetical commentary about Nancy’s involvement with Jacky.

Mais la mère, ah, la mère, où était-elle?

Elle amassait ses petites affaires, elle remplissait son joli sac, elle venait parfois (je le sais, j’en suis sûre) et se cachait dans les maïs, n’osant pas s’approcher, pour observer de loin les tourments du garçon qui n’avait pas de jambes mais des tiges. (41)

Mme Diss expresses no doubts at all about where Nancy was, although we still have only a vague notion as to whether or not she is telling the truth. The contradictions of Nancy’s presence at the house, her claims that she knew nothing of the life of the young boy, and her claims that she learned of his death long after it occurred, clash with her knowledge of the date of his death, and Mme Diss’s accusation that she came and hid in the corn to watch the boy suffer from afar. I will refer once again to this violence and its significance in chapter 5.

Mme Diss is never permitted to enter the house, nor is she given water. Instead, France eventually comes out of the house, and Nancy goes into the house in order to
confront the father and care for the children. When this transition takes place, we learn that the identities of France and Nancy are somehow exchanged, and that France can never re-enter the house again, just as Nancy can never leave the house again. There are no reasons given for this transition, simply that it has occurred. Mme Diss, despite her family connections with her son, is the only person who remains unchanged in the exchange and also the only person who is not permitted to enter the house. She appears as a broken down woman at the end of the play, sitting outside of her son’s house and begging for money. We learn that she has methodically seduced all the lovers of her daughter-in-law and that at the same time she has no one she can turn to for lodging or comfort. She has decided to guard the house, much in the same way that France guarded the house, but begs France to come back and get her after the winter has come and gone and the new crop of corn has grown. Her identity, so entwined with her belief that she was entitled to receive money and water from her son, has led her to become a destitute woman, even though she still refuses to give up her identity. She explains to France: “Tu ne veux pas déranger. Rien ne t’est dû. A moi, tout” (89). Even though it is killing her, she still refuses to give up her sense of entitlement, because it is all she has left. The play ends with her desperate plea to be remembered (92), another reminder of one of the important themes within the Theater of the Absurd.

NDiaye uses two names in this play that I believe deserve a brief analysis. Nancy and France, the two women connected with the son of Mme Diss, are not only character names, but also names that have a great deal of national significance. Nancy is the name of a large city in the East of France, and the regional capital of Lorraine. The name France needs no explanation as to its dual significance. While it is unclear whether or not
Marie NDiaye chose these names out of a desire to bring the question of national identity into focus in this play, the fact that she also chose to set the date of the play as the fourteenth of July, France’s national holiday, lends credence to this possibility. It is certainly possible to see the play as a metaphorical representation of the re-emergence of the importance of French regional identity after a period of intense centralization in French politics. However, Nancy’s reentry into the house is unsuccessful and she finds herself trapped inside, and this makes the metaphor more complicated and perhaps more realistic. It is certainly possible to see Nancy’s disappointment and fright at becoming trapped inside of the stuffy house as NDiaye’s way of hinting that regional identity, even as it begins to regain its importance, will continue to face struggles. Lorraine, in spite of the decentralization that has taken place, is still trapped within French borders, and must still operate within the context of French cultural identity. The addition of children to the scenario, children who are heard but never seen, whose existence is questioned by Nancy once she is inside of the house, may indicate that simply raising children to take pride in who they are regionally does not mean that they will follow through and retain the sense of regional pride into adulthood.

In the tradition of the theater of the absurd, there is also a great deal of emphasis on image and identity through appearance and vision. This also appears to be the case in the theater of Marie NDiaye, as the physical appearance of her characters is of great importance. In *Papa doit manger*, there are constant references to Papa’s blackness. He himself announces it to Mina at the beginning of the play:

Regarde. La peau de Papa est aussi noire que peut l’être la peau humaine.

Ma peau est d’un noir ultime, insurpassable, d’un noir miroitant parmi
lequel mes yeux foncés paraissent presque délavés. Alors, enfant, sache dès à présent que cette teinte absolue et impérieuse de ma peau me donne l’avantage sur les peaux mates comme la tienne. Sache-le maintenant, pour le comprendre plus tard. (11)

Later on, he speaks to Zelner of his incredible youth, again referencing his face in particular:

Constatez, Zelner. J’ai cinquante ans et j’en paraïs trente. Mon corps, mon visage : toute ma personne est d’une jeunesse insensée. J’ai réussi au delà de mes espoirs les plus fervents, j’ai voyagé, commercé, négocié, j’ai amassé et me voilà . . . Au lieu de vieillir comme vous tous, j’ai rajeuni au fil des années, par la seule force de ma volonté et de mon désir de n’avoir plus jamais affaire à la vie de Courbevoie. (19-20)

It certainly does appear that Papa’s skin color and youthful appearance are the most powerful of his attributes. He does not even own the clothing on his back or the shoes on his feet. Instead, these belong to the brother of the woman with whom he also has a child and with whom he is living. Even the money he has spent on the candies he presents to his children and for the dinner he has with his family is not his. His appearance and his youth are his only two possessions, and once he is attacked and mutilated by his wife, even these are gone. The details of the attack lead us to believe as well that his wife realizes where the source of his power lies. As recounted by Tante Clémence, we learn that, “Elle lui a crevé une joue, amoché un œil, déchiré la lèvre” (71). Although Tante José and Tante Clémence say that Maman was simply unable or unwilling to kill Papa, it really appears as if Maman never intended to kill him in the first
place, only to disfigure him and destroy the source of his incredible strength. Maman has not only disfigured the man she loved, she has destroyed his youth by tearing open his cheek, ruined his vision and his powerful gaze by cutting his eye, and most importantly attacked his lying mouth by tearing open his lip. She has always affirmed that she never believed a word Papa said and once her suspicions are confirmed, she is able to make certain that he will not betray her trust again.

Outwardly, it appears as if the attack works. Mina recounts towards the end of the play that her father has become “un homme sans âge à la face détruite,” and while he still has black skin, “la couleur de sa peau est devenu terne, douteuse, et qu’il ait la peau noire semble être maintenant une sorte d’infirmité et non plus l’écrasant apanage du temps de sa splendeur” (84). Instead, the youthful appearance now belongs to Maman, who is described by Mina as younger looking than even she (81). It seems that Maman’s triumph over Papa buys back her life and her youth, as if watching him age and waste away rejuvenates her. Even if the text indicates that the aunts use voodoo in an attempt to destroy Papa (77-78), it is doubtful that their “black” magic has caused him to fall from grace, because their past failures in magic do not lend them much credibility (76-77). Instead, it seems that Maman has consumed Papa in much the same way that the son of Mme Diss consumed Jacky, although we remain aware that Papa still holds some inexplicable power over her.

In *Les Serpents* Mme Diss affirms that her son grew more beautiful and more youthful once he had abused and killed Jacky.

Je lui ai dit, en lui tapotant la joue : tu t’es nourri de Jacky, tu t’es engraisssé de lui. Jacky t’a donné, je lui ai dit encore, la vigueur précieuse
Although I will spend more time on the portrayal of violence in *Les serpents* in chapter 5, it is worth noting that once again the idea of appearance is of the utmost importance to NDiaye’s characters whose power often seems to be contained in youthfulness and the image they project of themselves. As in the plays of Genet, the power of the characters, although it appears to be real and disarming, is in part illusory or at the very least ephemeral. Papa, Maman, Mme Diss, and the son of Mme Diss all fall from grace at some point in the plays, having been betrayed by their own power. The source of Papa’s power is destroyed. Maman, in spite of her rejuvenation and in spite of Papa’s apparent loss of power, returns to Papa at the end of the play and sadly admits that she will live a poor life with him. Mme Diss, despite her ability to manipulate and coerce, finds herself alone and abandoned at the end of the play. Mme Diss’s son is nameless, faceless and may be only a fictional portrait of the imagination of the other characters in spite of the image that is projected of him. Reality and illusion once again come to the forefront in our understanding of the various characters in the plays of Marie NDiaye.

NDiaye places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of and the difficulty of interacting with the family, much like Susini shows the complicated relationship between family and religion in *Coravara*. NDiaye also reminds her readers that the question of race and mixed race relationships is still a complicated issue in contemporary France.
Aimé Césaire presented his analysis of race in the context of his native Caribbean—perhaps a comfortable distance from the mainland—while NDiaye shows that many of the same concerns that Césaire spoke of in plays written in the 1960’s are still alive in the heart of France. NDiaye’s characters are often presented as literal outsiders, at times unable to gain entry into a house as is the case with Mme Diss, and if allowed inside, kept comfortably at arm’s length. In the case of Nancy, her entry into the house does not bring acceptance or understanding, but rather an even greater isolation than she had experienced before.

In chapter 5, I will continue to explore how various questions of identity often bring characters like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* and King Christophe in Aimé Césaire’s *La tragédie du roi Christophe* to a realization of the absurdity of life, and the way in which these characters react to this knowledge. The suicide of the old couple in Eugène Ionesco’s *Les chaises* and that of Claire in Jean Genet’s *Les bonnes* are examples of one extreme of the spectrum of reaction, while the motionless and quasi catatonic behavior of the unnamed man in *Acte sans paroles I* represents the opposite extreme. In many cases, characters react with violence either towards themselves or towards others, and their struggle leads them towards death, while in other cases, they become the embodiment of the absurd hero that Camus describes in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* and their struggle leads them towards freedom. In both cases, their reactions show that their authors still demonstrate at the core of their plays, a reliance on the concept of the Absurd.
Chapter 5: A violent reaction to the absurd

Death, suicide, and violence have always been important theatrical themes. The dual suicides of Romeo and Juliet in the eponymous Shakespeare play have been the inspiration for operas and movies alike, and as far back as Sophocles’ *Antigone*, suicide was used as a dramatic tool to emphasize the punishment meted out by the gods. While it isn’t unusual to find suicide and death in the plays of the Absurdist Theater as well as those of Susini, Césaire, and NDiaye, what is unique is the way the themes are linked to identity and to the philosophy of suicide as it is explored in Camus’ *Mythe de Sisyphe*. Another unique aspect of the portrayal of suicide in the plays I am analyzing is the way in which it has changed in character since the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare. While the idea of identity crisis as a reason for suicide has been present since the plays of classic Greek theater, is an important plot device in the classic English theater of Shakespeare, and still exists in the modern theater of the writers already referenced in this dissertation, the reasons behind the suicide of and violence committed by dramatic personae differ in many of these plays.

One need only examine the end of Genet’s *Les bonnes* to see that suicide can be used as a voodoo-like form of murder by proxy that, while effective in creating a theatrical mood, appears to accomplish the opposite of the murder that was originally planned. In *Les nègres*, another of Genet’s works, symbolic murder takes the form of acted-out vengeance against Whites, another almost voodoo-like ritual, while at the same
time not actually accomplishing anything as far as the audience can tell. It is only after the proper punishments have been acted out that it is known that the violence and murder on stage have been used only to distract the audience from the trial and execution (another act of violence) of another Black behind the scenes. In addition to the actual acts of suicide and murder, the threat of and the opportunity for suicide and murder appear in many of Beckett’s works, including *En attendant Godot* (1952), *Acte sans paroles I* (1956), *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1960). If the plays of Aimé Césaire, Marie NDiaye, and Marie Susini are examined, violence, suicide, and murder also sit within reach of many of their characters and are often staged differently than those acts portrayed by Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco. This particular examination of suicide and violence is intended to bring this dissertation full circle by returning it to the roots it planted in the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus and the existential angst of Jean-Paul Sartre. At the same time, this exploration will also remain firmly situated in the context of identity as first examined in the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet. Every author discussed in this dissertation, regardless of origin or gender, is in some manner related through the topics of violence and suicide, while at the same time retaining his or her own unique portrayal of these acts.

Suicide, while often a topic of the dramatic arts, was presented in a different context by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, when he approached the topic from the point of view of philosophy and identity, and removed it from the emotional and religious context in which it was often debated. In Camus’ essay, suicide is seen as a true philosophical dilemma and not simply as an act.
Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c'est le suicide.

Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie. Le reste, si le monde a trois dimensions, si l'esprit a neuf ou douze catégories, vient ensuite. Ce sont des jeux ; il faut d'abord répondre. (15)

While Camus explains his position on suicide and his philosophy of the absurd in this essay, he also explores the idea of suicide and violence in plays such as *Caligula* (1938), *Le malentendu* (1944), and *Les justes* (1949). It is important to note that he does distinguish between suicide as a philosophical response to the absurdity of life and suicide as a response to injustice in the world (*Sisyphe* 17), because in the plays discussed here, the act of suicide is not portrayed as having one single cause, and it must follow that violence is also not undertaken because of one single cause. The suicide by execution in *Les justes* is far removed from the suicide in Ionesco’s *Les chaises*. In much the same way, Maman’s mutilation of Papa in *Papa doit manger* is a different type of violence than that portrayed in Genet’s *Les paravents*. What Camus explains in his essay is that what matters most in the debate concerning suicide is the response to the fundamental question of whether life is worth living or not, and not just the act of suicide or the act of deciding to continue living. He emphasizes reason over action. The reasons for deciding to continue living in the midst of the absurdity of life are as varied as the reasons for deciding not to continue living, and each play explored here does in some way address those questions and answers.

One question that is often posed through the plays themselves is that of the definition of suicide. Camus defines two kinds of suicide in *Sisyphe*; the physical act of
suicide that results in the taking of one’s own life, and the act of philosophical suicide that results in allowing a philosophy or a religion to serve as a refuge from the reality of the absurd. Both, he claims, are ways of escaping from facing the absurd.

Camus explains here that suicide can take the form of philosophical escape just as it can take the form of taking one’s own life, and reminds the reader that philosophical escape is as individual a choice as the method by which one might commit suicide. He doesn’t single out religion as the only method of philosophical escape, but rather seems to suggest that anything that comes in between a person and his or her facing the absurdity of life with honesty (and with the goal of negating the struggle against the absurd) is in fact a form of philosophical suicide, including what he calls the “attitude existentielle”. Although he emphasizes that his view of this existential attitude is not a
judgment, he explains that any philosophy that substitutes a given \( x \) in the place of a recognition of the absurd and the struggle that must ensue with this recognition of the absurdity of life is dishonest.

Si absurde il y a, c’est dans l’univers de l’homme. Dès l’instant où sa notion se transforme en tremplin d’éternité, elle n’est plus liée à la lucidité humaine. L’absurde n’est plus cette évidence que l’homme constate sans y consentir. La lutte est éclatée. L’homme intègre l’absurde et dans cette communion fait disparaître son caractère essentiel qui est opposition, déchirement et divorce. (54-55)

This quote finds its application on the stage in concrete images such as Samuel Beckett’s portrayal of Estragon’s struggle with his boot and his affirmation “Rien à faire” in *En attendant Godot* (10). Instead of approaching the boot with philosophy, Estragon simply acknowledges the tangible reality that there is nothing that can be done. Eventually he manages to remove the boot (12) even if it does nothing to advance the plot, leading a spectator or a reader to the potential conclusion that continued struggle may have a result, even if it doesn’t completely resolve the problem. Other examples of the translation of the philosophy of the Absurd from the page to the stage will follow.

There are many plays where the idea of suicide is discussed or considered without the act actually being accomplished, at least not during the play itself. Two notable examples in the plays of Samuel Beckett appear in *En attendant Godot* and *Acte sans paroles I*. In *Godot*, the tramps discuss suicide at length (20-21, 69, 122-23), consider its merits, debate who should attempt suicide first, and at the end of the play even make an attempt at using a belt as a noose, which turns into a sight gag. Beckett almost seems to
mock the act of suicide when he has Estragon remove his belt to create a rope only to have his pants fall down around his ankles (122). It is also significant to note that this decisive action taken by the two tramps is one of the only deliberate and independent acts they attempt to undertake during the entire play. In general the play has consisted of Estragon and Vladimir fighting against their surroundings and being forced into action by the people around them. Although they twice indicate their decision to leave, they never go (70, 124). And while they both decry Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky in the first act, Estragon is savagely kicked by Lucky when he takes Pozzo’s recommendation to go and dry his tears (41), and subsequently both tramps are silenced when Pozzo claims that it is he who is being mistreated (43-44). Once the two of them finally decide to act on their own and actually proceed with their plan of action, their failure reverberates even louder. Didi and Gogo thus have their identities formed by their inability to successfully act independently, and demonstrate their obedience to this formation in voicing desires that will go unfulfilled. In a similar fashion, Acte sans paroles I wordlessly presents a man in the desert struggling both against his surroundings and against unseen forces that mock his attempts to leave the stage, find shade, procure water, and also hang himself and cut his throat with a pair of scissors. The play ends with the character remaining impassive while the items he struggled with during the play appear to mock him.

Il reste allongé sur le flanc, face à la salle, le regard fixe.

La carafe descend, s’immobilise à un demi mètre de son corps.

Il ne bouge pas.

Coup de sifflet en haut.

Il ne bouge pas.
La carafe descend encore, se balance autour de son visage.
Il ne bouge pas.
La carafe remonte et disparaît dans les cintres.
La branche de l’arbre se relève, les palmes se rouvrent, l’ombre revient.
Coup de sifflet en haut.
Il ne bouge pas.
L’arbre remonte et disparaît dans les cintres.
Il regarde ses mains. (123-124)

There are two ways to view this play that both return to Beckett’s preoccupation with identity. The man may have finally understood the futility of struggle and realized that no matter what action he undertakes, he will never be able to fulfill his desires. His impassibility at the end of the play is an indication of resignation and defeat. He has had even his ability to commit suicide taken away from him twice, just as Estragon and Vladimir find themselves unable to commit suicide and then mocked for their attempt. This interpretation allows us to see Beckett’s belief in “the inevitable frustration and disappointment of life” (Knowlson 377). However, it is possible to imagine that Camus would have seen the man as a perfect example of the absurd hero, as he eventually realizes that the only way to fight against the system is to do nothing. All interactions with the world have proved useless and there is no explanation given as to why he is where he is and what it is that he is supposed to accomplish. In response to the unreasonable silence of the world, he will not react to the world’s attempts to dominate him, but rather dominate himself and refuse to react. Although the audience might see him as simply having had the fight beaten out of him at the end of the play, and attribute
his inaction to hopelessness and a realization that action is futile, his motionlessness in
the face of the taunts of the world and his decision to remain impassable at the end of the
play can certainly also be seen as gestures of defiance.

One of Beckett’s plays in which the question of suicide becomes significantly
more clouded is *Happy Days*. Winnie seems to be presented with the option of suicide
from the outset of the play. Her black bag appears to give to her all the items that she
needs on a daily basis and is as much a character as it is a prop, giving her items not, it
would seem, at random, but rather as she has need of them. Winnie herself seems to
relish the mystery of what might emerge from the bag.

Could I, if some kind person were to come along and ask, what all have
you got in that big black bag, Winnie? Give an exhaustive answer?

[Pause.] No. [Pause.] The depths in particular, who knows what treasures.

[Pause.] What comforts. [Turns to look at bag.] Yes, there is the bag.

[Back front.] But something tells me, Do not overdo the bag, Winnie,
make use of it of course, let it help you… along, when stuck, by all means,
but cast your mind forward, something tells me, cast your mind forward,
Winnie, to the time when words must fail—(288)

Immediately following this explanation she reaches into the bag and pulls out,
with disgust, the revolver, which certainly highlights the final phrase “time when words
must fail” in a sinister way. Although it is never explicitly clear whether Winnie is
herself selecting the items she pulls from the bag, this particular speech would seem to
indicate that more often than not, the bag itself is choosing what it will give up,
responding to needs (a nail file when Winnie examines her nails, a magnifying glass
when she wishes to read the handle of the toothbrush) and also deciding when to stop
giving. Towards the end of the first act, Winnie explains something else about the bag
that also suggests its autonomy as an “other.”

I used to think—I say I used to think—that all these things—put back into
the bag—if too soon—put back too soon—could be taken out again—if
necessary—if needed—and so on—indefinitely—back into the bag—back
out of the bag—until the bell—went. [Stops tidying, head up, smile.] But
no. [Smile broader.] No no. (295)

Is Beckett suggesting that suicide is an option that Winnie should perhaps
consider? If it still seems unclear in the first act, then perhaps he gives a clearer
indication of his intent in the second. Winnie, now buried up to her neck in the earth,
appears alone on stage with only the black bag on one side of her head, and the revolver
on the other. Both remain just within view, although she must visibly strain to see either
object. We can certainly assume as spectators that she has not chosen to leave the objects
out, because she physically cannot. In this case the bag again becomes an active
character, giving up objects from its depths in order to “help” Winnie get through her
day. Certainly Willie’s appearance at the end of the play does little to lighten the mood,
as he struggles to climb up the hill toward her, and Winnie is forced to declare, “Is it me
you’re after, Willie… or is it something else? [Pause] Do you want to touch my face…
again? [Pause] Is it a kiss you’re after, Willie… or is it something else?” (307). The
sight of Willie struggling up the hill is both touching and chilling as there is truly no way
to know what it is that he wants. The unseen eyes and the bag may be showing Winnie
that she should have taken the opportunity to “float up into the blue” when she had use of
her arms because her fate now rests in the hands of the man at the bottom of the hill (289). The metaphor of death as a release from confinement is certainly strong here, and it is possible to make out Sisyphus’ hill in the pile of earth in which Winnie is confined. As to the question of Willie’s intent, Beckett never speaks about an intended motive, and always claimed that he did not know what happened between the two characters after the curtain fell. He realized only that the ambiguity of motive presented a chance for a dramatic portrayal that it would have been a true shame to have missed (Knowlson 434).

Once again, the specter of death appears in Beckett’s work sandwiched between the touching and the chilling, the solemn and the humorous.

Winnie, Didi and Gogo, Krapp, and the unnamed man in Acte sans paroles I can all be reconnected to Camus through his declaration that “L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde. C'est cela qu'il ne faut pas oublier. C'est à cela qu'il faut se cramponner parce que toute la conséquence d'une vie peut en naître” (45). Each of the characters created by Beckett is looking for someone or something to respond to their questions and either receives no response or a response that cannot be explained, “même avec de mauvaises raisons” (18).

In Ionesco’s Les chaises (1952), the act of suicide is used in a particularly powerful way, forcing the spectator to confront his or her own identity. As described in the first chapter, the suicide of les Vieux follows two long rambling speeches given by le Vieux as he contemplates the huge crowd of invisible guests. The first speech, addressed to the invisible Emperor, is largely focused on the failings le Vieux experienced in his life and how he could have been something if he had simply been given the chance and not been held back by others. The second speech, given after the Orator arrives, is a farewell
address that expresses the hope of le Vieux that the Orator will transmit his message well so as to rescue humanity. At the conclusion of both of these speeches, les Vieux salutes the Emperor again and throws themselves out of the window simultaneously.

After the suicide, the audience is made fully and perhaps painfully aware of the emptiness of the chairs, which beforehand were treated as if filled with the raucous crowd of people who had come to hear the message of le Vieux. The mute mumblings of the Orator do even more to reinforce this idea that everything up to this point in the play has been an illusion, that there will be no message transmitted, and that there may not have been anyone in the chairs at all but the memories of les Vieux and the failed hopes and dreams of a lifetime’s worth of regret.

In this play, the use of suicide has the dual function of showing the reaction of les Vieux to the final realization of what life could have been had le Vieux not wasted his time and talents and had la Vieille not made excuses for his failures, and also of forcing the spectator to confront his or her own life when faced with the empty chairs. While the death of les Vieux certainly does represent a suicide in the face of the absurdity of the world, it also clears the stage of the only characters that have been holding together the illusion of the guests, demonstrates the futility of communication through the mute Orator, and most importantly allows the spectators to fill the chairs with their own regrets and their own wasted chances. The identity of les Vieux, completely contained in their memories and their regrets, has up to the moment of their suicide been placed in the chairs and been brought to life only through their conversation. In no other play within the scope of this dissertation is memory personified more effectively after the play has ended than it is during the action on stage. While the spectators might very well believe
in the invisible guests during the play, it is almost inevitable that they will not truly realize the strength of this illusion until after the suicide of les Vieux and the fall of the curtain. It is truly the suicide that gives life to the moments that come before it.

The plays of Jean Genet contain a startling amount of physical violence, from the outright murder committed at the end of *Haute surveillance*, one of the author’s first plays, to the multiple deaths in *Les paravents*, the last of his plays. Genet did not shy away from a physical and often brutal depiction of violence aimed at all character types. While the violence in *Les paravents* might appear to be more stylized and less outwardly brutal than the violent acts portrayed in the brothel in *Le balcon*, it is no less significant a part of Genet’s work. For Beckett and Ionesco violence was an inevitable part of the difficulty of living, and often a result of the struggle to form and maintain an identity. Genet uses violence in a similar way, although his use of it is much less abstract and slapstick and much more brutal in that he created situations that are based in a tangible and recognizable setting such as a prison, or an African or Arabic country. Genet’s universe includes familiar places and familiar situations. Brothels and prisons may not be personally significant for all audience members, but they do provide the spectator with an easy point of reference. In addition, Genet loosely based his last two plays on historically significant situations and placed them in locations that, once again, forced the spectator to consider the plays in a different way than they would a play by Beckett set in an unfamiliar wilderness.

If Beckett and Ionesco both often presented violence in terms of its significance in the personal struggle for identity, Genet depicts violence in terms of its significance in the power shift that might occur as a result of this struggle. The plays that I have
examined in depth here, *Le balcon*, *Les nègres*, and *Les paravents*, all present power in terms of its ephemeral and illusory nature. Genet’s staging of *Les nègres* and *Les paravents* shows this power in terms of cultural conflict, through the depiction either of a colonized African people or an Arabic-speaking country. In this way, his plays are more akin to those of Aimé Césaire, who also evokes colonization in his theater, though Genet’s plays retain many of the traits that link them with the theater of Beckett and Ionesco.

I want to explore two situations in Genet’s plays where suicide and murder are used in his depiction of the struggle for identity. The first takes place in *Les bonnes*, which depicts two maids, Claire and Solange, and the aftermath of their having anonymously denounced their employer’s boyfriend for a crime. In much the same manner as *Le balcon*, the play opens with the characters playing roles; Claire is playing Madame, and Solange is playing Claire. The audience is only once given a clue as to the switch in roles after Solange breaks character and uses the wrong name in the role-playing exercise and is criticized by the dominant Claire (29). Several lines later as the two maids are physically fighting with each other, completely absorbed in their roles, an alarm sounds and both Claire and Solange resume their normal roles and prepare for Madame’s return to the house (32). As the play progresses, the two learn that Madame’s boyfriend has been released from prison (53). They realize as well that it is only a matter of time before the anonymous letter is traced back to them (54) and, fearing punishment for their betrayal, prepare a cup of poisoned tea for Madame to drink when she arrives at the house (63). However, once Madame learns that her boyfriend has been released from prison, she leaves in a flurry of excitement and neglects to drink her tea (90). Claire
returns to playing the role of Madame and drinks the tea in her place (113), and the 
curtain falls with the audience knowing that Claire will die and that Solange will likely be 
accused of the murder and the denunciation of Madame’s boyfriend.

In this first instance, Genet’s characters use role-playing to satisfy their urge to 
exact revenge. Much in the same way that the character of Roger in *Le balcon* uses his 
self mutilation while in the role of the Police Chief to exact a sort of revenge upon his 
designated other, Claire’s dual desire to harm Madame and to escape responsibility for 
her crimes culminates not in mutilation, but rather in a suicide that is a murder by proxy. 
As Roger cannot physically harm the Police Chief, he chooses to mutilate his image. As 
Claire and Solange have failed to kill Madame while they had the chance, Claire decides 
that she will simply kill the image of Madame and leave Solange to her fate playing yet 
another role, as “La femme Lemercier. La Lemercier. La fameuse criminelle” (109).

In *Les nègres*, a white court, after having been revealed to be Blacks disguised as 
whites, is condemned to death and “executed” by the other Blacks. While the initial 
description of the play (a full summary of which I gave in Chapter 2) given by a 
character, Archibald, indicates that the White court is to judge and condemn the Blacks 
for their ritual murder of a white woman, the end result of the “trial” reverses the roles of 
prosecution and defense and results in the Blacks judging and condemning the Whites. 
However, there is no real crime committed by either the Whites or the Blacks, only the 
necessity to entertain the audience, as Archibald insists.

    ARCHIBALD. (*solemn*): Puisque nous ne pouvions permettre aux Blancs 
d’assister à une délibération, ni leur montrer un drame qui ne les intéresse 
pas, et que, pour le dissimuler nous avons dû échafauder le seul qui les
concerne, nous devons achever ce spectacle, et nous débarrasser de nos juges... (A celle qui était la Reine) : comme prévu.

(164)

As for another reason for the Blacks having donned the masks of white persons, the actor who portrays the queen explains that the masks served a dual purpose: allowing the Blacks to live “l’abominable vie des Blancs,” and allowing the other Blacks to experience shame more fully (165). She also reveals that the massacre of Whites will be accomplished lyrically immediately before the members of the White court don their masks again (165). Genet once again uses the tactics of illusion to accomplish the symbolic murder of the Whites. His use of violence here is symbolic rather than real, as it is in Les bonnes, but no less powerful. The images and the actions are still effective at creating an image of the white other as uncultured and narrow-minded, and their execution retains all the symbolic power of the image of a hated political leader being burned in effigy. Genet’s use of violence also differs in this particular play as it is not intended to speak in the same way to the white spectator as it is to the black spectator. As I cited in chapter two, one of the actors in the American representation of the play described black theatergoers as not necessarily cognizant of the “pungent hostility” that the play gave off (White 439). The violence in Genet’s plays does tend in general to reflect his desire to write polarizing material. While Les bonnes and Le balcon use violence in such a way as to reveal general tendencies within society to use role-play as a means of determining identity, Les nègres and Les paravents speak more specifically and focus on less abstract ideals.
Perhaps the best description of the reason for violence in the plays of Genet is given by Madame Irma in her description of the role the brothel fills and the necessity of the role-playing that takes place within it. After Carmen suggests that the return to reality for someone who has just left a brothel must be brutal, Irma replies, “Tu n’y comprends rien. Je le vois à leurs yeux : après ils ont l’esprit clair. Tout à coup, ils comprennent les mathématiques. Ils aiment leurs enfants et leur patrie” (72). The maison d’illusions allows the men who frequent it to leave behind worries and fears, to clear their heads of unnecessary troubles or to forget, even if for only a bit, what preoccupies them. For Genet, this is also the role of theater, and the reason for the degree of violence that he uses in it. His is a theater of scapegoats upon which the sins of the audience can be placed, whose characters can serve as whipping posts, and in which the anxieties and fears of the audience can be left behind at the end of the performance, allowing spectators to leave the theater cleansed. Still, he warns us at the end of Le balcon, once again through the words of Madame Irma, that we must leave and go home where everything “sera encore plus faux qu’ici” (134). Yet, as Carmen has pointed out, the visitors to the brothel continue to return and continue to seek relief from their cares on an almost daily basis (72). In this way, Genet does not hesitate to remind us that his theater is only a temporary reprieve, and cannot serve as a permanent shelter from the role-playing, the hypocrisy, and the disappointment that we experience in our daily lives. However, he does invite us into his sordid world of ritual to find our scapegoats. John Killinger reminds us that Genet doesn’t use noble characters but “their opposite. It is his outcasts who bear the sins of the world. Evil is really the only thing they have” (216).
Aimé Césaire presents a somewhat surprisingly traditional and restrained view of suicide in *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, allowing Christophe to kill himself off stage, and using only the sound of a gunshot to signal the act of suicide. It may be argued that the suicide of Christophe is orchestrated in such a way as to allow the emperor to retain his dignity in the face of his failure, and that Césaire shows respect for his character by not displaying his final act in front of all spectators. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Christophe lets the audience know that he is resigned to a death of some sort when he speaks to his page Congo about allowing himself to be struck “en plein” by the arrow of the enemy (140). This quote certainly brings to mind the question of whether or not it would have been more honorable for Christophe to actually allow the arrow of his enemy, rather than the weapon held in his own hand, to end his life, although perhaps, as Camus might have suggested, the real question is what Césaire intends to show through Christophe’s suicide.

Christophe has always had a great love for his people and desired the best for them to the point of forcing them into a sort of slavery so they would be able to achieve what he believed they were capable of accomplishing. His identity is completely intertwined with the identity of his people and his country, and when the desires of his own life and the desires of the country begin to differ, he finds himself literally torn between the two, broken apart to the point of finding himself paralyzed (128-29). His hubris and his desire for the best cloud his ability to see the necessity to work hand in hand with the people he loves, rather than guiding them with the whip towards the place he believes they should go. In the section of the play immediately preceding the scene where Christophe commits suicide, he laments to his African page Congo that he cannot
continue to live in a country full of people who neither love him nor understand the love he has for them, which has caused him to act in the way that he did. He expresses his desire to return to Africa, carried like “un vieil enfant” and washed clean (147). Then taking his revolver he goes off to commit suicide, serenaded by Hugonin who is dressed as the Haitian death God, Baron Samedi (147-49). His death is tragic in that he truly desired the best for the people he loved and fell into the old ways of colonization, although he called it ambition rather than colonization.

Even though there is no suicide in Une tempête, there is a similar situation where the hubris of a character, his feeling of entitlement because of the work he has done and because of the noble ideals he believes he possesses, causes his downfall. In Une tempête, Césaire shows violence in the stark terms of colonization. Prospero, an exile who has been displaced from his own kingdom, has effectively colonized the island on which he was marooned, and has two servants with two different views of colonization. When we first encounter Caliban, he scoffs at Prospero’s claim that it was he who civilized him and taught him everything.

D’abord ce n’est pas vrai. Tu ne m’as rien appris du tout. Sauf, bien sûr à baragouiner ton langage pour comprendre tes ordres : couper du bois, laver la vaisselle, pêcher le poisson, planter les légumes, parce que tu es bien trop fainéant pour le faire. Quant à ta science, est-ce que tu me l’as jamais apprise, toi ? Tu t’en es bien gardé ! Ta science, tu la gardes égoïstement pour toi tout seul, enfermé dans les gros livres que voilà. (25)

In response to this accusation, Prospero responds by threatening further violence, exclaiming that “La trique, c’est le seul langage que tu comprennes ; eh bien, tant pis
pour toi, je te le parlerai haut et clair” (27). Ania Loomba points out, citing several verses from the original Shakespearian version, that the play is presented so as to prove that Prospero’s only real power is in the threat of violence (154-55). I would add that his power also consists in being able to wield a more potent form of violence than can Ariel or Caliban. Césaire’s version emphasizes this particular point of view during a revealing conversation between the two slaves, after Ariel suggests that what Prospero needs is to be taught civility.

    CALIBAN. Tu n’as rien compris à Prospero. C’est pas un type à collaborer. C’est un mec qui ne se sent que s’il écrase quelqu’un. Un écraseur, un broyeur, voilà le genre! Et tu parles de fraternité.

    ARIEL. Alors, que reste-t-il? La guerre. Et tu sais qu’à ce jeu-là Prospero est imbattable.

    CALIBAN. Mieux vaut la mort que l’humiliation et l’injustice. . . D’ailleurs, de toute manière le dernier mot m’appartiendra. . . A moins qu’il n’appartienne au néant. . . . (38)

The strength of Caliban lies in his refusal to fear death. Even if he does realize that Prospero’s greatest asset is his ability to carry through with his threats of violence, he refuses to continue to back down in the face of those threats. He represents a hardened version of the colonial subject who has come to realize that the colonizers will not change their ways and live in harmony with the colonized and therefore must be challenged rather than accepted. Ariel still hopes for peace on the island, still hopes to change Prospero’s mindset, and represents the colonial subject who has accepted his or her position as subordinate and hopes to change the colonizer through gradual non-violent
resistance. If the historical context of this play is taken into consideration, it is not difficult to make out, as some critics have, the mentalities of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. in the respective characters of Caliban and Ariel (Porter 373, Sarnecki 283).

Césaire presents a kind of success for both servants. Ariel, through his hard work and his fidelity to his master, is released from service at the end of the play, while Caliban is presented as victorious in spirit having outlasted Prospero at his own game, but his victory is clouded by the same Master-Slave dialectic that often appears in Genet’s works. At the end of the play, Prospero is presented as a stereotypical colonist at work trying to defend “civilization” before he cries out to Caliban, “Eh bien, mon vieux Caliban, nous ne sommes plus que deux sur cette île, plus que toi et moi. Toi et moi ! Toi-Moi ! Moi-Toi ! . . . .” (92). While Prospero can no longer exist as a colonizer if his colonized refuses to participate, Caliban can no longer pursue his dream of liberty if he has no one enslaving him. The balance is clearly tipped in the favor of Caliban in this instance, but his identity too has been shaped by his subordination and he has become a freedom fighter who will forever chase after but never truly attain liberty. It is also important to note that Prospero seems aware that he and Caliban are one entity, as seen through his use of the hyphenated “Toi-Moi ! Moi-Toi !”

For Césaire, violence and suicide are responses that emanate from within as a reaction to the desire to control. When Christophe realizes that he is no longer in control of his own kingdom, is in danger of losing control of his own destiny, and has already begun to lose control of his body, he takes his life because it is his last bastion of strength. Prospero decides not to leave the island because he perceives that in doing so,
he would leave behind an entity whose life he had never fully been able to control. His granting of freedom to Ariel is, in a sense, a way for him to wield power because he is the one who held that power of freedom or slavery and is also the one who decided to relinquish control. Since Caliban refuses to acknowledge the “gifts” of freedom and pardon offered to him by Prospero (86), it is Caliban who retains power, withholding Prospero’s ability to grant the freedom and pardon that he gave to Ariel. The power struggle ends with the two sides remaining locked in a battle where neither will ever relinquish their position, and while Caliban certainly retains a measure of power in his servitude, Prospero will go to the grave a broken and powerless man. Caliban, although locked in the Hegelian dialectic with Prospero, greatly resembles the Absurd hero in his refusal to give up the fight with the absurdity of his situation—that of being a stranger in his homeland—and to continue to desire what it is that he can probably never possess: freedom. His reaction to life is almost Sisyphean in its trajectory.

The death of Francesco in Susini’s Corvara offers one of the most interesting philosophical views of suicide that I have encountered in my research. Corvara and her son arrive at the house of her brother-in-law to beg him to help her find her husband, Francesco, who has run away from the house on a miserable snowy night. She is in a panic over what she said just before he left the house, a sort of malediction that left her mouth almost without her knowledge, and apparently a sign to him that he was to leave. While the brother and a neighbor go out in search of Francesco, we learn the details of the life of Francesco and hear of his fall from grace once he left the priesthood and then married Corvara. Since he decided to abandon the priesthood, it appears that fate has doomed his path. His son is born blind, he is shunned by all who used to love him, and
his life has become one of isolation and misery. Francesco is found at the end of the play, but he has died out in the snow and his body is brought back to his brother’s house where people prepare to mourn him.

As I explained in the last chapter, the play takes up the philosophies of Camus and Sartre at the same time. Sartre’s philosophy of Existentialism is borne out through the townspeople’s judgment of Francesco based on his actions and his desires. His choices are deemed to be made in bad faith (both literally, as he abandoned the priesthood, and in the Sartrean sense of the term), and his life is judged based on his actions and not on his background or his upbringing. The love that people had for him before his decision to leave the priesthood is turned to bitterness and rage. However, his isolation is also reminiscent of the definition of the Absurd as given by Camus. The people and the places that were at one time familiar to him have become strange, and there is nothing but silence in the place of the answers that he seeks for the reasons behind his isolation.

The question remains as to whether he has or has not committed suicide. Francesco, in choosing to become a priest in the first place, would have been guilty of committing the philosophical suicide described by Camus in the *Mythe de Sisyphe*. Taking refuge in the church certainly seems to have left him unprepared for the absurdity of life that he rediscovers after leaving the priesthood. In the philosophical sense, it would seem that his decision to take refuge in the church ended when he left the priesthood, although Corvara insists that he has kept his faith. But in this sense, does his decision to run away into the snowstorm represent a different kind of leap toward the eternal? Corvara, although she and Francesco both represent the philosophy of the absurd in their daily lives, does not appear to believe that Francesco’s decision is one that
he made consciously, and instead sees herself as only a tool of fate. She claims that what she said came out of her mouth without malice, but that it was instantly apparent that she had done something terrible. “Oh... je lui ai dit. ... (D’une voix désespérée.) Je lui ai dit : Sois maudit entre tous, toi qui portes le malheur. ... Et pourtant, ce n’était point de la haine que j’avais dans le cœur...” (40). Although she realizes her mistake, she still believes that she should be absolved of some of the fault because she did not mean for what she said to have the effect that it did. Immediately following this admission, she disappears off stage, and the Maid makes a statement about how family ties cannot be broken, an indication of how the woman managed to find her brother-in-law’s house in the middle of a snowstorm even though she had never been there before. It is a difficult line to draw between what seems like fate, and what seems like the absurdity of life suddenly crashing down and claiming a victim who has struggled for too long in vain.

_Corvara_ brings to mind salient questions for many spectators regarding their own lives. It does seem to ask why bad things happen to good people, because from all accounts of Corvara’s husband, even from those who turn on him after he left the priesthood, he was an intelligent, well-mannered person who made one decision that was an error in the eyes of those who knew him, and he now finds himself being punished. Corvara explains that she feels that fate has been following him since birth and that he is a marked man. “Quand on est marqué, on l’est dès qu’on sort du ventre de sa mère et déjà le cri qu’on pousse en naissant est celui du désespoir...” (128). Her explanation bears a great similarity to the story of Cain who, according to Genesis 4, became a marked man for the rest of his life after killing his brother Abel and who was condemned by God to become “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” as punishment for his actions.
(Gen. 4.12). Cain himself was denied a familiar homeland, having been driven out of his land because of his sins, and Francesco finds himself in the same position, although as I pointed out in chapter 3, his sins seem to be defined by his peers rather than by God.

What then of his physical death? Francesco’s flight into the snowy night can be viewed in two vastly different ways. His decision to leave the house with no coat and with no apparent trajectory, at least none that can be discerned in the storyline until he is found at the end of the play, certainly seems like the decision of a suicidal man who has no reason left to live. If Corvara has been the sole source of support for Francesco, her words of condemnation, even uttered without any hatred or malice in them, would signal that Francesco’s last bastion of support has finally crumbled and that he truly has no one left who believes in him. Faced with the utter hopelessness of the situation, his identity having been reduced to nothing even in the eyes of his wife, he finds no choice other than to commit suicide. If another reading of the play in undertaken, however, his decision to leave the house cannot be completely understood until the end of the play because it remains unclear where exactly he was trying to go until his body is found at the foot of the bell tower in the town in which he was born. The neighbor exclaims to the mother, “Quel ange ou quel esprit l’aura porté jusqu’au pied du clocher du village ?...Dans ce village où il est né… Tout ce chemin… Il ne peut l’avoir fait tout seul…” (132). Here, there is a clear indication that the neighbor believes that perhaps Francesco had some sort of a divine guide that led him back to the town where he was born so he could die in a familiar place. In this case, Francesco’s flight into the night is not one undertaken by a suicidal man in search of a place to end his days, but rather a journey of redemption that ends in a reconciliation of sorts between Francesco and his God. What has initially
The violence described in NDiaye’s *Papa doit manger* and *Les serpents* is disturbing because it is neither stylized nor idealized. Whereas in Genet’s *Les paravents* and Ionesco’s *La leçon* the violence is presented in such a way as to be shocking but still extreme enough to remain clearly fictional, the mutilation of Papa and the abuse and death of Jacky, while not physically acted out on stage, are uncomfortably familiar and realistic to those who might see such stories on the news, or know of people who have suffered domestic abuse. The violence in NDiaye’s work is spoken of with such ease that it becomes all the more uncomfortable to hear alongside the semi-absurd moments of the text that remind the reader of Ionesco or Beckett. In the scene from *Papa* where the Aunts describe the attack on Papa, Tante Clémence appears to be shocked by what has
happened, but still places concerns about her hair on the same level as the attempted murder.

Elle lui a crevé la gueule. Au couteau. Elle l’a raté.

Cette fille fait tout n’importe comment. Même notre couleur, elle l’a mal faite, ça ne tient pas. Et comme quoi c’est son métier et sa vocation et turlututu.

Le nègre n’aurait pas grand-chose.

Mais il est presque défiguré, dit-elle.

Elle lui a donné plusieurs coups de couteau, elle a voulu le tuer, José.

(70)

Here, the power of the description of the attack is intensified because the surrounding text does nothing to prepare the reader or the spectator for the description of the violence. The description is also filled with a slang that makes it all the more disconcerting. Verbs like crever and rater (burst or puncture and make a mess of) and nouns like gueule (mouth, usually used to describe an animal) are effective in making the sentence shocking, while at the same time making it contemporary. This juxtaposition of humor and violence and the use of slang creates a description of the situation for which the spectator or reader will likely be unprepared, hiding the brutality of the violence within these layers of slang and ridiculous racism.

In much the same way, the description of the abuse and death of Jacky in the text of *Les serpents* is intensified through the insensitivity of Mme Diss, who extorts money from Nancy in exchange for gruesome details of what happened to her son. Nancy despises Mme Diss and tells her that she will never loan her a single cent, but she is
gradually worn down when the conversation turns to Jacky, her dead son. She begins to stammer and lose her confidence when it becomes clear that Mme Diss is questioning her right even to be at the house in the first place. “Ce qui n’est plus, deux moins un, ne compte pas. Tiens, à moi, quel souvenir m’en reste-t-il? Je le crains : pas le moindre” (24). Nancy retorts by insisting that she will always be the mother of a certain boy, to which Mme Diss replies that she can remember nothing of the boy nor of the situation, and clarifies that she will remember nothing if she receives nothing in return. After being tempted with the promise of information, Nancy agrees to pay money for Mme Diss’s dreadful memories of the abuse and death of the little boy. The situation in itself is horrifying in its frank exploitative nature. Mme Diss, after receiving a total sum of 2400 Euros, explains how the boy was systematically beaten because of the gentleness of his nature (29), because it didn’t seem as if he were truly suffering from the abuse (31), and because of the absence of his mother (34). Nancy seeks in vain to validate the abuse, asking whether the boy was perhaps difficult, lazy, and deserving of his punishment (29). When she learns that he was in fact so gentle that his father truly had to invent “une haine spéciale pour oser la forcer puis s’inventer des raisons de le cogner” (30), she then insists that his father must have at least loved him, and comforted him once the abuse was over. Mme Diss, however, is unrelenting and twists the knife again by informing her that the father told the boy, “qu’elle vienne te voir, ta mère, si elle veut arrêter mon bras. Car rien d’autre ne l’arrêterait” (31).

NDiaye allows the violence in her plays, as horrific as it is for the audience or the reader, to serve as little more than a way of moving from one part of the play to another. In *Les serpents*, the violence introduces the character of Nancy and also illustrates the
abusive nature of both the son of Mme Diss and Mme Diss herself. The death of Jacky, although told in such a way as to shock the reader once more, is recounted by Mme Diss in an emotionless fashion, making it all the more repugnant. Nancy herself, the mother of the boy in question, while she does beg and even pays money to be told the story of the abuse and death of her son, appears to use the story as nothing more than a way to assuage in some measure her guilt for what happened, and even says at the end of the chapter, “Je me suis soulagée de ma peur et jamais plus je n’aurais peur de ma vie” (42). NDiaye almost seems to be indicating that the violence that she is portraying here is scapegoat-like in nature, allowing it to free Nancy from her past fears. In *Papa doit manger*, the violence described by Tante Clémence allows the reader to understand why Papa is weakened, and also demonstrates a shift of power in the relationship between Papa and Maman. As I described in the last chapter, Papa’s sources of power—his skin, his eyes, his mouth—are all destroyed in Maman’s attack and go from being his greatest asset to becoming his Achilles heel.

If these examples of violence in the theater of Ndiaye are examined, it is possible to see that she incorporates some of the hallmarks of the theater of Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett. She incorporates Ionesco’s use of violence as a mere tool for moving the plot forward, taking away from it a great deal of the emotion and leaving behind the simple fact of violence, while also allowing the violence to be realistic enough for the audience so as to make it truly horrifying. If Ionesco’s portrayal of a murderous professor in *La leçon* tends towards the humorous and the ridiculous (he has killed 40 students and will continue to kill more) it does so in a manner that is unemotional and makes this violence a simple plot device. NDiaye allows the violence to serve as a way to introduce
characters and display their personalities, but does not ridicule it. She also incorporates Genet’s idea of power as illusory and ephemeral by showing Papa’s fall from grace, and also allows the idea of ongoing revolution to appear in his apparent return to influence at the end of the play when Maman agrees to take him back and admits her lifelong love for him. She likewise shows how two of Beckett’s major themes—vision and memory—are important by showing how memory can be exploited by one character in order to wield power over another, and how the destruction of vision (through the destruction of one of Papa’s eyes) can partially destroy a character’s power. She also shows how memory remains a vital part of identity by allowing the final plea of Mme Diss to echo, in a way, the final desire of Krapp in Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Mme Diss pleads with France, “Souviens-toi de moi” (92), because it is only in being remembered and in being seen that she can be assured of her own importance and existence. Krapp, who speaks numerous times of the women’s eyes that he looked into, wants simply to “Be again, be again” (229). NDiaye’s melding of these themes, often through the use of violence, demonstrates how she has brought the Theater of the Absurd into a contemporary setting and used the recurrent themes of this genre to speak volumes about the struggle for identity within the structures of power, family relationships, and French society.

In summary, one of the greatest differences between the violence portrayed in the works of Beckett and Ionesco and that in the francophone plays discussed here is the purpose it serves in the text. As we have seen already, Ionesco presents violence in his wordplay as a metaphor for the violent nature of communication and the struggle we must each undertake to make ourselves understood. His violence is highly stylized and often exaggerated to the point of being ridiculous. Even in a political play such as
Rhinocéros, the violence becomes part of the symbolic representation of a greater struggle against fascism and extremism. Beckett too explores violence as a symbolic representation of a greater struggle. His portrayals of violence emphasize the emotional nature of his characters as in Godot and Krapp’s Last Tape. They also share characteristics with the violent wordplay of Ionesco in plays such as Not I (1972) and Play (1963) in which there is no real action, only the mouths and faces of the characters. The violence in these plays shows the absurd in its raw emotional nature, while restricting the actual violence seen on stage either to the violence of words, or to the subtle threat of violence boiling under the surface.

In the plays of NDiaye, Susini, Césaire, and even in those of Genet, the violence serves many purposes other than the portrayal of the nature of the absurd. While many of the plays by Césaire, Susini, and NDiaye have not before been categorized as absurd, they do, as I have shown, share many of the characteristics of the plays of the absurdist authors. Still, their portrayal of violence differs in both nature and intended result. Genet often uses violence as a cleansing ritual. His is a theater of scapegoats, where a few are punished for the sins of many, and he does not cease to remind us of this fact. Marie NDiaye also uses violence to cleanse and restore, although the actual portrayal of violent acts is restricted to repugnant descriptions of the violence. Aimé Césaire uses his violence in a way that allows the struggle for identity to reach beyond the individual and into the culture of a people group. In much the same way that Jean Genet used violence in his last two plays to expose the nature of colonization, Césaire does not shy away from violence in his work to demonstrate the aftermath of colonization, or the injustice inherent in subjugating a culture. Marie Susini uses the suicide of a character we have
never seen on the stage as a way to talk about the devastating effects of never having one’s proper identity accepted by the world or the people in it.

The philosophies of Camus and Sartre can be used to understand a great deal of the violence portrayed in the plays of these six different playwrights. If Sartre emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility in his philosophy, he acknowledges at the same time the interconnected nature of our lives and the necessity of the other in our being able to define ourselves. If Camus emphasizes the challenge of living in a world where we often feel lost among questions for which there are no answers, he does so while also stressing the need to use civil discourse to find solutions to our conflicts with one another.

All six playwrights discussed here have used these themes of conflict and violence extensively in their writing. Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco explore the violent nature of communication in plays that place language at the center of the conflict. If *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a moving portrait of a man who has come to the realization that his life has been wasted in attempting to isolate himself in order to pursue some philosophical goal (which is never revealed to us anyway because Krapp skips over its description on the reel of tape), it is the raw, violent nature of the language that creates the bulk of the emotion. If *Le roi se meurt* is both a funny and poignant play about the process of dying, it is due to the interconnected nature of Bérenger and Marie, and Ionesco’s insistence that life and death are shared experiences. Jean Genet and Aimé Césaire both remind audiences that their responsibilities often extend beyond national and racial boundaries and that the nature of revolution is such that our desire to dominate will become a form of subjugation when we allow it to control our human nature. Marie
Susini and Marie NDiaye both demonstrate the challenges associated with family relationships and the consequences of making the decision to live in community with others. They remind readers that while family and community can be bastions of support, they can also isolate, disappoint and reject, forcing those family and community members that are affected to face the absurdity of life head on.

This shared experience of the Absurd, and the violence and conflict that is often the result, is at the core of the plays of all six of these playwrights. Where playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco portray a violence that is often interpersonal, not extending beyond the boundaries of individual relationships, others like Aimé Césaire and Jean Genet explore the ways in which violence and suicide are not only interpersonal acts, but also have repercussions that demonstrate their importance on a national and international level. Still others, like Marie Susini and Marie NDiaye explore metaphors of family conflict that can be understood to represent the larger context of national identity and expose the (often subtle) violence inherent in day-to-day interactions with fellow countrypersons of different racial, ethnic and regional origins. All six of these playwrights use the violence in such a manner as to expose the struggles that emerge from the desire to discover and maintain an identity in the face of the “other” and in this way also show how the Theater of the Absurd and its focus on *showing* and not *telling* makes it especially relevant to discussions of postcolonial and regional literature.
Conclusion

The Theater of the Absurd is especially relevant to a discussion of postcolonial and regional literatures because of the techniques it uses in presenting its recurrent themes of identity, violence, and suicide. While these themes are not unique to the Theater of the Absurd, this dissertation has shown how the techniques used by this genre allow these themes to be *shown* through the actions of the characters on stage rather than merely *discussed*. The authors examined in this dissertation have all used these themes in different ways in their various plays, and adapted them not only to fit the mood of their plays, but also to showcase how these themes of identity, violence, and suicide are relevant to them. Their plays make the stage a place of enactment where the spectator is able to engage directly with these themes and the raw emotional power that such an enactment entails.

For Absurdists like Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, identity is not only fraught with struggle and violence, it also tends to isolate characters in a way that allows their desperation to speak to the souls of audience members. Characters such as King Béringer and les Vieux are intimately familiar to us in their struggles with death and failure, and characters such as Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp reflect our struggles with the passage of time and disappointment. Jean Genet presents identity as a power struggle in which the audience is implicated. His outcast characters remind us not only of our responsibility in remaining wary of both reality and illusion, but also of the irresponsible
nature in each of us—the part that craves what it is that would either harm us or drive us towards what we know we should not have—that links us to everyone else. Both he and Aimé Césaire borrow from the cultures of the dominant and the dominated in showing identity as a struggle that binds weak to strong, moral to immoral/amoral, and master to slave. They remind us that light cannot exist without dark, and that revolution means a constant change from one extreme to another and back again. Marie Susini masterfully blends her own culture and the philosophies of both Sartre and Camus in her Corsican play. In Corvara, the audience is able to see the idea of the pure absurdity of finding oneself caught between being at a loss for self-definition and remaining face to face with the ever-important idea of personal responsibility. If there is a play in this dissertation that almost perfectly blends together these philosophies of self-definition and personal responsibility, Corvara is that play. Marie NDiaye examines identity and finds it to be a complicated network of relationships that constantly pull characters in opposing directions. Her characters demonstrate this tension between the preconceived notions that everyone obtains through their cultural norms and the temptation to have what has been forbidden either by society or by one’s better judgment. Her characters also demonstrate the notion of entitlement and the burden that it can place on individuals when they fixate on what they believe they are owed or when they are convinced that they are deserving of something.

The struggle for identity inevitably results in these plays in some form of violence, either against an “other” or against oneself. As I have worked to demonstrate, the violence expressed in each play varies in both its form and its function on stage and is shown in vastly different ways. In the plays of Beckett and Ionseco, the violence is often
first and foremost linguistic. In many instances, the words themselves are used in a violent manner as in the next to last scene in *La cantatrice chauve* where conversation devolves into shouting and nonsense syllables that are every bit as disconcerting as physical violence. In many of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s plays, the threat of physical violence feels as if it lurks just below the surface, although it rarely rears its head. Jean Genet, on the other hand, allows the violence to spill out onto the stage in his plays, and shows a somewhat less abstract, although no less bizarre side of the Theater of the Absurd. While we can connect emotionally with the plays of Beckett and Ionesco, there is still a psychological distance between the audience and the action on stage due to the sometimes fanciful scenarios and staging. Genet breaks down the psychological barrier with characters that are more familiar and at times even based in historical fact. *Les nègres* and *Les paravents* use historically specific characters that show one particular example of colonization and the Algerian conflict respectively, and their impact is made all the more forceful through the descriptions and overt portrayal of violence on stage. Aimé Césaire also shows the violence inherent in the historical situations depicted in his plays. The violence of his plays is used specifically to show either the historical reality of the violence that can emerge during the nation building process, or the violence that is inherent in colonization. This realistic violence comes as no surprise as his plays are also based on historical fact, as is the case in *La tragédie du Roi Christophe*, or adapted from influential western works, as is the case in *Une tempête*. While Marie Susini does not overtly show violence in *Corvara*, the violent emotional reactions expressed by Corvara in regards to her own situation and the public opinion surrounding her husband are no less visceral than the violence of the plays of Genet and Césaire. Her play ends, as do
Les chaises, Les bonnes, and La tragédie du Roi Christophe, with what can certainly be viewed as a suicide. The main difference in Corvara is that the suicide here is that of a character about whom we have only heard and never actually seen on stage. Nevertheless, our reaction to his death should be every bit as strong as if we had met him physically because of the intimate portrait that his wife paints of him throughout the play. Marie NDiaye also shies away from staging overtly violent scenes, but does allow her characters to describe violence in startlingly graphic terms. Her plays combine elements of the absurd conversational style of Eugène Ionesco with the realistic violence of the plays of Jean Genet. In addition, her plays touch on the racism and fear of the outsider that continue to mark French society, and in this way show how the Theater of the Absurd continues to deal with contemporary issues.

Throughout all of these plays the philosophies of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre resonate. Their philosophies form the very basis of the concepts discussed in this dissertation. Even if Camus and Sartre are not the first authors to speak about Absurdism or Existentialism, their examination of these philosophies informs the work of the rest of the authors in this dissertation and their concepts of violence, struggle against self and other, and personal interaction with the world make their way into each and every play that I have analyzed. It is for this reason that I chose to begin and end this dissertation by showing how the philosophies of Camus and Sartre entered into the discussion of the six authors whose plays I discussed. Camus’ philosophy highlighting the feeling of disconnection between a person and his or her homeland finds a parallel on the stage in the plays of Beckett and NDiaye. Beckett’s Estragon and Vladimir are no less familiar with their setting than NDiaye’s Nancy, whose return to a house in which she once lived.
is unfamiliar and disconcerting. Sartre’s philosophy of personal responsibility and accountability for all actions finds a parallel on the stage in the plays of Césaire, Susini, Ionesco, and Genet. Césaire’s Roi Christophe is judged for his actions, having chosen a path that he believed to be good for both himself and all those living in his kingdom, in the same way that Susini’s Francesco finds himself the target of the judgment of his entire community. For both men, the judgment that comes from without, the Sartrean judgment that places them before their personal responsibilities, becomes a judgment from within, best explained by Camus’ warning that having one single life goal takes the focus off of the necessary and constant struggle against the absurd (Sisyphe 62) and leads to despair and suicide. For Christophe, the realization that his entire life has been consumed with ruling a country that is ultimately rejecting him as its leader causes such despair that he sees no way out other than suicide. Francesco has been attempting to atone for a sin that he does not see as such, and upon witnessing his last bastion of support crumble when Corvara curses him, also sees no way out other than suicide. Both men have been so focused on one life goal that when they fail to achieve it their only recourse is suicide because they know that they cannot face the judgment of others any longer. Nevertheless, personal responsibility is more often seen in a positive light. Eugène Ionesco’s Queen Marie acts with an honesty and a responsibility that she knows will result in her own death when she helps King Bérenger prepare for a dignified death, and Jean Genet’s Saïd, although his actions appear to lack respectability, is no less true to himself during his lifetime and chooses death over betraying his own values at the end of Les paravents. While the situations and the major plotlines of each play of course vary, their interrelation can be seen when the themes of identity are examined, and the majority
of these plays can in some way be traced back to the philosophies of Camus and Sartre as examined in the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

What I have presented in these chapters is a starting point, and I hope to continue to expand my research to include other Francophone playwrights who have also explored these concepts of absurdity, violence, and suicide, and who demonstrate an overall interest in the origins of the identity of people and nations. I am especially interested in authors from Francophone Africa such as Sony Labou Tansi, who explored the after-effects of colonization in much the same way as Aimé Césaire. I would also like to further explore Jean Genet’s connection with and portrayal of colonial Africa, his interest in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as another view of identity construction and conflict, and his time spent with the Black Panthers as an exploration of cross cultural identity construction. I am also interested in examining the contemporary theater of the Maghreb region both in light of past colonial conflicts and the recent “Arab Spring” and their effects on theatrical representations of how formerly colonized citizens have come to an understanding of their identities. If authors as diverse as Shakespeare and Marie Susini are somehow linked through portrayals of violence and the struggle for identity, what might be gleaned from taking a closer look at other playwrights whose work explores the construction of postcolonial and regional identities?

In conclusion, much of what I learned about identity construction, the Theater of the Absurd, and colonial and postcolonial literature differed from what I expected. I began this project with many preconceived notions about what it meant to form an identity in the midst of a sustained struggle and the way in which authors facing such challenges would portray their characters and their fight to construct and maintain an
identity in the face of the “other.” What I learned was that while identity construction is a near universal concern in societies around the world, there is no such universality in the literary portrayal of individual experiences, only the observation of and comparison of these individual experiences to one another and a certain grateful satisfaction at seeing patterns emerge, even if they were not the patterns that I expected. The value of deconstructing my own preconceived notions in order to rebuild an understanding of postcolonial and regional literature was essential to this project as was the recognition of the importance of looking at my own background and my own process of identity construction. Finding my own place in the research allowed me to feel more connected to the authors I studied here, and also allows me now to bring this current phase of study to a close. No matter where this area of study leads me, I feel prepared to confront the questions of identity that I encounter with the understanding that even if the research seems at times to resemble a Sisyphean mountain, Camus reminds us that, “La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d’homme,” (Sisyphe 168). I certainly imagine that I will be happy.
Works Referenced


