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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

THEORIZING THE BLACK DIASPORA ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

by

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Doctor of Philosophy

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THEORIZING THE BLACK DIASPORA ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

CONSTANCE VOTTERO

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2021

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconsiders the creative and strategic crisscrossings among the African diaspora's literary and cultural productions, paying special attention to the status and influence of Black America(ns), as a point of reference, on African and Afro-descendant writers working in French. Building upon the works of Paul Gilroy on the one hand, and Frida Ekotto on the other, I trace a major literary lineage in Afro-diasporic literature that revolves around the question of legibility. The texts studied in this dissertation are linked by their focus on a hermeneutic that is deployed along two main lines of thought. At the diegetic level, how are the characters being (mis)read by other members of the African diaspora, and reciprocally, how do the characters see these other members of the African diaspora and situate themselves in relation to them? At the meta-level, how does this reading system, or system of knowledge acquisition, invite or highlight a critique of genre (and gender) conventions and classifications?

More specifically, I look at how writers such as Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou, and Léonora Miano establish affiliative ties with their Anglophone peers—Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Teju Cole, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—across the Black Atlantic and across generations, in order to challenge the French system of racial and literary classification. In so doing, I argue that they also participate in shaping the

figure of the contemporary black intellectual on a global scale, from a non-American black perspective. The two main objectives of my research are to situate African, Caribbean, and Afro-descendant writers working in French within a transnational literary tradition that transcends the long-lasting polemical—and today outdated—category of “Francophone Literature,” and to account for their contributions to it.

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INTRODUCTION

Africans and Afro-descendants across the globe have long entertained a cultural, social, and political dialogue. The 20th and 21st centuries witnessed the emergence of major movements and critical frameworks, narratives that attest to that ongoing exchange, including Pan-Africanism, Négritude, and Black Internationalism. The imagined communities these movements summon aimed at encapsulating the shared political and historical struggles, and, more arguably, the cultural heritage that unite the African diaspora beyond displacement, language, and nationality. These movements have existed in tension from the beginning, and continue to do so, between the drive to theorize the similitudes of practices forged by the members of the African diaspora and the resistance to any broad conceptualizations that would not account for the specificities and differences between and within each Afro-diasporic community. With time and the confrontation of new sociopolitical realities, other theoretical paradigms have emerged, such as Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, and Afropolitanism. However, these concepts represent specific currents of trend that are not as encompassing in scope as their predecessors.

In fact, the concepts of Pan-Africanism and Négritude continue to be used frequently to describe the discursive practices of the African diaspora for lack of a better, contemporary approach. The scholars Nathalie Etoke and Sarah Fila-Bakabadio have both argued for the creation of a new transnational diasporic philosophy. Nathalie Etoke demonstrates in *Melancholia Africana* (2019) that “it is essential to construct a proactive diasporic consciousness” that would account for the heterogeneity of the African diaspora

in a productive way while also looking at the “melancholy that colors the existence of Blacks in Africa, in Europe, in the Caribbean, and in North Africa,” (7-9).¹ In her 2018 article “On *décalages* in the African Diaspora,” published one year before the publication of the English translation of Etoke’s text, Sarah Fila-Bakabadio made a similar demand: “We need to go beyond the celebration of a common heritage, the crystallization of Africa as the ‘homeland,’ to build contextualized and humanistic reflections of the 21st century” (172).

The present study is driven by an equivalent inquiry. I propose that literature is a promising avenue to examine “What holds Africans and Afro-descendants together in the present day” (Fila-Bakabadio 172) and that indeed many authors across the diaspora have addressed this question in their texts. Pan-Africanist movements frequently includes an aesthetic and philosophical project that finds its chief expression in literature. Because these concepts have been articulated more and more around artistic and literary production (and here I conceive of these artifacts in terms of aesthetic, style, and imaginary, as well as products of the social and political environments in which they were created), they crystallize the issue of classification that lies at the heart of knowledge production. In this regard, they are very much the heirs to Pan-Africanism and Négritude, two movements whose objectives aimed to open a discursive space wherein Blacks could define and position themselves in the world and in history, a pursuit of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor’s initial questions: “Who am I? Who are we?”

¹ Nathalie Etoke, in her book *Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition*, defines “diasporic consciousness” as “a sense of belonging that contributes to an existential fullness” (15).

What are we in this white world?” (*Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai* 23). As Souleymane Bachir Diagne points out in his definition of Négritude, the transfer from the “I” to the “we” indicates that the process of self-definition is understood as bound to the collective. Against the backdrop of a system that rested on racial categories, Négritude and Pan-Africanist frameworks engaged in a process of self-determination that entailed the official delineation of its own cultural production (Diagne, “Négritude,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

In his 1992 book *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. stresses the foundational role of anthologies for this process, examining the conversation around his own attempt at framing the black American canon in his *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. According to him, “a well-marked anthology functions in the academy to *create* a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it” (31). From a more critical standpoint, Paul Gilroy also underlines the prevalence of canon formation when “the archaeology of black critical knowledges enters the academy” (*The Black Atlantic* 33). As demonstrated in these two quotes with the use of the term “academy,” the flourishing of black anthologies that started at the end of the 19th century was motivated by the impulse to record the codes and elements characteristic of a black aesthetic and to enter an institution, namely the academic canon, from which they were excluded.

It is instructive, then, as Gilroy notes, that anthologies of the time continued to be arranged along the lines of ethnicity and language (33), such as Alain Locke’s *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), an anthology of African American literature, and

Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948).² This is an ongoing phenomenon. More recently, the French Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou, now an established professor of French and Francophone studies at UCLA, expressed his hope in his most recent essay, *Rumeurs d'Amérique* (2020), that African writers could be soon included within African American anthologies (118). In 2003, almost two decades before this publication, in a series of articles entitled "Fenêtre sur l'Amérique" in which he reflected on the relations, or lack thereof, between writers of the African diaspora, Mabanckou regretted the absence of African Americans at the New Congress of Writers of Africa and Its Diaspora organized by Fest' Africa.

These limitations stand in contrast to the internationalist initiatives that aimed to translate, compile, and circulate the works of black intellectuals across the Black Atlantic during the mid-twentieth century, of which Brent Hayes Edwards provides a detailed overview in his seminal work *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Edwards calls attention to the emergence of numerous, regrettably short-lived, reviews created by black thinkers working in French with the goal of converging the writings of the African diaspora beyond national and linguistic borders, expanding and complicating the conversation on blackness in the process. It is within this tradition that the present dissertation wishes to inscribe itself, because the inquiry that lies at its inception was sparked by the following questions: Can we identify an Afro-

² Perhaps one of the most perplexing iteration of this system of classification can be found in the anthology that Gates identifies as the first black anthology (24-5). Edited by Armand Lanusse and published in New Orleans in 1845, *Les Cenelles* compiles text written in French by free people of color, creoles, who had pursued their education in France.

diasporic literary history in the 21st century? What elements would compose the creation of a black international literary canon and what would its anthology/ies contain?

Embracing Gates's interpretation of the canon, I use the term to refer to a network of affiliations, correspondences, and affinities: "I suppose the literary canon is, in no very grand sense, the commonplace book of our shared culture, in which we have written down the texts and titles that we want to remember, that had some special meaning for us" (21). Acknowledging that canon formation rests upon a logic of inclusion/exclusion, I do not suggest that there should be no such things as an African anthology, Caribbean anthology, or an African American anthology. Instead, I argue that it could coexist with the identification of a body of work on a transnational scale that would apprehend the contours of an African diasporic imaginary beyond short, topic-narrowed, or linguistically constrained comparative studies. The idea of a transnational canon relies upon the distinction Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih articulate between the global and the transnational in *Minor Transnationalism* (2005). They contend that while the transnational is indeed "part and parcel of the process of globalization," it can also be "less scripted and more scattered," that is, not tied to the logics of a homogeneous, dominant center (5). An Afro-diasporic anthology could become a productive alternative to the national/regional and/or monolingual black canons, an addition to the existing ones that would participate in the historicization of the diaspora's cultural circuits and their many crisscrosses.

In *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), Michelle Wright begins by exploring the complex, often vague use of the term

“blackness” in scholarly and public discourses. In order to find a balance between the historical reality of the construction of the category “black” and the diversity and multidimensionality of the how blackness is lived, perceived, or experienced, Wright proposes that “Blackness operates as a construct (implicitly or explicitly defined as a shared set of physical and behavioral characteristics) and as phenomenological (imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context)” (4). Not only do I defer to Wright’s understanding of blackness throughout this entire dissertation, I also hope that the delineation of a diasporic literary tradition could provide an effective endeavor to account for an Afro-diasporic “in-common” (Fila-Bakabadio 169) or “consciousness” (Etoke 15) that “reflects [blackness’s] diversity yet does not deprives it of its historical materiality” (Wright 7).

With this in mind, I selected a group of Afro-diasporic authors in this dissertation for a comparative analysis, within each chapter and across them, which allows me to infer “a tradition not defined by a pseudoscience of racial biology, or a mystically shared essence called blackness, but by the repetition and revision of shared themes, topoi, and tropes” (Gates 39). I am interested in these authors’ engagement with key issues, such as mobility and displacement, gender roles, and the literary and cultural fields, inasmuch as they shape a shared vocabulary/terminology that produces a collective discourse just as much as it is produced by it. Building upon the works of Paul Gilroy on one hand, and Frieda Ekotto on the other hand, this study focuses on the literary history/tradition of the African diaspora as “crossroad” (Gilroy 199), composed of a series of interpretations, revisions, and negotiations between distinct yet connected cultural interlocutors.

Gilroy and Ekotto have both respectively participated in mitigating what the scholar Jacqueline Brown identifies as the “unidirectional transnational flow of iconography and ideas, ideologies and inspirations” between different communities of the black diaspora, and in particular from black America to European blacks (317). In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Gilroy observes how global concepts and artifacts of the African diaspora circulate transnationally and intersect with the local strategies and adaptations of a given group, such as black Britons. Noticing the dominance of black America’s cultural production and its tendency to rely on ethnic absolutism, he traces the more complicated routes of the Black Atlantic: a hybrid network of intercultural flows and exchanges that disrupt any stable, definite points of origin. Akin to Gilroy, Ekotto underlines the significance of the African American aesthetic and politics in the formation of Négritude, but she also sets herself to uncover the influence of European thought and French-speaking intellectuals on America’s understanding of race: “I explore the idea that ‘race’ is not the same phenomenon—or even the same epistemological construct—across the Atlantic, but has been mutually constituted by discursive intellectual flows between Africa, the Americas, and Europe” (Ekotto xii). In 2018, she argued for the need to discern and explicate the role Césaire’s and Négritude’s legacy played and should continue to play in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Black America, as a reference point, appears in all the literature explored here. Each of the selected writers lives or has lived in the United States, at the exception of

Miano who did, however, give several conferences at North American universities. The visibility of black America in these texts showcases its influence as a cultural power, but also as a determining force when it comes to the way racial politics and blackness, as an identity and concept, are approached, defined, and expressed. As mentioned earlier, “blackness” has proved to be a tricky term to employ because it is the subject of much debate and interpretation. As demonstrated by Wright, while blackness as a “collective identity” is fundamentally multidimensional, it often carries the logic of belonging (and, therefore, of non-belonging) characteristic of categorization systems (3).

And indeed, the protagonists of the works studied in this dissertation have to mediate among multiple modalities of belonging and identification. If black America has gained much traction as the symbolic representation of blackness on the global scale, Africa as (imagined) homeland retains much significance as a source of authority and authenticity for the African diaspora. For that matter, Gilroy also questions the centrality of Africa in the Black Atlantic landscape when it is considered as a “purist idea of one-way flow of African culture from east to west” (*The Black Atlantic* 96). Africa, and the notion of Africanity, function as another point of reference in the corpus of texts I have gathered. It is all the more instructive to consider the place these two topographies occupy as referents of identification and disidentification in these texts as black America’s own cultural idea of Africa and Africanity circulates widely.

In *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes*, Maya Angelou recounts her attempt at the great return to Africa in the 1960s, a voyage undertaken by several African Americans of her generation. Maryse Condé crosses path with Angelou’s compatriots in

La vie sans fards, in which Condé scrutinizes her life in Francophone and Anglophone Africa at the same period as Angelou. Julius, Teju Cole's evasive narrator in *Open City*, is a Nigerian-German psychiatrist doing his residency in NYC. Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* follows the life and tribulations in Paris of a budding writer, the Congolese Fessologue, whose process of identity formation as an artist is caught between mirroring images of (in)authenticity, from Camara Laye to Miles Davis. In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays a Nigerian student and soon-to-be star blogger, Ifemelu, who starts writing her blog "Raceteenth Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) By A Non-American Black" to come to grips with the new paradigm of race relations she encounters in North America. Léonora Miano lets the reader glimpse into the daily life of a group of Afro-descendant friends in *Blues pour Élise* as they mix Parisian cafés with African fashion and Caribbean music with black American politics.

What unites these texts is that all the characters have to negotiate their relation to the entities Africa and America, and especially black America, albeit a relation complicated by a third cultural and geographical space of the African diaspora: Europe. We encounter the urban spaces and imaginaries of Paris (France) in *La vie sans fards*, *Black Bazar*, and *Blues pour Elise*; Brussels (Belgium) in *Open City*; Germany in *All God's Children Needs Travelling Shoes*; London (England) in *Americanah*. Tapping into this third space allows for the transfiguration of a centripetal African diaspora composed of one-way flows. It aligns with Gilroy's argument that:

Critical space/time cartography of the diaspora needs [...] to be readjusted so that the dynamics of dispersal and local autonomy can be shown alongside the unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and new arrivals that, in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities. (*The Black Atlantic* 86)

In her essential endeavor at laying the foundations for an epistemology of diasporic studies, “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” the scholar Kim D. Butler draws on past definitions of diaspora to select its four main features: “there must be a minimum of two destinations” after dispersal, “some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland,” “self-awareness of the group’s identity,” and they must be “multi-generational,” spanning at least two generations (192). In the context of the African diaspora and its cultural production and for the purpose of this analysis, the third criteria, the consciousness of belonging to a diasporic communal identity is paramount.

As we have seen, Africa as an actual or imagined homeland and Europe/United States as a host land still figure prominently in the selected texts. However, it is the relationships between these two entities and diverse Afro-diasporic individuals, and the underlying interrogation of the existence of a Pan-African community, that ignite the characters’ inquiries around self-identity, belonging, memory, history, and art. Therefore, I concur with Butler’s caution to consider diaspora “as a framework for the study of a specific process of community formation” so as to avoid “essentializing [it] as an ethnic label” (193-4) and I adopt this perspective in this dissertation. I focus on the encounter between members of the African diaspora as a site of mediation and meaning-making that is not indisputably rooted in any geopolitical location.

If the group of featured protagonists are indeed influenced by the “travelling,” or migrating discourses of Black America and Africa on blackness in their process of self-identification, they resist being reduced to sole readers or consumers of these discursive and cultural productions. They adapt or transform the heritage of Afro-diasporic writers to fit the conceptualizations of their own racial/local and writerly identities. In turn, their processes of translation and mediation of these texts, thoughts, and images make their way back into the larger system of transnational circulation of ideas. The goal of the present study is twofold: (1) each chapter focuses on textual themes and characteristics that speak to the existence of a shared diasporic sensibility/ies, or “intimacy,” as Gilroy calls it (*The Black Atlantic* 16). Without succumbing to facile comparisons that would convoke any racial essentialisms, I seek to uncover a collective literary and cultural dialogue while accounting for the authors’ variations on it, as difference, as they recast it according to their local and personal realities. (2) Read together, I hope to show a broader intergenerational parameter in African diaspora literature that deals with the exploration of their legibility. It is through their connections to other members of the African diaspora, be they actual encounters or literary and symbolic ones, that the characters of these novels grapple most directly with the principles of classification and categorization (racial, cultural, sexual, literary) that govern the political and cultural order in which they evolve.

The texts studied here are linked by their preoccupation with a hermeneutic/reading grid that is deployed along two lines of thought. At the diegetic level, how are the characters being (mis)read by other members of the African diaspora,

and reciprocally, how do they see them and situate themselves in relation to them? At the meta-level, how does this reading system, or system of knowledge acquisition, invite or reproduce the critique of genre (and gender in the case of Angelou, Condé, Miano, and Adichie) conventions and classifications? The focus on the inter and intra interactions within the African diaspora, as a recurring motif of Afro-diasporic literature, supports Fila-Bakabadio's call that "conceptualizing the relation between Africans and Afro-descendants and among Afro-descendants [beyond regular reminders of the contemporaneity of Pan-Africanism and *Négritude*] is an unremitting and necessary work" (172).

I take the issue of positioning to be crucial to the present writers as they delineate the contours of their writerly and cultural identities. In so doing, I subscribe to Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a positioning, not an essence, that "has its histories and histories have their real, material symbolic effects. [...] Cultural identities are the point of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourse of history and culture" (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 226). It is not my intention, then, to negate the creative individuality and license of a group of authors that have fiercely, and successfully professed it. On the contrary, I am committed to showing that these creative positionings participate in a cultural and historical literary and discursive Afro-diasporic tradition without subsuming them entirely to the collective.

James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou, Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Léonora Miano, and Raoul Peck are aware that they are

part of a transnational network of affiliations and alliances, more or less willingly, and they engage with this literary and theoretical landscape accordingly and in their own terms. In fact, I argue that through these readings and interactions with their peers from the African diaspora, and the United-States in particular, across the Black Atlantic and across generations, they thoughtfully inscribe themselves within a black intellectual history and share in the shaping of its contemporary figures. This perspective subscribes to Wright's call for imagining the collective within African diaspora studies through the prism of "horizontal" relationships, as opposed to "vertical" ones (113).

To account for their non-American black perspectives on this history matters even more now if we are to understand the global impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, which crystallizes the questions of circulation and transformation that animate this research. The literary and political production of black Americans holds considerable capital and visibility in France and increasingly works as one of the main frames of reference to talk about race and racial inequalities. Miano refers to this phenomenon in *Afropea* and the articles that accompanied its publication as "noiraméricanisation," and the scholar Nathalie Etoke describes it as a "copy/paste" ("Black in Blue White Red," MIT Talk). While many of the non-American writers represented in this corpus have acknowledged their debt to African American's cultural and political movements, it is crucial to comprehend and put forward their own contributions to this transnational discourse. As Fila-Bakabadio observes, many contemporary frameworks, such as *Africana*, "[renew] an Anglophone Atlantic focus, again leaving limited space for African and non-Western Afro-descendant thought" (173). My dissertation explores the place of

the United States at the center of diasporic studies, but it looks at it as a signifier and reference point in order to highlight the ways a selection of writers of the African diaspora, especially those working in French, interact with, interpret, and/or transform this influence.

I look specifically at Condé, Mabanckou, and Miano in their quality of both fiction writers and essayists in order to demonstrate the strategies they implement to structure and disseminate their own thoughts about literature, as well as identity and community formation. The theoretical framework of this study puts their ideas in conversation with other contemporary Afro-diasporic thinkers such as Paul Gilroy, Françoise Vergès, Achille Mbembe, bell hooks, and Stuart Hall, and the classical works of French theorists André Bazin, Paul Ricœur, and Pierre Bourdieu. Although the present selection of authors is not exhaustive and could benefit from the inclusion of more continental writers, it hopes to begin to capture a different way in which to categorize the literary and artistic production of the African diaspora, moving towards less hierarchical and unilateral modes of comparative literary mapping and inquiry. Accordingly, our perspective embraces Lionnet's and Shu-mei Shih's objective, as deployed in *Minor Transnationalism*, that states that:

Equally important to the project of rethinking transnational ethnic and migratory relations is the urgent need to consider the disciplinary principles that guide the production of academic knowledge about minority subjects and their histories. By "historicizing" the field of minority discourse production, it is possible to show how transdisciplinary academic practices can construct transnational objects of knowledge, thereby

transforming our established interpretive frameworks and disciplinary conventions, while also producing alternative genealogies and narratives of the past. (15)

It may not be possible to do away with “the pernicious problem of the *category*” completely (Ekotto 92), especially when it comes to literary and academic systems of classification. However, throughout the connections established within this dissertation, I aim to suggest alternative ways of considering and cataloging the much-debated label of “Francophone Literature” as applied to Afro-descendant writers working in French. Beyond the need for more translations, I examine how studying authors of the African diaspora side-by-side, in order to draw a literary tradition that crosses through linguistic and national borders, could contribute to stretching and extending the boundaries of Afro Anglophone and Francophone literatures as well as their respective fields of study. Could it help in representing a reality that is much more encompassing, more “inclusive and non-hierarchical” (Wright 14) than our current system of classification?

Interdisciplinary in nature, this study combines the methodological lenses of diaspora studies, comparative literature, and literary history to apprehend what can bridge differences between writers of the African diaspora with regard to how they envision identity, belonging, and community. I pay particular attention to how gender identities come into play within these peer interactions. The overall organization is chronological as each chapter looks at a specific generation of Afro-diasporic authors at a specific time, pairing an Anglophone with a Francophone writer to examine the evolution of a Black Atlantic dialogue throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Mapping the generational

transmission and transformation of these diasporic frameworks, or “ideologies” (Fila-Bakabadio 169), remains a core objective of the present analysis.

The dissertation is divided into four parts. It begins with Africa as its starting point, analyzing in chapter I Maya Angelou’s and Maryse Condé’s accounts of their return to the African “homeland” in the mid-20th century at the height of Pan-Africanist movements such as Garveyism and Négritude. With both intellectuals concluding their journey with the realization that Africa will remain an (imagined) homeland, but not necessarily a home, I turn my attention to how the next generation grapples with their diasporicity, focusing on how they envision themselves in relation to a deterritorialized Afro-diasporic community. While chapter II explores how two contemporary trajectories of migrancy/mobility presented in Alain Mabanckou’s *Black Bazar* and Teju Cole’s *Open City* center around intra-diasporic interactions as a discursive space of legibility and self-determination, chapter III considers the new forms of connections and correspondences this Afro-diasporic dialogue takes in the age of the internet and social media in Léonora Miano’s *Blues pour Élise* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*. The fourth and final chapter revolves around the significance of James Baldwin as an authorial figure of the African diaspora across generations and national and linguistic borders. It encapsulates his legacy as a sort of roadmap to the main questions examined in the dissertation, imagining new possible forms of Afro-diasporic affiliations and alliances.

Chapter I, “A Generation of Women Intellectuals—Pan-Africanism and Diaspora Revisited in the Personal Works of Maya Angelou, *All God’s Children Need Traveling*

Shoes and Mom & Me & Mom; and Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fards* and *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*,” imagines a literary encounter between Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé who had both embarked on similar journeys of the return to Africa in the early 1960s. In each account, the two writers look back critically at their experience “back” in Africa and narrate the insights they gained from it with regard to their understanding of the self, the family structure, and the existence of a black community. First, I investigate Angelou’s and Condé’s respective approaches to their cultural identities and the representations of Africa and the African diaspora (African Americans, Caribbeans, and Africans) they depict. More specifically, I observe how these representations inform, and are informed by, the notions of motherhood and kinship they hold. Then, I turn to the interplay of commonalities and differences with respect to their narrative identities, and the literary strategies they implement to unify their experiences in Africa while acknowledging the contradictions and mutations they underwent personally and collectively. The chapter concludes with the exploration of how their trip to Africa affected and transformed their conception(s) of the “Other,” their own processes of othering, and themselves as another.

In Chapter II, “Travelling Archives/Travelling Bodies: Memory, Optic(s), and Hermeneutic in Alain Mabanckou, *Black Bazar* and Teju Cole, *Open City*,” I unravel the visual grammar implemented by the two narrators, Fessologue (*Black Bazar*) and Julius (*Open City*), to interpret their surroundings, read their interactions with other members of the diaspora, and conjure up the personal and collective past. The protagonists of the two novels exemplify different experiences of migration and their relation of past to present:

while Julius has moved to the United States from Nigeria after high school and is completing his residency to become a psychiatrist, the Congolese “Fessologue” has been living illegally in France, where he has been working at a printing shop, for over a decade. However, they similarly deploy their own visual “system” to code, “decode” (Knox 84), and archive what they see and how they are being seen—engaging in a practice of looking and reading that questions the hierarchy and classification of images and systems of knowledge. Looking at both texts in relation to Chris Marker’s seminal essay film *Sans Soleil* allows me to compare how the three artifacts address common issues that revolve around memory, history, and official archives. Additionally, the film works as the prism through which to enter *Black Bazar*’s and *Open City*’s cinema-photographic language, and I refer to theories on visual arts, ranging from Susan Sontag to Roland Barthes, to analyze its use and purpose in the novels.

Chapter III, “Gender/Genre Networks—Relationality and Intersectionality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Léonora Miano’s *Blues pour Elise*,” considers the genre/gender bending practices of both writers in their respective texts. Arguing that the two novels’ tone and theme stand out from their authors’ larger corpus, I find that pop culture, as an element of the narrative and as a literary device (in the form of the blog in *Americanah* and of music and TV series in *Blues pour Élise*), works as a tool to challenge pre-conceived, dominant notions about genders and genres. Turning my attention to the liberatory potential of pop culture, I investigate how the characters of the novels channel it to envision more democratic and equal love relations and friendships. While documenting Adichie’s and Miano’s optimistic outlook on the possibilities for

creative and innovative networks and interactions that the digital era offers, I also focus on their acknowledgement of the perils it holds. Therefore, this chapter includes a reflection on the damages mainstream pop culture causes when it operates solely as an apparatus of merchandizing that decontextualizes and depoliticizes its content in the process.

In chapter IV, my concluding chapter titled “Between (Af)filiation and Self-definition: The Collective Heritage of James Baldwin,” I trace the literary and personal relations that the authors studied in this dissertation have threaded with James Baldwin and his legacy over the years. Examining how Baldwin works as a central figure for the intellectuals of the African diaspora, I suggest that his legacy constitutes a privileged site of connections for them, gathering many of the most well-regarded African and Afro-descendant writers and scholars in collaborative texts and conferences. Finally, I show that analyzing the works and authorial postures of Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou, Raoul Peck, Léonora Miano, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in light of Baldwin’s thought—paying particular attention to their level of engagement with his cultural production and his personal life—can be a revelatory lens through which to understand how they conceive of their diasporic and writerly identities.

CHAPTER 1: A GENERATION OF WOMEN INTELLECTUALS—PAN-AFRICANISM AND DIASPORA REVISITED IN THE PERSONAL WORKS OF MAYA ANGELOU, *ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES* AND *MOM & ME & MOM*; AND MARYSE CONDÉ, *LA VIE SANS FARDS* AND VICTOIRE, *LES SAVEURS ET LES MOTS*.³

At first glance, Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé's experiences of Africa, more specifically of Ghana, appear to have been highly different: "I was soon swept into an adoration for Ghana as a young girl falls in love" recalls Angelou (*All God's* 19), while Condé, whose "first contact with Africa did not trigger any love at first sight" (*La vie* 35), perceived Accra as a "Sodom or Gomorrah" (*La vie* 153) compared to the Muslim city of Conakry in which she used to live. Yet the two writers and the works they produced about their time in Africa, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) and *La vie sans fards* (2014), sustain an intricate set of correspondences and complementarities.⁴ In her book *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Carole Boyce Davis proposes reading black women's writings through a comparative lens, arguing that it "brings together black women dislocated by space and time" (3).

Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé are considered two major black women writers of the 20th and early 21st centuries in their respective countries, as well as worldwide. In addition to being prolific authors, they concurrently published autobiographies that look back on their attempted returns to Africa, personal accounts exploring their identities in relation to their mothers and grandmothers (*Mom & Me & Mom*; *Victoire, les saveurs et*

³ Unless stated otherwise, all the translations in this dissertation from French to English are mine.

⁴ From now on, these works will be referred to as *All God's* and *La vie*.

les mots)⁵, as well as works that celebrate the analogy between word, memory, and cooking (*Mets et Merveilles*, Condé, and, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes*, Angelou). Moreover, despite their acclaimed body of work, both authors have sparked controversy for some of their stances. Angelou now holds an iconic status in the US due to her activism in the civil rights movement. However, some of her works have been subject to much polemic. Her first autobiographical volume, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) has been the target of several ban attempts because of its depiction of, among other topics, teen pregnancy, violence, and sexual abuse. The same is true for Condé who faced criticism for her books *Ségou* and *Heremakhonon*, as she explains in *La vie*. All of these affinities involve more than mere serendipity and should be explored without, however, annihilating their differences.

Angelou resided in Ghana from 1962 to 1965 after living in Egypt for some time. Condé, after sojourning in Ivory Coast and Guinea for four years, emigrated to Ghana where she, too, would live from 1963 to 1967. These two women, budding writers at the time, made the trip “back” to Africa, motivated by quasi-identical quests for origins/roots—seduced by the promise of Pan-Africanism—and influenced by men, as Angelou followed her husband to Egypt while Condé fled from hers. Maya Angelou then decided to remain in Africa and live in Ghana with her only son, Guy. As for Condé, Ghana was the first place where she interacted with African Americans before eventually living and working in the United States for two decades. The representation of the United States and what they identify as African American particularities constitute a third term

⁵ From now on these works will be referred to as *Victoire* and *Mom*.

of comparison that triangulates the binary comparison of these two authors. Indeed, the Americas, Europe, and Africa are the three geographical and cultural spaces in which their narrators evolve—physically and conceptually—and which contribute actively to their remapping of the self and community.

Their trajectories, motives, cultural acquaintances, and personal modes of expression coincide on so many different levels that it is difficult to fathom how the two of them did not interact more during the years they spent living in the same place. It would appear that they did meet, or, at the very least, that Condé knew of Angelou's presence. For instance, she briefly mentions Angelou's name when she lists the abundance of African American intellectuals living in the Ghana in the early sixties, "where established writers such as Julian Mayfield mixed with aspiring writers such as the beautiful Maya Angelou" (*La vie* 163). However, although they did frequent the same places, like the Flagstaff House, bonding with the same people, in particular Roger and Jean Genoud, it seems from their respective autobiographies that the two women did not have any significant relations.

This missed opportunity, while indicative of the deficiencies of Pan-Africanism (whose forces and limits are at stake in the conclusions of both writers) is fertile ground to revisit the definition of what constitutes the identity of a diaspora. The striking similarities and differences in their recollections of their time in Ghana, revealed in their respective autobiographical accounts, provide a productive juxtaposition that can inform us about their distinctive yet allied ways of shaping the self in its relation to the community. Most important to us here is that, in their revisiting of the concept of Pan-

Africanism and what binds them to their communities and others, Condé and Angelou highlight the place of gender and gender norms in these dynamic networks of solidarity. In their works, the representation of motherhood plays a pivotal role in the relationship between selfhood and collectivity, self and other. Incorporating two other personal works of each author, Condé's *Victoire* and Angelou's *Mom*, this chapter explores and compares their respective depictions of family and motherhood, as well as what such views reveal in terms of identity politics and writing strategies. In so doing, I follow bell hooks's incentive to move away from a "sentimental construction of female bonding" in order "to look not just at what brings females together superficially across differences now and then, but rather at what keeps us apart more often than not" (55).

Despite the commonalities of their experiences regarding integration, politics, motherhood, and love affairs, the stakes and outcomes of both experiences are decidedly different for Condé and Angelou. Imagining or recreating their encounter through their writings is a way to explore the constant tying and unraveling of patriarchal, racial, class, and national forces at play in their communities and in society at large. Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé remain two separate individuals representative of this decentered, plural community. Paul Gilroy has best explained this dialectical dynamic as a "*changing same*" in his important book *The Black Atlantic* in which he defines the multiplicity characteristic of the diaspora as a "tradition in ceaseless motion—a *changing same* that strives continuously towards a state of self-realization that continually retreats beyond its grasp" (122). More specifically, Gilroy attempts to focus on interconnections and similarities among seemingly differing black cultures, with the intention to retreat from

the fallacious logic of ethnic particularism and nationalism—dangerous thinking still rampant twenty-five years after the publication of his book. Cautious about avoiding any essentialism, Gilroy goes on to identify three main common steps pertinent to black experiences: “the struggle against the institution of slavery,” “the protracted struggles to win human status” along with its associated rights and liberties, and the “pursuit of an independent space in which black community and autonomy can develop” (122). These three issues and the overall quest for freedom and self-definition, are integral parts of Angelou’s and Condé’s narratives.

Using Gilroy as a frame of reference, the aim of this chapter is to explore the diasporic identities and themes of “intersectionality” in Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé’s works with regard to the self, the family cell, and the black community. By shifting the moral values attached to the binary opposition of similarity/differentiation, it is possible to reinstate the notion of change as a significant part of identity and integrity. In order to provide a multidimensional analysis of the two writers, Gilroy’s socio-historical approach will be complemented by Stuart Hall’s work on cultural identity, Hélène Cixous’s poetic vision of feminine writing and motherhood, and the philosophical writings of Paul Ricoeur. The latter already stressed positive emphasis on “change” in his definition of narrative identity, in *Oneself as Another and Time and Narrative*. Narrative identity, the instance created within the writing of the self, was, for Ricoeur, the only way to “include change, mutability within the cohesion of one’s lifetime” (*Time and Narrative* 246).

The present analysis is divided into two major sections, first the investigation of Angelou's and Condé's respective approaches to cultural identities and representations of Africa and the African diaspora (African American, Caribbean, and African), particularly in relation to motherhood. Then, I turn to the interplay of commonalities and differences with respect to their narrative identities and the literary strategies they implement to unify their experiences in Africa while acknowledging the contradictions and mutations they underwent personally and collectively. This will lead me to the exploration of how their trip to Africa affected and transformed their connection(s) to the "Other," their own processes of othering, and themselves as another.

I. CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN TRANSLATION

"What is Africa to me?"

To engage with these authors' autobiographical accounts of their attempted return to Africa, it is first relevant to consider what "Africa"—the continent as a concept—meant to both of them before their departure. How do they describe their motives for expatriating themselves to Ghana? And what does the representation they held of Africa reveal about the environment and the culture in which they were raised, as well as about the historical context of the time (1960s)?

The famous question that the prominent Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen selected to open his poem "Heritage"—"What is Africa to me?"—guides this part of the chapter (*Color* 36). It is significant to keep the interrogative form because Condé and Angelou show that their reference to Africa remains a work in progress, a connection that

they have to (re)negotiate perpetually. Condé hints at this feeling of volatility of Africa when she compares her experience in Guinea to that of the Greek philosopher Diogenes carrying a lamp, looking for an honest man in broad daylight. Indeed, her understanding of Africa was divided among many conflicting images, “the one of ethnologists, complex and without any wrinkles. The over-spiritualized one of the Négritude. The ones of [her] revolutionary friends, suffering and oppressed [...]” (*La vie* 125). Interestingly, Maryse Condé’s title, *La vie sans fards*, has been translated to *What Is Africa to Me? Fragments of a True-To-Life Autobiography* for the English publication. The translation choice is judicious in its adaptation to the Anglo-American market. In addition to anchoring the text within the African American context of the time, referencing Cullen’s celebrated question, it puts the emphasis on Africa more so than on Condé’s personal life, which could appeal to an Anglophone audience that does not know the Francophone Caribbean writer.

Certainly, both writers are looking for a place where they can feel a sense of belonging, develop fully as black women, and express their selfhood. The journey to Africa is therefore intertwined with an intimate quest for identity and self-realization. Contrary to many other expatriates they encountered during their trips, Condé and Angelou are fully aware of their subjective and poetic viewpoints on this mythologized continent. Condé states at the very beginning of her work that her goal is to examine the place of Africa in her life, as well as in her imagination. And indeed, it was her imagination that was first solicited when she was introduced to Africa—through the mediation of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s and Aimé Césaire’s words.

Unlike Angelou, Condé was not brought up in a family that valued its African heritage—quite the opposite. It was only during her time in France, after experiencing racism and rejection firsthand, that she turned her attention towards the African continent. Although heavily influenced by the Pan-Africanism of her favorite poets, who believed Africa to be the place where the “reconciliation of Antilleans and Africans for the purpose of black emancipation” (*La vie* 46) would happen, Condé’s path is informed more by her private life than by her political convictions. Her theoretical knowledge of Africa evolved into something real and palpable when, while still in Paris, she met Jean Dominique, a Haitian journalist and a political militant. Her passionate love affair with this man, who would eventually abandon her while she was carrying his child, proves to be one of the everlasting threads that tie her to Africa. Although he was Haitian, he was the one who introduced her to the notion of “Africa” and its diaspora, to Pan-Africanism. Condé employs the verbs “initiate” and “enlighten” (*La vie* 21) to describe her discovery of Africa via the influence of Jean Dominique; to a great extent, her initiation to Africa, which started in France and continued in Ivory Coast, was shaped by and tied to others and to a longing for love. Moreover, attraction to Africa was also the result of her rejection by and of both French and Antillean communities. A young unmarried pregnant woman (she purposefully uses the French derogatory term “fille-mère” [*La vie* 26] that is common to France, French-speaking African countries, and Guadeloupe), she was isolated from her family and her former friends among the Antillean diaspora. Her break with France’s society and culture had already begun long before, at least so she felt at the time.

Turning to Africa appeared to Condé as the only possible—and desirable—option. On the one hand, she could not return to Guadeloupe because her social situation would be considered a disgrace there. Furthermore, she did not think of the island as a real “home” now that her mother had passed away. On the other hand, she could not stay in France where she was alienated and lived in constant emotional and financial instability. The precariousness of her situation, along with the images of Africa acquired through her readings and romantic interactions, led her to envision Africa as a blank canvas: the space that would allow her to be “reborn” (*La vie* 31). This can explain why, after getting pregnant, she sought the company only of Africans who “didn’t know anything about [her] and were impressed by [her] manners and what was left of [her] eloquence” (*La vie* 26). It is within this community that she met the man she would go on to marry, Mamadou Condé, who was for her, above all, an “African,” and an opportunity to restore her social status.

Similarly, Angelou gained insight into Africa through a man: namely, her eventual husband, Vusumzi Make. Make brought her and her son, whom she had had with a former lover, to Egypt. The recollection of her feelings during the South African’s wooing is linked to Africa; it is also not too different from Condé’s own recollection of Jean Dominique’s impact on her: “[He] spread before me the lights and shadows of Africa” (*Singin’ and Swingin’* 150). Angelou further compares her love for Ghana in *All God’s* to a youth’s summer fling. However, this is where the comparison between Jean Dominique and Vusumzi Make ends, and for two reasons. The first is that the marriage between Angelou and Make bears more resemblance to the union of Maryse Condé and

Mamadou Condé as Angelou, herself a *fille-mère*, “is willing to compromise herself to attain the much-heralded state of marital bliss” (Siphokazi 40). The second lies in Angelou’s highly romanticized depiction of Africa as a tribal and sensual space where “African men covered their betrothed with precious stones and specially woven clothes” (*Singin’and Swingin’* 151).⁶ By contrast, Condé refers to her time with Jean Dominique as an intellectual passion. The exotic images that flashed into Angelou’s mind during her first night with Make are nonetheless mixed with hints of her political and ethical stance. For instance, Angelou describes the above-mentioned African men as warriors defeating European settlers and the continent as “black and strong like the girls *back home*” (*Singin’and Swingin’* 151).⁷

Angelou who, contrary to Condé, was already a black activist before her return to Africa, is thus also inspired by a Pan-Africanist perspective that was popular in the United States around the figures of W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, but her views are also enriched by a “wider, global dimension of political antagonism: anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, and political and economic emancipation from colonial domination” (Gilroy 154). For instance, her connecting of Africa to the skin color of African American girls in the quotation above manifests her desire to establish a sense of

⁶ It is in *Singin’and Swingin’*, her third autobiographical volume, that Angelou recounts her meeting with her first husband, Make.

⁷ Angelou’s juxtaposition of the African continent with African American girls is worth noting because of the kinship relationship it assumes, but also for its inclination towards what has been denounced by the writer Roxanne Gay as “the strong black woman’ archetype” (18). We will examine later in this chapter Angelou’s take on black women’s representations—especially regarding mothers.

continuity between Africa and black America. In a prolongation of Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, Angelou believes that she has legitimate ties to Africa.

Ultimately, the symbolism of the return holds two distinct interpretations of Africa for the two writers: for Condé it embodies a rebirth, a means to start over as a woman and mother, while for Angelou, crossing *back* is a metaphor for *returning* and for reconciling with her roots and origins. The connection with "Mother Africa" was never fully interrupted because, for Angelou, Africa had always been there, in the background of her American culture and life. "The mystery of return" represented at that time was an inherent part of black American culture in storytelling, music, literature, and particularly religion. At church, the hymns longed for a heaven that really is Africa (*All God's* 20).

These two interpretations, however, are not contradictory. For that matter, I find the writers' coincidental use of the image of the "virgin" to be a powerful and delightful cue to a simultaneous cultural commonality and contrast. For Condé, it is about "becoming a virgin again" (*La vie* 31) whereas Angelou portrays herself as "a young African virgin" (*Singin' and Swingin'* 151) in Make's arms. Angelou and Condé share a common frame of reference and imagery, even if their expression and interpretation differ at times. Such a correlation between sexuality, or its lack thereof, "virginity," and the African continent is particularly revealing of the central questioning of gendered and

sexual norms within both texts.⁸ The return to Africa is tied to a longing for “innocence”—a moral, social and/or political pure freedom that seemed out of reach in France and in the United States where they were limited because of their gender *and* their skin color.

Their accounts illustrate two of the many different paths taken by members of the African diaspora in the postcolonial era, and shed light on the complexity and density of their relations to one another. No matter what, these paths lead first to Africa: specifically Ghana in the case of Angelou and Condé, which both writers represent as a unifying space of meetings, exchanges, and knowledge.

Comparative Transnational Geographies and Identifications: The Representation of Africans, Europeans, and African Americans in Angelou’s and Condé’s novels.

In the accounts of both authors, Africa becomes the privileged theater of confluences for the diaspora. In addition, it provides an opportunity for experimentation and comparison, for Africans and African Americans as well as white Europeans, because of the diversity and cosmopolitanism of some of the African cities at that time. Ghana, in particular, was a “happening” and attractive country due to the politics of modernization and reconciliation implemented by Kwame Nkrumah since 1957. As

⁸ When one reflects on these words, the connection easily follows with Hélène Cixous’s 1975 seminal text “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which she decried the “phantasm of woman as a ‘dark continent’ to penetrate and to ‘pacify’” (877). The term “virgin” here can imply the resistance to male and colonial penetrations that have impacted their sense of self. However, in the present case, “the opposition activity/passivity” (877) is challenged because they themselves are doing the conquering of their bodies and Africa as both other and the same. It also connotes a desire to be unmarked and to thus be able to write themselves anew, as encouraged by Cixous.

mentioned on several occasions by Condé and Angelou, Nkrumah was specifically disposed to expanding relationships with black Americans and welcomed them in Accra. As such, the influence of prominent African American intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois are palpable in both of our author's works.

Therefore, the United States is equally a major influence on Condé because she encountered many African Americans in search of their roots in Ghana, just like Angelou. This influence also has to do with the omnipresence of, and admiration for, the civil rights movement alluded to through the figures of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Nevertheless, Condé's consideration of the African American presence is a bit harsh, especially when contrasting her own experience in Ghana to theirs. Indeed, her rash decision to go to Africa (more specifically, the Ivory Coast) was an act of survival, prompted by the hopelessness of her condition in Paris. The stakes were all or nothing—it was a matter of life and death. In comparison to her own desperate motives, she considered that African Americans were only "tourists," in Africa merely for the "change of scenery" (*La vie* 201) provided in Ghana. Moreover, despite her admiration for Malcolm X and Richard Wright, the United States remained the embodiment of capitalism, a system she despised as a budding Marxist. One of the most striking examples of it, according to her, lies in the transformation of the Gold Coast and its history of slavery into a tourist attraction where black Americans could come, take a few pictures, and buy a souvenir before taking off (*La vie* 193). As we shall discuss later, such a critical judgment is partly due to the fact that she was aware, and somewhat envious, of the collective bond of the African Americans she encountered: "A common

nostalgia for their native land united them” (*La vie* 164). Unlike her, they could go back to a place that, in spite of everything, they could call home.

Indeed, Angelou embraces that very community in her writing, enjoying and displaying instance of what Gilroy calls “ethnic particularism” (4), that is, certain traits of character that would be specific to African Americans. She continuously returns to a list of unspoken rules that are shared among her community. Those rules, derived from their shared experience of double consciousness in the US,⁹ focus primarily on their capacity for resilience: sassiness and sarcasm as a means of resistance, and laughter in face of adversity (*All God’s* 8). To some extent, although indirectly, Condé refers to the same cultural specificities when she describes the boldness of her two African American friends, Amy and Maya, who were not afraid to touch the snakes during their visit to the temple of snakes. In a similar vein, when they attended together a “traditional” music-and-dance show organized for the tourists at the hotel, she was surprised by the cheerfulness of her friends. She personally found it mediocre. In emphasizing these traits, Condé confirms her isolation—accentuated by the positioning and different frame of analysis she holds—whereas Angelou asserts her belonging to a community.

Condé’s relationship to the United States has, throughout her writings, been an ambivalent one. But for all the criticisms she may have expressed, the African American

⁹ In his influential work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois defines “double consciousness” as follows: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (2).

experience remains an inescapable reference point, and the United States plays an integral part in her existence. Her complex outlook on black America is the product of two conflicting projections to which she was exposed as a child: that of her mother, who believed the United States to be the only place in which a black person could thrive, and that of her brother, who educated her on the history of segregation (*La vie* 170). Her conclusion on the country, “When I was a little girl, I understood that the United States was a complex land about which it was possible to equally affirm one thing and its opposite” (*La vie* 170), echoes her previous statement about Africa: “What tormented me was that I couldn’t figure her out. Too many contradictory images overlaid” (*La vie* 124). The two spaces, as well as their interconnections, are not easily graspable, but rather are the sites of a constant negotiation, adaptation, and translation.

This is why Condé approaches Africa with an almost scientific point of view. Unlike most of the Antilleans she has met on her way to Ivory Coast, she had every intention of “deciphering” Africa and making sense of it (*La vie* 43). In taking her boy, Jiman, and her suitor, Koffi N’Guessan, as “research subjects,” (*La vie* 43) she hoped to establish an objective link with the continent. As for Angelou, in contrast, she adopted a decisively poetic and subjective outlook from the very start of her journey:

The breezes of the West African night were intimate and shy, licking the hair, sweeping through cotton dresses with unseemly intimacy, then disappearing into the utter darkness. Daylight was equally insistent [...] It forced through my closed eyelids, bringing me up and out of a borrowed bed and into brand new streets. (*All God’s* 3)

Africa, ever personified, is a living, motherly force that draws Angelou to wonderful encounters and discoveries.

Yet, it would be a mistake to read these two perspectives in opposition, since, in so doing, we would be dismissing the complexity of the two authors' experiences in Africa. After all, lasting and intimate impressions similar to Angelou's take over Condé's declared goal of objectivity. Even though she believed that she did not have much to show for her first journey to Ivory Coast, she realized: "I will never forget how amazed I was when penetrating the baroque cathedral of the Bingerville forest; the pang of emotion dealt by the colonial vestiges in Grand Bassam [...] (*La vie* 53). To the same extent, Angelou got a better understanding of Ghanaian society via her interactions with her boy, Kojo, and her hairdresser, Comfort. In her work, she carefully reports the exchanges she had with them, especially the ones that illustrate her own cultural bias and assumptions, which allow the reader to witness her learning process. In so doing, she also adopted the mind-set of a student.

Aside from these specific characters, and their respective lovers, there are few intimate and detailed portraits in either text. This is precisely due to the outsider position of the two writers that condemns them to watch from a distance: the personal and the collective alternate in the creative process, as is often the case in black women's autobiographies (Larrier 114). When looking at Ghanaian society, both authors are particularly drawn to the visual and spectacular aspects of it. Indeed, ceremonies, spectacles, gatherings of all sorts constitute an important part of their accounts. Special attention is paid to clothes—traditional, or more surprising, such as the western luxurious

designer-outfits worn by the African elite. Colors and jewelry along with the beauty of African women are recurrent images.¹⁰

Of course, the analysis is not necessarily the same since Condé bitterly concludes that a shared skin color does not change anything when it comes to class relations, while Angelou enjoys describing all the different skin tones she encountered. In fact, when addressing the question of tradition and/or ethnicity, Angelou usually opts for a more positive angle. Although they both agree on the vast disparity between poor and rich and the issues born from the confrontation of tradition and modernization, Angelou alone insists on the possibility of reconciliation. She cites the relationship of T. D. Bafoo, editor at the *Ghanaian Times*, with his wife, both from separate groups, as a hopeful example of national unity. The instance chosen by Condé to depict the relations between different ethnic groups in Ivory Coast shows her skepticism: “What I mean is that from now on the Baoulé will have everything while me, a Bété, I will still have nothing” her bus driver explains to her on the day of Houphouët-Boigny’s celebration of independence (*La vie* 52).

The ambivalence between similarity and difference among the African community is communicated directly by Condé when she is confronted by what she called “two Africas” (*La vie* 208). Indeed, when she briefly had to live under the same roof with her Guinean husband, Condé, from whom she was separated, and her lover, the Ghanaian Kwame Aidoo, she was stunned by the contrast between the two men. Angelou

¹⁰ The distance from which they are observing, along with their attention to clothes and jewelry, positions them as foreigners as it highlights, through their response to these scenes, a certain exotic, or ethnographic, quality of the gaze.

also evokes comments from her friends stating that Liberia was not Africa, as if there were degrees of Africanness. More recently, the writer Alain Mabanckou carefully reclaimed the expression of the plural “the Africas” in *Le sanglot de l’homme noir* (2012), in order to account for the diversity of Africans (116). In addition to this multiplicity, the presence of Europeans, especially numerous in Ghana, and the imprint of European cultural heritage further complicate social and ethnic dynamics. Indeed, Condé explains that, at that time, Ghana represented a space of freedom and change, not only for the African diaspora but also for Whites from everywhere. The reality is that most of the African intellectuals and leaders they meet during their stay have spent time abroad, in the United States or in Europe. An employee at the university where Angelou works introduces her to the term “the beentos,” pejoratively used to refer to Africans who have lived abroad and now act like Europeans (*All God’s* 52). The cultural heritage that Angelou sought and the flight away from Europe that Condé needed in Africa prove not to be as straightforwardly accessible as they had hoped. Because of the shared history of the Atlantic slave trade and colonization, Africa, America, and Europe are interconnected poles of references whose relational meanings and representations challenge any simplistic binary oppositional schemes.

As spectators and as researchers, the two of them, however, remain at a distance—a close distance, but a meaningful one in any case. As they watch the layers of the African culture unfold and weave before their eyes, they reevaluate their assumptions, sense of belonging, and self-definition.

The Stakes of Belonging: Caught Between the Integrity of the Self and the Longing for a Community

Integrity, as wholeness and “congruence between what we think, say, and do” (hooks 192), and authenticity are central notions at stake in Angelou’s and Condé’s autobiographies, even though their prevalence in the definition of the genre, along with the necessity for truth, has long been criticized and reviewed.¹¹ In the cases of Condé and Angelou, these notions take on a triple implication: integrity and authenticity to the self, to the community, and to the reader. The two writers portray themselves as “authentic” authors, in terms of being real, sincere, true-to-oneself speakers (though Condé acknowledges that truth to the self is not rigid and can often shift).¹² And yet, how can one be true-to-oneself or feel whole when one experiences a split identity, sometimes even fragmentation and division? Condé and Angelou are constantly negotiating the contradictions they face as black women, mothers, and writers. Both of them had to deal with the gap between their expectations and the reality they were experiencing, as well as with their own unpredictable responses to the black communities they interact with, which included judgments and views inherited from Western societies. As Condé found out early on, “education cannot be completely disowned” (*La vie* 160). Hypocrisy,

¹¹ The two texts are considered autobiographies in the canonical sense as defined by Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique*: they are written in the first person; the author, narrator, and main protagonist are the same person; they are retrospective accounts told mainly in the past tense; they are preoccupied with the individual life of their writers and the story of their personality (4).

¹² Their relation to the question of authenticity to the community, however, in the sense of “confirming to an original so as to reproduce essential features,” differs strategically as will be discussed later (“Authentic.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic. Accessed 3 April 2017).

doubts, and self-reassessment are inevitable parts of their difficult integration into the African community.

Angelou and Condé quickly understood that they would not find exactly what they were looking for in Africa. Condé, rushing head first towards a new beginning, was constantly brought back to her “Caribbeanness” by Africans, and to her own repressed “Grands-Nègres” (“*High-Class Blacks*”) mentality.¹³ While evolving in African cities, she was still divided among several places: Europe (Paris and London), Guadeloupe, and Africa. It seems that she was unable to connect with Africans on a cultural level because, unlike Angelou, she had been raised to look down on “the attributes conferred on black people: rhythm, intense sensuality” (*La vie* 64).

During nights spent out, whether with Jean Dominique, Kwame, or her two African American friends in Ouidah, Condé felt ostracized because she was unable to join them in their dancing. The reason for this, besides the literal separation from them when she would sit apart from her companions, is that dancing goes beyond simple enjoyment or cultural particularism. According to Condé, their love of dancing is the result of their self-acceptance, of the pride they take in their black bodies. Deprived of this self-love, Condé envied their freedom. “You, a black woman, you don’t like to dance” (*La vie* 202), exclaimed her new African America friend with surprise, deepening

¹³ “Comme ma mère, [mon père] était convaincu que seule la culture occidentale vaut la peine d'exister et il se montrait reconnaissant envers la France qui leur avait permis de l'obtenir. En même temps, ni l'un ni l'autre n'éprouvaient le moindre sentiment d'infériorité à cause de leur couleur. Ils se croyaient les plus brillants, les plus intelligents, la preuve par neuf de l'avancement de leur *Race de Grands-Nègres*.” (*Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, pp 17-18, emphasis mine).

Condé's inability to feel included and reinforcing the assumed correlation between ethnicity and culture. And, indeed, Condé admits that she has been brought up in a social environment that was mostly influenced by French culture. At school and at home, she read the French classics. She did not speak Creole nor did she know anything about Guadeloupean traditions. Given this background, it is difficult for her to ignore others' preconceived ideas of her, whether positive or negative. For example, while on the one hand her husband, Mamadou Condé, was proud of marrying her because "she speaks Parisian perfectly" (*La vie* 28), her son Denis, on the other hand, was bullied at school because of Maryse Condé's mixed-skin: they called her a "toubabesse" which really means "a white woman" (*La vie* 97).

Moments of extreme feelings of exclusion, like Denis' bullying or her loneliness at the dance clubs, punctuate the narration throughout the autobiography. Her eventual expulsion from Ghana is the ultimate instance of it. In Condé's mind, these events are not only a negation of her ethnicity, but the stripping down of her identity: "I was shattered. This way, Africa was going beyond rejecting me. She was laying me bare" (*La vie* 222). The choice of words echoes Condé's opening wish to become a virgin again, although this *tabula rasa*, forced upon her, is no longer desirable after the few chaotic years she has spent in Africa. In addition to the imposed exile, Denis lost at the airport a folder that contained all of her photo albums. As a result, she continues: "[Africa] annihilated my past, my references, in a word, she was destroying my identity. I was nothing anymore" (*La vie* 222). Condé experiences a duality somewhat comparable to Angelou's double consciousness. She accuses Ghana of tearing her family souvenirs away from her, even

though they are attached to an identity she was attempting to reject. In spite of her will, her Antillean past was “catching up to her” (*La vie* 68). In the multiplicity of connections and experiences she had made there, she was forced to examine her attitude, thoughts, and actions more closely, thus questioning the foundations of her identity.

The spatial and cultural dislocation she was experiencing was also expressed in her personal life. Half of the time, she did not understand herself and she painfully records the “split between her intentions and reality” (*La vie* 48). All the contradictions she had noticed within the African diaspora are also embedded in her. Maryse Condé as narrator was not yet at a stage where she could reclaim her hybridity. This period was a time of instability, as she was struggling to follow and reconcile her multiple trajectories. Furthermore, Condé was still in her early twenties when she first visited Africa, and she had only recently, while in Paris, experienced racism based on the color of her skin. This may explain why, at the beginning of her journey, she dismissed her *créolité*, because she still conceived of identity in binary terms: as she did not want to belong to the “Grands-Nègres,” she believed she had to become their opposite. All these roots that she could not harmonize left her with a sense of isolation and loneliness. In order to cope with this sense of rejection, and her own conflicted feelings towards Africa, she refuses to dress up like an African. This choice is emblematic of her ambiguous positioning throughout her journey; she is at once the prisoner of her own image and her own projections.

Surely, this constitutes one of the major differences from Angelou, who was eager to blend in with Ghanaian women. Unlike Condé, for whom one of the most difficult aspects of integration is communication, Angelou is a native English speaker, like most

Ghanaians of Accra, and she had learned Fanti during her stay. Her efforts to speak the language were visibly appreciated and allowed her access to seemingly more “authentic,” or at least unmediated, relationships. In addition to this, she dressed and did her hair in the Ghanaians’ way. Even though she was perfectly aware that she was not Ghanaian—she referred to herself only as black American—it was important for her to fit in, to belong, even if just physically, to Africa. Ghana was the first place where she felt that the color of her skin was “accepted as correct and normal” (*All God’s* 3) and such a feeling of acceptance was worth an illusion or a lie (*All God’s* 102). If Angelou does not recollect any anecdote of rejection similar to Condé’s, she is, quite to her delight, mistaken several times for an African, notably in the small town of Dunkwa on the Gold Coast where villagers try to guess to what ethnic group she belongs.

That being said, the concern of ethnic rejection is not absent from her account, for she includes in her narrative a striking conversation between an African university student and Malcolm X, during which the latter called the former a “White.” That interpellation is an act of provocation, given the fact that Malcolm X was an emblematic figure of civil rights, and, until recently at that time, was affiliated with the Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. In his powerful response, Malcolm X asserted his African heritage and illustrated the particularity of the situation that people of mixed-color like him have to face: rejected by Whites and sometimes called names by Blacks. In the end, he concluded, Black people would “claim” him and he would belong to them (*All God’s* 138). His speech touched base on W. E. B. Du Bois’ double consciousness

except for the fact that Malcolm X did not call himself a “Black American” (*All God’s* 138).

Malcolm X’s position on the subject differs from Angelou’s, for she recognizes herself in the term “Black American” with all the contradictions that it might entail. Her sense of belonging to the black American community is a given from the beginning and only gets reinforced through her experiences in Ghana. She uses the subject pronoun “we” very often and refers to black Americans as “my people,” especially if the group is under criticism (*All God’s* 52). The journey in Africa becomes the site of a comparison that helps her to delineate and appreciate African American cultural specificities. Independence, fierceness, and perseverance are the qualities that she admires in herself and her community (*All God’s* 8, 109). Unlike Condé, Angelou’s sense of self and identity gradually strengthened throughout her stay, and she left Ghana with a renewed outlook. In spite of this, she, too, went through many doubts and often felt lost. The Ghanaians’ behavior towards her makes her wonder if “years of bondage, brutalities, the mixture of other bloods, customs and languages had transformed [black Americans] into an unrecognizable tribe” (*All God’s* 20). In the light of certain interactions she had in Ghana, such as, for example, the one with the Ghana broadcasting office receptionist looking down on her, she also examines other possible motives for the discrimination she faces in the United States. Besides the color of their skin, she suspects that African Americans’ history and enslavement played an even bigger role in her people’s status and that the fight will need to be continued in the United States for that reason. The march to the US Embassy with the group with which she is affiliated, “The Revolutionist

Returnees,” marks a turning point in Angelou’s quest. Indeed, as they were making fun of a black officer raising the American flag, they could not help but be seized by emotion as they gazed at the floating banner of “promise” and “denial” (*All God’s* 126-7).

While Condé battled with her hybrid identity and her challenged sense of integrity, Angelou came to terms with the reality of her double consciousness and accepted its difficulties and challenges. Nevertheless, her renewed commitment to political activism towards the end of the text expresses her strife for creating a space where such a duality would no longer be alienating but rather meaningful and all encompassing. As Du Bois concludes in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “[The American Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (2-3).

Even though she embraced her black American collectivity and decided to continue her political activism in the United States, Angelou does not completely dismiss Africa as her home. Instead, she recognizes that it is her home away from home. Condé, on the other hand, did not think that she had a home to which she could return. Both of them came to the realization that belonging is not a matter of appearance, and that wearing the country’s clothes and hairstyles or speaking the language is not enough to be African (Condé 87, Angelou 174). But if for Angelou, a shared culture born from a national experience of exclusion—what Gilroy calls “cultural nationalism” (2)—is the cement of community, it is above all a matter of the heart and an “adhesion of the self, a spiritual modification” for Condé (*La vie* 88). Attachment and love are the foundation of

her sense of belonging, which is beautifully summed up in the expression she uses to describe her love for Kwame: “My body and my heart had rediscovered their language” (*La vie* 180), as well as in the expression her sister employed to justify her staying in Guinea: “My home is where [my husband] is” (*La vie* 266).

Angelou expresses a similar feeling about her son, Guy, when he is bedridden at the hospital due to a car accident, and she fears that she “would be left without a home,” were he to die. As a matter of fact, the internal conflict between the integrity of the self and the longing for community is best exemplified through the turbulent relationship between mother(s) and child(ren).

Motherhood: A Conflict of Interest Between Self and Other?

Motherhood is a recurrent, traditional trope in both African American and Caribbean literature (Dana A. Williams 78). It is also conceived to be a central marker of authenticity when it comes to defining a community, since family ties lie at the heart of the concept of community. Family, Gilroy explains, is often represented as a microcosm of the community, or what the community ought to be: its ties and organization are symbolic of what the community should strive to achieve (194). Moreover, in the Afrocentric-influenced view that, according to Gilroy, dominated black American politics in the eighties, “the patriarchal family is the preferred institution capable of reproducing the traditional roles, cultures and sensibilities” of the race (194). Such a patriarchal conception intended to reproduce an African familial structure that would be organized around the father as the figure of tradition and authority.

However, Renée Larrier argues that the character who “supports the family unit [in the Caribbean social structure] is the Mother” (24). This shift, she maintains, is replicated within Caribbean literature with traditional tales opening with the mother and in which matrilineal genealogy is favored. Condé herself refers to her own father, in her autobiographical works and in interviews, as an absent, distant figure. Mamadou Condé, her husband during her time in Africa and the father of three of her children, appears as an on-and-off presence, even though this is mostly her choice. Similarly, in African American literature, the mother is also regularly the main character in the tradition of the slave narrative in which “the maternal heroine” is either fighting to keep her family united (Braxton 132) or enacting infanticide to spare her children from the sufferings of slavery (Gilroy 68). In her contribution to the anthology *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers & Daughters*, Patricia Hill Collins contends that, to resist the definition of “true womanhood” as delineated by the concept of “motherhood in white American’s tradition,” black American women turned to Africa as well, but for a different reason (43). Indeed, in African societies, women hold “influential roles in families” (Collins 45). Contrary to the precepts of Eurocentric “true womanhood/motherhood” at the time, there existed no dichotomy between emotional and financial care within the Afrocentric point of view, which aligned more with African

American households' social and economic realities (Collins 45), as Condé and Angelou are both full-time working mothers.¹⁴

Angelou and Condé each explore the place and role of women within African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American communities, especially with respect to motherhood. Their focus on a family structure that is mainly matrifocal, as well as the lucid, uncompromising depiction of their conduct with their children, disrupt the patriarchal, traditional, and Eurocentric notions of motherhood, while they “[question] how well black women can define themselves within the context of community” (Williams 73). Indeed, motherhood is a double bind in these accounts, since it pertains to their conflicted understanding of maternity but also to the questions of origins, lineage, and tradition. For instance, the death of Condé’s mother led her to think that she could not return to Guadeloupe. When her father passed away, she equated being an “orphan” with being “stateless”: “a homelessness with no *motherland* [...]” (*La vie* 49). This feeling of up-rootedness and its resulting lack of genealogy is an obsessive motif for Condé as a mother and as a writer. Her identity quest, inspired by the drive to start anew, seems to be continuously in conflict with her maternal (and filial) duties.

¹⁴ In 1965, when both Condé and Angelou were living in Ghana, the infamous Moynihan report was published, “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action.” In this report, the then Assistant Secretary of Labor, the sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, argued that the high percentage of black single-mother families, along with lingering discrimination, constituted the main factor in the perpetuation of the African American community’s economic and social predicament. Therefore, Moynihan stressed the correlation between family and community, as well as the necessity for the patriarchal reorganization of the black family cell. The report has been decried by many black intellectuals for its participation in the creation of the “welfare queen” and absent black father stereotypes, as well as for its victim-blaming undertones and the politics of respectability it brought about.

As discussed earlier, the mother-child relation is further complicated by the ambivalent triangulation among the “mother” referents of France, Guadeloupe, and Africa.¹⁵ Initially, by traveling to Africa to become a “virgin” again, Condé expressed the desire to be reborn, to erase her past and to define herself outside of her parents’ “Grands-Nègres” alienating mentality. Despite the fact that she did not enjoy Ghana, she “felt like [she] was losing her mother a second time” (*La vie* 223) when she was expelled. Condé’s troubled identification with different mother-like figures is reminiscent of the traditional African American spiritual, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

Motherlessness often translates into the idea of lacking motherliness, and we see this in numerous examples. Understood symbolically, becoming a virgin again implies the negation of her son Denis’s very existence. The relations she depicts with him are particularly problematic because he reminds her of Jean Dominique, who abandoned her.¹⁶ Furthermore, Condé was torn between what she wanted for herself and what she thought was best for her children. The conflict this causes between her intimate self and her social self is the source of constant self-questioning: “What was [Leïla’s] feeling for a mom who was dragging her around from one country to another, one home to another [...] In a word, a mother because of whom she has been introduced too early to the terrible experiences of uprooting, exile and racism?” (*La vie* 246). Additionally, Condé

¹⁵ Indeed, Dr. Dana A Williams explains in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature* that “The mother figure in Caribbean women’s writing is an ambivalent one due largely to Caribbean’s identification first with Europe as mother figure during colonization, then with Africa during the age of Negritude, and finally with the islands themselves beginning with the postcolonial years” (79).

¹⁶ Her relationship with her son is further complicated in other texts by her ambivalent response to his homosexuality.

considered the three pregnancies carried on the African continent not as an anchor to her roots and identity, but as a reminder of places where she no longer wished to reside. Her cultural and geographical dislocation finds its echo in this divided personal life.

The duality of womanhood and motherhood and the conflicted but nonetheless interrelated relations between identity, nationality, and community are thus two sides of the same coin. Such a correlation is particularly reinforced in Condé's situation since, as she stated herself in an interview with Noëlle Carruggi, in the Caribbean, "genealogies must be passed on via women" ("Écrire in Maryse Condé" 210). In the fictive biography of her grandmother, entitled *Victoire*,¹⁷ Condé attempted precisely "to recreate this feminine genealogy" in order to "connect herself to this Antillean society, to this Guadeloupean world [...]" (*Victoire* 210). Furthermore, unlocking the secret of her grandmother was a necessary detour that allowed Condé to get closer to her mother Jeanne, by remembering her childhood and understanding what made her the woman she is. Similarly, going to Africa proved to be a necessary, if at times painful, step on her way to eventually returning to Guadeloupe (by way of the United States).

Both "detours" through family and Africa ultimately constitute the foundation of Condé's identity quest, a quest that can be "'complete' when someone comes to terms with the mother and with the mother's land" (Alexander 25). The conflicts that Condé experiences with her mother-referents in Guadeloupe, France, and Africa can be seen as paralleling the discordant mother-daughter relationships described above. Ultimately, the

¹⁷ The English translation of the title, *My Mother's Mother*, is especially explicit about Condé's project and is also remarkably evocative of Angelou's autobiographical work *Mom & Me & Mom*.

confrontation with these mother figures results in an act of self-affirmation and self-liberation for Condé, as when at the end of *La vie*, she has freed herself from the obsessive longing for “the peace of the mother’s womb” (265). In the third, and final section of the book, she is looking forward to her future life and to her eventual trip back to Guadeloupe, not as a rebirth circle but as a creative and healing endeavor.

Angelou also grapples with a similar association of motherhood and roots, which can be set in parallel to the stereotyped, yet particularly relevant in this context, correlation between identity and nationality, crystalized in “the paradoxical term Mother Africa” (Lupton 154). In the final work of her autobiographical series, *Mom*, Angelou reflects on a triangular connection rather similar to Condé’s. Indeed, her grandmother, “Momma,” and her mother, Vivian, both influenced Angelou’s self-identity. The book focuses on Angelou’s enigmatic and powerful relationship with her mother, from the time she was reunited with her at around the age of thirteen. Since the very beginning, her mother stands in sharp contrast to what she has previously experienced, that is the rural town of Stamp, Arkansas, and the reassuring presence of her grandmother who, according to Françoise Lionnet, symbolizes the religious and blues traditions of the black vernacular (134). The title, thus, cleverly conveys a network of mothering threads that can be interpreted in many different ways: Mom (grandmother), and me, and mom (Vivian); mom (Vivian), and me, and mom (Angelou as a mother).

Structurally, the account is divided into two sections. The first, “Mom & Me,” ends with Angelou giving birth to her son and finally being able to call Vivian “mother.” Angelou connects the two “mothering” events as she says: “I was aware that after the

birth of my son and the decision to get a place for just the two of us, I thought of Vivian Baxter as my mother” (*Mom* 73). Until that moment, Angelou was calling and conceiving of Vivian only as “Lady,” because she was beautiful and thus didn’t look “like a mother” (*Mom* 18). During the first section of the book, then, Angelou cannot reconcile her mother’s beauty and freedom with her internalized notions of motherhood. In addition, she struggled to recognize herself as both a woman and a potential mother by means of her image of Vivian, for she thinks herself to be ugly. In her study on motherhood and female identity in Antillean literature, Florence Ramond Journey contends that “in positioning themselves as subjects, [Antillean women writers] can then transcend the original bond to the mother: they do not become *their* mother [...], but are free to become *mothers*” (84). In the case of Angelou, becoming a mother does work as an act of agency and self-realization as a subject. It enables her to shift the perspective in the second section, titled “Me & Mother,” not as a power move, but as a means to assert her independence within a renewed kinship that is no longer alienating but liberating. Finally, as will be discussed later, Angelou will be the one taking on a mothering and nurturing role towards her mother at the end of the narrative. The interwoven motif of the pairs mother/daughter and motherhood/selfhood guides the narrative of *Mom*. In a similar vein, Angelou skillfully turns these interrelated pairs into an intricate and dynamic literary device in *All God’s*, as Lupton notes:

The mother/son plot, like the African/African American plot, is dual in nature. To develop the plot is to create a series of active/counteractive rhythms. The confrontations

between love and desertion, between knowledge and misunderstanding, are two examples of the shifting stories that shape [Angelou's autobiographical] series. (141)

Indeed, the relationship of Angelou with her son follows a somewhat similar path to the relationship she entertains with Africa. Her first few months in Ghana are solely centered on Guy and her first impressions of the country are mediated by their time together: "For two days Guy and I laughed. We looked at the Ghanaian streets and laughed. We listened to the melodious languages and laughed. We looked at each other and laughed out loud" (*All God's* 4). She too, like Condé, had previously moved with her son from state to state due to her job as a performer. However, their particular situation resulted in an interdependent family cell in which Guy played the role of an anchor and a motivation for Angelou's activism because she wants to protect him and offer him a better life. Her stay in Ghana, along with the fact that Guy was growing up and living his own life, became the opportunity for her to enjoy a newfound freedom and to redefine her purpose. The confrontation with the Motherland resulted in a similar outcome. Now that she had made the journey back and reconnected, even if only for one day, with her roots, she was free to continue her life, just as her ancestors "had dared to continue to live" (*All God's* 207), and to further the fight for civil rights in the United States. Simultaneously, she understood that "this new leading man [Guy] did not need a mother as supporting actress in his scene" in the same way that Africa did not need her, unlike the Organization of Afro-American Unity (*All God's* 194-5).

There is an instability in Condé's approach to motherhood that she doesn't seem to be able to regulate or even to understand as readily as Angelou does towards the end of

her autobiography. Therefore, Condé perpetually oscillates between guilt and demonstrations of her freedom through what she deems to be selfish actions. She believes this fundamental conflict inherent to motherhood to be a universal concern: “to be a mother or to exist for oneself alone” (*La vie*). Cixous also refers to such an idea when she states that:

[Woman] has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...). (880)

And, sure enough, judgments of her character end up being based on her status as a mother, especially as the mother of mixed-race children. One of her former colleagues, and Guadeloupean native, from the Charles de Gaulle High school where she worked in Senegal later told her: “No one knew where you came from. Were you an English-speaker? A French-speaker? You had no husband, but a bunch of children of all colors” (*La vie* 276). Not only was she secluded because she was perceived through a gender-normative lens (a mother with apparently “no” husband), but also because she was the embodiment of an essentialist anguish, a family composed of people “of all colors” that resisted any racial or cultural categorization or hierarchy.¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, the family can be and is often conceived as a microcosm of the community, and as such, the distinctions between Angelou’s and Condé’s family

¹⁸ According to Lionnet, “what is at stake in the conservative resistance to *métissage* is clearly a patriarchal desire for self-reproduction, self-duplication, within a representational space—female bodies—uncontaminated by the presence of the other” (12).

structures are particularly telling. Such structures subtend Condé's effort to deconstruct the image of the Antillean woman as being the "pillar of society" ("Entretien avec Maryse Condé" 1097). Moreover, her portrayal of motherhood disrupts the status of the "enfant-roi" often held by children in Africa, because she portrays a mother driven by her sexual and emotional needs, rather than by her maternal instinct alone. Such an image singularly contrasts with that of the "super-mama," Madame Bâ, whom she meets in Dakar and who defines motherhood as "a full-time job" (*La vie* 272). Condé admires her, insofar as she "symbolized the mother that she was not able to be, maternity in its most noble expression" (*La vie* 272). And yet, Condé recognizes that Madame Bâ was uneducated because her whole life was solely dedicated to having children. This tension between femininity and maternity, motherhood and selfhood, appears as a recurring thread in Condé's fictional and personal works.

La vie can be said to pursue the inquiry Condé had started in *Victoire*, in which she wanted to reestablish the dialogue between a generation of women and mothers who misunderstood each other because of the conflicted representations they had of themselves. This work set to unravel the myths and rumors, symptomatic of Antillean society according to Condé, that have submitted her mother, Jeanne, and grandmother, Victoire, into imposed, rigid identities. A similar premise guides her autobiography. Interrogating motherhood is crucial since at stake in its (re)definition also lies the possibility for agency and creativity for Condé-the-writer. In inscribing mother-children relationships at the heart of her work, Maryse Condé claims a revised reading of maternity as a "metaphor for female liberation" (Journey 51). For instance, a decisive part

of *Victoire* is dedicated to imagining Victoire's private life, especially the desires and pleasures she enjoyed in her intimate relationship with her white "master" Boniface, and possibly with her female friend Anne-Marie. Challenging the image of Victoire as the *poto-mitan* and selfless mother created by Condé's mom is a fruitful means for the writer to explore a mothering-space in which she can take root and thus express herself genuinely.

Nevertheless, at the time of her travel in Africa, Condé had not yet come to terms with the story/history of the fragmentation born from the biased equation between motherhood/womanhood and identity/motherland. Having barely known her grandmother and lost her mother at a young age, Condé first lives motherhood as alienating and isolating. First of all, her marriage to Mamadou Condé, undertaken in order to avoid being a single-mother, accentuated the distance between her and her sisters because they believed that he was not good enough for their bourgeois family. After this, instead of acquiring social value as a mother, which can hold an idealized, if limiting, status in Africa at that time, she was judged and secluded because she did not fit the gender-normative definition of a "mother." Finally, her children tied her to people and places that made her unhappy, while pulling her away from some of her lovers. When she learns that she is pregnant with her third child, Aïcha, she feels that: "I was the victim of fate [as] this new pregnancy inexorably tied me down to Condé, to Guinea" (*La vie* 66). Even more, her decision to leave Paris for Conakry, motivated by the well-being of her children who, she believed, needed "a country, a roof, a father" (*La vie* 65), forced her to abruptly separate from her lover Jacques, ripping her heart apart. As a result, family and

community are at odds in *La vie* and Condé receives little to no help from her family or community.

Whereas Condé could not depend on her sisters when she needed help with her newborn in Paris, Angelou was able to count on a reliable and diverse support system. Just as Angelou herself was raised partly by her grandmother (from age 3 to 13), Guy also spent a lot of time with his own grandmother, Vivian Baxter. In Ghana, when Angelou met Efua, during the time Guy's recovery after the car accident was still unsettled, the latter told her: "your son is now my son" (*All God's* 11), thus assuming a kinship that extends beyond the established frontiers of the Eurocentric, nuclear family ideal. Likewise, Angelou took on several duties as an "othermother"¹⁹ in *All God's*. Her relationship with her Ghanaian houseboy Kojo is the best instance of it, as she took him under her wing and, with the help of her flat-mates and friends, helped him with his schooling. Even though she did, at first, take on this motherly role rather reluctantly (as she was, after all, in the process of self-reactualizing herself outside of her relation to her son), she ended up giving in to Kojo's resemblance to her brother, Bailey, and to the all-too-familiar task of childcare.

Therefore, she feels at home within the Ghanaian societal structure of community as family, in which she finds a place within "mothering" networks (Collins 45). This is what Lupton refers to when she describes Angelou's "delight in being called by the African title 'Auntie' by Nana Nketsia's charming children and by other children from

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins explains that "othermothers" are "women who assist the blood mother by sharing mother responsibilities," and as such, are "traditionally [...] central to the institution of black motherhood" (47).

Cairo or from the outskirts of Accra. The phrase has a maternal connotation that pleases her” (Lupton 154).

All of these elements combined bring together a sense of community in which people help each other as if they were part of the same big family. Even though the father figure is completely absent in Angelou’s account, Guy and she are well cared for. Julian Mayfield took on the role and responsibilities of her “brother,” and she welcomed the rumors that her Ghanaian friends brought her about her son’s love life, which she interpreted as being a well-meant warning. The community’s gossip and hearsay, in this instance, act as a healthy function of the community-as-family. After all, her mother and her grandmother taught her: “my reputation is the most important thing I’ll ever have” (*Mom* 31). It also suggests that Angelou occupies a legitimate place within this community. Indeed, according to Collins, motherhood, within Afrocentric “othermother” networks, can be liberating as it provides a certain status and power within the community (46).

If parts of Angelou’s experience in Ghana illustrate this position, the figure of her mother Vivian, as presented in *Mom*, is the epitome of a strong community mother. Indeed, Vivian Baxter is depicted as a rather larger-than-life character, which fits the magnitude of Angelou’s admiration and respect for her. In *Mom*, before being called “mother” by Angelou, Vivian is first and foremost a staple in the community. Most notably, she formed “a group she called the Stockton Black Women for Humanity” (151) whose mission was to help families in need as well as to support students to pursue their

education.²⁰ Within the course of her life, she was a realtor, a nurse, and the owner of a gambling house and hotel: she is a leading force set to transgress the limitations forced upon her as both a black person and a woman. Vivian's portrayal in turns embodies and resists the archetype of the "strong black woman," whose underlying "burden" Roxane Gay denounces in her article, "Strong Opposition." Vivian fits Gay's definition of "the strong black-woman" archetype to the extent that she "is imposing or intimidating and, often, angry. She is selfless and independent. She is resourceful. [...] She is different from everyone else. She is a woman apart" (18). She also is a strong mother capable of much tough love, as Angelou recounts. On the other hand, she offers a much more nuanced portrayal of motherhood, since Vivian at times does not hesitate to disrupt traditional gender roles (she is the leader of the household, as she was the leader of her brothers). However, the strength, and sometimes the violence, that characterizes Vivian as a mother and "othermother" never deprive her of her "womanhood." Angelou emphasizes many times how beautiful her mother was, "a startling beauty" (7) who enjoyed a full romantic and sexual life. As Françoise Lionnet aptly remarks in her analysis of the first four books of Angelou's series, Vivian's "energy," "creativity," and "rhythm and blues" work as the living illustration that "the conflict between productive and reproductive roles is a false problem [...]" (136).

In a more cynical vein, Condé puts into question the African Americans' delight at being called "sister" or "auntie" on the streets of Accra. According to her, not only is

²⁰ A community park in Stockton has been named to honor Vivian's legacy after her death: the Vivian "Lady B" Baxter Park.

the term “sister” “a simple and polite way to say ‘miss’ or ‘madam’” (*La vie* 202), it also contrasts with the scene she had witnessed of Ghanaian children impishly greeting African American tourists arriving at Elmina with the Twi term “Obruni (foreigner)” (*La vie* 194). Condé does not only resist the premise that the color of the skin or a presumed common cultural heritage could be enough to found a community; she also challenges the conceptualization of community as family. If her family were to represent a community, it would be a hybrid community that has to manage its internal differences. Condé resists the metaphor that envisions family as a community and community as a family for two main reasons. First of all, she deems the communities she has encountered thus far to be based on exclusionary elements such as race, social status, language, etc., and thus none of them felt like a family to her. Secondly, her family is *métisse* and as such does not abide by the criteria of what a community should look like, according to the people she meets.

The distance between Condé and Denis grew wider when he learned that Mamadou Condé was not his father. His character also raises the issue of (black) masculinity, as Condé herself judged him too “girly.” Aïcha, born in Guinea, is “the perfect Mandika baby”: she has a Muslim name and baptism and she is closer to her nanny, Awa, with whom she shares the same language (*La vie* 82-3) than to Condé. Finally, Condé’s oldest daughter, Sylvie, because she had stayed longer in London and had thus been separated from her siblings for a long time, treated them in a demeaning way when she returned: “She was the princess and treated her little sisters, especially Aïcha, as ignorant ‘savages’” (*La vie* 274).

Angelou inscribes herself in the black American narrative tradition of strong mothers and reaffirms their leading roles within a community. As her relationship with Guy evolves into a new separated-but-connected one, she leaves Africa as an empowered, independent woman ready to devote her care and energy to the black American cause. In focusing attention on the mother while demystifying motherhood's role in the Antillean society in *Victoire*, Condé, too, places herself under the lineage of emblematic mother figures like her own mother, the first black woman teacher of Guadeloupe, and also her grandmother beforehand, who was an exceptional cook. She attempts to give voice to these enigmatic mothers, still surrounded by taboos, sufferings, and rumors.

Angelou, on her own terms, also aims at preserving and circulating the voice, memory, and flow of Vivian's vivacity. At the end of *Mom*, just after Vivian passed away, Angelou concludes in stating that she "knew [her mother] deserved a daughter who loved her and had a *good memory*, and she got one" (*Mom* 197, emphasis mine). Such a task resonates with a significant purpose of many other African American women writers, just as Alice Walker confided in the beautiful collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, about the omnipresence of her mother in her work: "I have absorbed not only my mother's stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded" (75). In this work, Walker re-envisioned black women (mothers, grandmothers, great grand-mothers...) not as strong women or "saints" but as creative beings in their own right. Acknowledging and emphasizing these lost, or alternative, creative agents can thus be both the subject matter of their own writing as well as a

means of empowerment for it. For that matter, I agree with Lionnet that Angelou, through the figure of her mother and her autobiographical self, “creates a mythology of the ‘creative mother’” (137), to which writers who are also mothers can relate.

This is precisely Condé’s goal, in *Victoire*. Through writing she can reclaim the legacy of her grandmother’s own creativity in the kitchen space: “I want to claim the legacy of this woman who seemingly didn’t leave any. To create the link that connects her creativity to mine. To move from the flavors, the colors, the smells of meats and vegetables to the ones of the words” (*Victoire* 104). In a similar way, in *La vie*, the beginning of Condé’s creative journey as a writer seems to be directly linked to mothering/motherhood. If after her expulsion from Ghana, she “felt like [she] was losing her mother a second time” (*La vie* 223), her subsequent trip to London marks the beginning of her writing, as she turns to the comfort of the blank page. There, she decided to undergo a tubal ligation, which prompted her to feel like she “wasn’t a woman” (*La vie* 238) anymore when she is finally reunited with Kwame in Accra because she can no longer give birth. However, it is during this second stay in Accra that she begins to conceive of writing as a profession, slowly coming to terms with the fact that mothering (providing) and writing are not mutually exclusive.

As for Angelou, who has always expressed her creativity as a performer and dancer, she proceeded to write more professionally only upon her return to the United States, after having symbolically “cut the umbilical cord” with her son and the symbolical African motherland. In that respect, even though Condé and Angelou contributed to creating a new creative mother-mythology and genealogy (and Angelou would continue

to take on nurturing and inspiring roles for other black women such as Oprah Winfrey), they still had to engage and struggle with what Lionnet describes as the false dichotomy between writing and mothering. Both of them started their professional career as published writers later in life, in their late thirties-early forties, affirming the possibility for creativity, (re)productivity, and self-reliance beyond the idealized status of mothers, although never completely separate from it or in opposition to it.

Studying Angelou's and Condé's writing processes in light of the literary trope of motherhood allows us to show how both writers, beyond their differences, revisit and transform the dynamic writing/mothering. Indeed, the act of writing was for the two of them prompted by reflections and conflicts revolving around the key term "mother" (mother Africa, motherlessness, motherly love). Yet, their creative responses to these questions do not solely start with the exploration of their genealogy nor end with the need for transmission to their children. For all the collective and social resonances of their texts, writing remains first and foremost a deeply individual practice. It is on the blank page that they write themselves, mothering new subjectivities.

II. NARRATIVE IDENTITIES IN DIASPORA

Looking Back: Reminiscing as a Unifying Lens.

In both accounts, as we have seen, Angelou and Condé attempt to portray their past self at a major crossroad of their lives. The two biographies are the occasion for each of them to deal with the contradictions they had to face during their quest for selfhood and cultural identity in Africa. Their goal is not to dismiss or resolve these discrepancies

but to apprehend them as being an integral part of their lives, reconciled within the broader and cohesive whole of their narrative identities. The Ricoeurian term of “narrative identity” characterizes the coincidence between *idem*-identity, the a priori and immutable characteristics of one’s being, and *ipse*-identity, the maintaining of identity through time and the possibility of change (*Oneself as Another* 2-3). Narration then, where sameness and diversity coexist via the mediation of the unifying and comprehensible principle of the *mise en intrigue*, invests the two writers with a sense of agency (the right to choose and organize) and provides a field for introspection, self-interpretation, and self-representation (*Time and Narrative* 246).

Condé

Condé writes from a place of inquiry, looking back on her past self with the same investigating approach she had adopted for the African continent. Her older, writerly self consistently interrupts the narration in order to reflect on her reactions or decisions. At times, this process takes the form of an explanation in which the Condé of 2012, enlightened by distance and the knowledge of future events, tries to understand the reasons behind her past actions and to pass a sharp, but never incriminating, judgment on them. For example, she writes that she is able to: “discern today with a cruel lucidity how much of a fool’s bargain my union with Condé was” (*La vie* 31). At other times, the confusions she faced in the past have carried on into the present self, and she leaves the reader with questions to ponder.

La vie stands out as one of the rawest works of Condé, in which writing, as in her other texts, acts as “a kind of therapy” (“La race n’est pas primordiale” 46), but a therapy

in which she takes on the roles of both patient and physician.²¹ In comparison to her previous playful treatment of the fictive and the personal (the intimate and the autobiographical), *La vie* appears to be the work in which Condé is the most willing to present herself without embellishments, to drop the masks. The account is punctuated with interrogations left unanswered, very often about her personal life: for instance, she still wonders if her actions have brought pain upon her children during her quest. Such interrogations also extend to broader social issues such as Nkrumah's true agenda and the overall political and social situation in the newly independent African countries she experienced.

The voice of the writer is omnipresent via numerous, at times lengthy, commentaries on her state of being. Condé makes sure that the reader is aware of the fact that this is a mediated account over which she, as writer and protagonist, is the only one to have authority. She references her other works many times and how she creatively incorporated some real people and events, as well as some of her real emotions within the fiction. Moreover, Condé-writer anticipates and responds to comments that readers, friends, and critics have addressed to her/her work by asserting her right to literary subjectivity and creativity. Etymologically, the term "authentic" came from the Greek word "authoritative," which means that, by asserting her literary authority, Condé also aims to profess the authenticity of the Condé-narrator. Nevertheless, it is not authenticity *to* anything fixed, or defined from the outside. Unlike Angelou's position, Condé's

²¹ The reader's role remains ambiguous as s/he is addressed as a confidant and the recipient of her memory, a confidant whose judgment, as we have seen, is anticipated and at times dismissed.

literary authority doesn't necessarily translate into a communal or societal authority.

There is no clearly delimited "we" in her narrative,²² but a plural and multi-faceted "I."

Renée Larrier, in her essay *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, states that this literary authority derives from the "empowering subjectivity" created by the act of writing (2). This is precisely the subjectivity that Condé claims when she evokes her first attempt at writing:

I could feel it without anyone teaching it to me, the events of a narration ought to be shown through a filter of subjectivity. This filter is made of the sensitivity of the writer. Roughly speaking, regardless of the diversity of the narration, the filter remains always the same, book after book. It's the *unchanging* voice of the author, whether the professors of literature like it or not. (Emphasis mine, 233)

Condé's statement echoes Ricoeur's concept of the narrative constitution of *ipseité*. *Ipsé*-identity answering the question "Who am I?," is the maintaining of oneself through the promise: the fidelity to the self and to others in remaining true to its commitment and recognizing oneself as the author of one's actions even though the self is not unified and changes (*Oneself as Another* 123-4). The many questions raised in *La vie* resonate with, and pursue, the introspective and intimate investigation that constitutes the governing principle of her corpus. Most of them work more as a literary technique to guide the story; all of them keep on being refined.

By her own admission, Condé lied, dissimulated, and sometimes didn't understand herself at all. Nevertheless, by means of the unifying lens of the writing, she

²² In *All God's*, the communal "we" remains omnipresent and representative, even though the oppositional "them" grows more elusive.

recognizes herself not recognizing herself. Throughout her account she aspires to establish a personal chronology that is meaningful to her literary self: from her alienation in Paris, “I wasn’t who I used to be anymore” (*La vie* 20) by way of her rediscovery of Frantz Fanon, to her first experience(s) of writing and the anticipated happy outcome of her life with her future husband, Richard. The place of writing develops into a parallel plot to the story of her life in Africa, a life that indeed led her to the “nearly mystical experience” of writing (*La vie* 285).. The *mise en intrigue* reconfigures the past, along with the diversity of life events, moving towards a cohesive end that, with the help of humor and a retroactive perspective, eventually turns a space of doubt, pain, and separation—Africa—into a “tamed” and metamorphosed “subject of fictions” (*La vie* 285).

Moreover, the careful organization of the book into sections, usually headed by quotes or proverbs from authors ranging from Frantz Fanon to John Lennon, is another means to inscribe her writing under the auspices of a broader literary frame. “These voices of *auteurité*/authority” complement her narrative and create a transnational and intersectional dialogue on race, identity, history, memory, and many other subjects, without hierarchy (Larrier 113). Throughout the book, Condé comes back to literary “father” figures who had a profound influence on her, such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, but she juxtaposes them to writers from other genders, nationalities, and times—including herself. However, what interests her is her own interpretation of these seminal texts, which she explores through her personal and analytical lens. In so doing, she highlights the fact that, to her, reading is as much a creative act as writing. Condé stresses

the importance of literature for her own identity quest, which resonates with Ricoeur's belief in the role of reading in the understanding of the self. Condé considers literature a privileged "mediation" with the world that enabled her to grasp the Guinean revolution, for example, and "to be fully moved by it" (*La vie* 75). Such a statement reinforces once more Condé's thoughtful blurring of the frontiers between fiction and reality, constantly questioning the meanings, values, and expectations attached to the nature of truth.

In addition to being an instrument of meaning-making, the voice of the author serves as a way to take responsibility for her actions while defending them on both a personal and writerly level. In this way, Condé addresses the many criticisms that have been made to her regarding her writings, especially the critiques of *Heremakhonon* and *Ségou*, and she attempts to forestall any potential new criticisms: "Do not reproach me for sleeping with the son of one of the most sanguinary dictators that has ever lived" (*La vie* 65). These constant meta-commentaries of Condé-author also constitute an important means for her to claim her independence as a writer in fighting against a presupposed Antillean and African literary authenticity and what she calls their "victim sentimentality" ("Entretien avec Maryse Condé" 1096). In interviews, Condé often talks about the criticisms that have been leveled against her for not addressing the themes and topics that Antillean writers are expected to address or, when she does, for not aligning with the views of her contemporaries. Other writers in the following generation of the African diaspora have deplored the limitations established by the category "African" literature and its monolithic definition. Condé's emphasis on the similitudes between her sensibility as a writer and that of the Brontë sisters provide one means of decentralizing

literary categories and analysis based solely on culture and/or nationality, and of forging new creative solidarities. In following new networks of identification and new geographical routes, she inscribes her place within the global literary world and its “canons,” while still “looking for a narrative structure that corresponds to her specific personality [...]” (“Entretien avec Maryse Condé” 1094).

Condé addresses this particular issue of authenticity, in the sense of fidelity to the “truth” and to a community, from the outset in *La vie*, where she denounces autobiographers, including herself, and their “involuntary (?) attempts of embellishment” (*La vie* 13). In that same prologue and throughout the text, she admits to her own “embellishments,” such as, for example, her previous emphasis on Mamadou Condé’s Guinean nationality, which created a “seductive image [of] a love guided by political activism” (*La vie* 11) due to the aura of resistance and independence that the country represented during Sékou Touré’s leadership after 1958.

At the age of seventy-five, when she writes her second-to-last autobiography, Condé does not have the same preoccupations as before. She wants to complicate her own myth as a militant writer, to disrupt what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie eloquently called “the single story”—that is, the one-dimensional, linear story of Maryse Condé-writer-militant. In reaction to this classification, she then proceeds, not without humor, to inscribe her autobiography in the same vein as Rousseau’s *Confessions*, stating that she wants “to show to her peers a woman in every way true to nature” (*La vie* 12). The quote echoes the book’s title that literally translates to “Life Unvarnished.” However, she also affirms that truth to the self includes a “considerable place of imagination” (*La vie* 271).

Indeed, before *La vie*, Condé's self-referential strategy of authenticity relied on the premise that fidelity to the self and to the imperfect processes of memory were as important as, or even outweighed, factual truth. In this respect, she is true to her nature, to her personality traits and characteristics. In accepting her iterated commitment to truth in the present work, one must always consider what remains untold or silenced. For instance, despite the preponderance of the issue of motherhood in the work, we learn very little about her children. Similarly, even though she postulates at the beginning that she wants to explore the role Africa played in her life, the book ends ten years before she departs from Africa. Condé is known for her playful interactions with readers and critics, especially in interviews; when she takes off the varnish, her "nudity," to use the formulation of Sami Tchak, can be "more impervious" than the mask(s) (194).

Angelou

As Gilroy suggests in his analysis of black American autobiographies, the clear announcement of truth to the self lies at the heart of "the link between autobiographical writings and the project of self-liberation" (69-70). Yet imagination and its legitimacy within personal writing has been asserted by Maya Angelou as well. Just like Condé, she addressed that issue in her public life, but unlike Condé in *La vie*, she doesn't directly comment on it in her writing. During interviews, for instance, she notably responded to several criticisms that were made of *All God's* and its idealized portrayal of the return to Africa at the end. Angelou admitted, as Lupton notes, "[that] her view of Africa is not completely authentic. At times, she romanticizes her experience" (Lupton 142). The

mysterious, mystical dimension of Africa is something she wants to preserve intact.

Arguably, while Condé insists on the literary self throughout her experiences in Africa, Angelou aims instead at maintaining an image of Africa that would be meaningful to her as well as to her black readers despite its disappointments and contradictions. We could easily read Angelou's depiction of Africa through Condé's conception of identity in relation to Guadeloupe, asserting that:

I think it is in this way that one should conceive of identity, as a link one fosters with a territory, real or imaginary. The fact that this territory is imaginary does not matter, as long as it functions as a place to which someone can connect. ("Identité culturelle" 1096)

Fidelity to the self, through her recollection of personal development, is an element Angelou must negotiate in regard to her fidelity to others, in this case to the African American community. She wants to uphold a somewhat idealistic view of Africa, even if it is sometimes in contradiction with the facts and reality because the symbolic link that she has established with the motherland matters more to her when it comes to maintaining her identity and fidelity to the self. As in Condé's work, the hybridity of cosmological time (quantitative) and subjective time (qualitative) produces a text "functioning as both history and autobiography" (Larrier 110). Whereas Condé's work embraces a diachronic narrative in essence, Angelou's follows a more linear plot development that demonstrates the evolution of the two main characters (Angelou and Guy) at the end. The major difference between the two authors is that, even though they found themselves in Africa at the same moment of History, that particular moment doesn't hold the same meaning for them. In addition to this, Angelou wrote this book in

1986, twenty years after her journey in Ghana whereas Condé waited almost thirty more years to lay down her experience.

Angelou's writing on Africa includes a critical commentary on her encounter with it by expressing on many occasions African Americans' shared feeling of "being overlooked by Ghanaians" (*All God's* 19) as well as her awareness of the self-delusion of her community:

We had come home, and if home was not what we expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination. (*All God's* 19)

The longing for home is an emotional and cultural point of connection for the black American community, for it has influenced its literature, religious songs, and imagery for centuries. Angelou clearly explains that Africa is not their home anymore but she has returned, found her roots, to finally transcend the frontiers of time and space for a day during her trip to Eastern Ghana where "descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in [her] face and heard their ancestors speak through [her] voice" (*All God's* 207). The lineage between Africans and African Americans is restored here as the villagers recognize her as one of them, as the descendant of the people that have been torn away from their land and families during the Atlantic slave trade.

For Angelou, the linear adventures of motherhood and political activism in Africa are interrupted and enriched here and there by vivid poetic reconstructions of the historical past and a taste for storytelling influenced by biblical and slave narratives (Lupton 157). She embraces that heritage of collective imagination, arranging the plot

with a determined purpose: to make her African American readers proud of their African lineage and “to bring to her country a firsthand account of a continent that most African Americans have deeply felt but rarely visited” (Lupton 159). Whereas Condé anticipates throughout her account that she will not stay in Africa and will eventually live in the United States, Angelou’s power of invocation in depicting scenes of everyday life in Ghana, its beauty, and its people, invites the reader to daydream and to share with her, for a moment, the bliss of this illusion. Finally, Lionnet pertinently points out in her analysis of Angelou’s preceding autobiographical works that as a writer she was also addressing a double audience:

An audience split along racial and gender lines but also—and this is the important point here—split between those interlocutors, on the one hand, who share with the narrator an unquestioned sense of community and those, on the other hand, who have a relationship of power over the narrator. (131)

This commentary holds true for *All God’s* where she asserts her “Americanness” at the same time that she establishes a meaningful continuity between African Americans and their African ancestors. Nonetheless, due to the political and historical nature of the period described in that book, the reiteration of the communal “we” implies a de facto black American readership, one that she seemingly addresses in a more direct way. Many African American writers, such as her predecessor James Baldwin and her successor Ta-Nehisi Coates in their celebrated works *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*, have used the same collective “we,” strategically addressing their narrative to a family relative. Angelou’s use of a famous African American spiritual, “Swing low, sweet chariot, Coming for to carry me home,” as the opening epigraph of her account,

shows her will to reach out to a predetermined community. Moreover, this choice reveals that she positions herself at once as a preacher, a performer, and a poet.²³ Performing roles that have been traditionally reserved for men (and male writers), Angelou assumes a voice of authority/authenticity both literary and social. Nevertheless, this “male” public positioning is creatively reclaimed and redefined via the twin story-plot of the mother-son relationship (as previously noted) as well as Angelou’s vivid, conversational-like style.

What is more, in navigating the historical period of the return-to-Africa movement through the lens of her own personal struggle as a woman and mother, Angelou compiles history with her memories. As a result, she obscures the lines between history and *her* story. Her memories of this history, memory-as-history, can then be passed on to the reader and the community’s/ies’ collective memory. The scholar Kenneth Warren refers to Walter Benn Michael’s definition of “historicism” to describe such a process, “the process by which *the past* (what happened) becomes *our past* (what happened to us)” (Warren 97). Since memory and identity-making are so closely intertwined within this notion of historicism, *All God’s* functions as a means to inscribe, or re-inscribe, Angelou and her readers within a shared identity politics.²⁴

In this effort to be faithful to a story that she believes has value for her people, Angelou also tries to leave out most of the negative political aspects of Nkrumah’s

²³ Françoise Lionnet actually identifies Angelou’s mom, Vivian, as a female preacher figure in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. To learn more about Angelou’s “use of the religious tradition” (133), see Lionnet’s chapter “Con Artists and Storytellers: Maya Angelou’s Problematic Sense of Audience” in *Autobiographical Voices*.

²⁴ About the process of “historicism,” Michaels concludes, “It is only when [history] is reimagined as the fabric of our own experience that the past can be deployed in the constitution of identity and that any history can properly become ours” (qtd. in Warren 97).

presidency. She focuses on what he represented then for African Americans in exile (hope and pride), as well as emancipation for African descendants at large: “When he declared that West Indians and black Americans were among Africa’s great gifts to the world, the immigrant community gleamed to the world” (*All God’s* 77). She does not disavow the consumerist aspect of the return practiced by her group of friends who, through the clothes they purchase and the kind of beer they elect, adopt a Ghanaian lifestyle of appearances. Condé and her friends criticized this touristic and consumerist dimension, especially regarding the representation of Nkrumah. This is because Nkrumah is a *vedette*, in the Debordian sense of the term, namely an icon that is representative of a lifestyle and charged with a set of desirable values. For the first time, and unlike all the Hollywood movie stars she couldn’t identify with, she can admire a black *vedette*, promoting the High Life dance and embodying the physical features for which she was rejected in the United States.

Angelou pays particular attention to the pole-idem of her identity, which means the personality traits deemed to be permanent, and she does “lure” us into “claims of African American exceptionalism” and essentialist features (Gilroy 4). However, the return to Africa and the comparison with Africans enable her to underscore the acquired character of habits and identifications, the history of these characteristics that she attributes to black Americans. She concludes that despite their long history of slavery and displacement, African Americans are still recognizable by Africans, and they can recognize themselves in others in return. Africa, then, functions as both *other* and *same* in Angelou’s identity quest/conquest. At the end, she depicts herself as part of an African

diaspora that aligns with Gilroy's concept of a "changing same"—of communities *partly* belonging to the West and whose cultural affinities are *partly* guaranteed by a common African heritage, but who recognize that they are engaged in a meaningful transnational and intercultural dialogue (15-9). This conclusion once again resonates with Du Bois's thoughts on "Double-consciousness," as he stated about the plight of the African American that:

In this merging [of his double self] he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. (2-3)

In this respect, Angelou is consciously inscribing herself within the African American literary canon, which Kenneth Warren envisions as a "'historical' entity rather than as the ongoing expression of a distinct people" (8). Within this work, Angelou aims to produce an account that would be representative of her community's identity and history. Consequently, her writing is informed by instrumental and indexical goals while at the same time being animated by a strong sense of subjectivity, affirming herself as a subject "which can be 'spoken'" (Hall 6) and who can speak.²⁵

In conclusion, the mother/son plot finds its resolution as well at the end of the account as Angelou is about to set off on her trip back to the United States. Both mother and son have succeeded in discovering and expressing their own freedom within the

²⁵ In an interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou explains that she was "challenged by an editor who dared her to succeed in the difficult task of writing 'an autobiography as literature'" (Maya Angelou, interview with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work*, New York: Continuum, 1983, qtd. in Lionnet, 130).

bounds of their relationship. That dynamic once again illustrates the relationship between Angelou and Africa, which ends in a sense of belonging and connectedness even in separation: “In [...] her last depiction of Guy in the fifth autobiography, Angelou roots him in the culture of Ghana, thus returning him to the place of his ancestors” (Lupton 142).

The criticisms leveled against Angelou’s ending as being “too easily manufactured at the last minute to resolve the problem of the book” (Gruesser 18) could well be applied to the end of Condé’s work. As *La vie* is drawing to a close, Condé concludes her account rapidly, in less than a page, by introducing the meeting with her soon-to-be husband, Richard, and a glimpse into their happier future together as “he was the one who would change my life. He would bring me back to Europe and then to Guadeloupe” (*La vie* 285). The last words of both autobiographies are optimistic and bring forward the positive outcome(s) of their time in Africa: a wise farewell for Angelou, and a greeting full of promises for Condé. But, if the departure is anticipated, they both choose to close their accounts on the African continent: Angelou is portrayed at the airport, ready to leave, whereas Condé will eventually stay six more years on the continent.

The interdependent link between the Ricoeurian questions “What am I?” (*idem*-identity 122) and “Who am I?” (*ipse*-identity 122) is further complicated by Gilroy’s metaphysical issue of “When am I most myself?” (68). In laying down these questions throughout their narration, Condé and Angelou engage in a conversation with their readers in the same way as with their past selves. After all, the *mise en intrigue* is,

according to Ricoeur, the combined mediation between the reader and the text (*Time and Narrative* 158-9).

Dialogical Reading: Antiphony, Syncretism, and Intersectionality.

Gilroy refers to this specific dialogue present in the black art movements, whose expression is found at its most intense in musical traditions, as “antiphony” (78).

Antiphony is a discursive event of call-and-response where “lines between the self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others” (79). The oral, at times performative, character of their texts inaugurates the realm of a more direct and acute connection with their readers: the phatic function of the narrative. That connection remains nonetheless always unsteady and resists any attempt of grounding or reification from the reader. This unsteadiness may explain in part why Condé and Angelou are such prolific authors, particularly in the writing of the self, as they continuously refine the questions that obsess them.

In accordance with the bluntness for which they are well known, evidenced several times in their autobiographies in their conversations with others, both of them offer, in the end, a version of themselves of their choice. Indeed, Angelou was first and foremost a performer (a well-known dancer and actress in the United States), and she carried some of these theatrical and musical skills with her in her everyday life and writing. As Lionnet noted, Angelou understands the importance of a good story to draw the reader/spectator’s attention (165). In *Mom*, she recalled that when she first started

dancing, she embodied “Rita, the Dancing Señorita” (*Mom* 123) and when she moved on to a bigger club, they promoted her as “a Watusi, born in Cuba, who sang calypso” (*Mom* 126). Condé also likes to play with the different images and possibilities of herself that she is willing to display to the reader. As she herself admits, she enjoys testing her audience, be it on the radio or in her writings, and she regularly seeks to “shock” and “to elicit various reactions” from her readers by her performance (*La vie* 13).

As a result, orality plays a major role within their texts: it is embedded in their style and their syntax and constitutes an inherent part of the plot and the narrative. Their two accounts maintain a strategy that is common among African and Caribbean women writers to:

[...] capture the oral quality of a performance—that is, inscribe speaking voices. They have kept the repetitions; refrains; onomatopoeias; exclamations; series of questions, proverbs, and maxims; rhythmical language; and call-and-response structure between the storyteller and audience members [...]. (Larrier 55)

For instance, dialogues are an essential part of Angelou’s narrative device. She strives to reproduce the conversations she had with a diversity of people during her trip to Ghana as it is. More often than not, she does not provide further analysis or develop her own interpretation of these conversations, but let them speak for themselves. As a result, dialogue often signifies actions and characterization—it “[conveys] the distinctive language of a character” (Lupton 68) and articulates the kinds of relationships that exist between the different interlocutors. As a consequence, she expects readers to take an active role in the meaning-making process of the narrative as she calls on their cognitive skills. Focusing on the emotive, phatic, and poetic functions of language, Angelou excels

at recreating dynamic, theatrical dialogues that complement the rhythm and stylistic use of repetitions characteristic of her writing.

In so doing, this technique again inscribes her text within a literary community—a generation of African American women writers who, as noted earlier, were preoccupied with recording language as an identity strategy, especially the language of their mothers. Paule Marshall, a contemporary of Angelou, paints a vivid image of the daily conversations her mother and other women were having, “transform[ing] [the standard English] into an idiom, an instrument that more adequately described them—changing around the syntax and imposing their own rhythm and accent so that the sentences were more pleasing to their ears” (76). Indeed, if language usually identifies individual characters, it takes from time to time the form of an indistinct collective chat with no clearly identified speakers. In these instances, the collective identity of the community prevails, as when a few people from the “Returnees” discuss how to make the best of Malcolm X’s presence in Ghana:

“How well do you know Kofi Batcha?”

“And surely ..., the Minister of Defense can be approached.”

“I think he owes me one.”

“If you can’t be sure, he certainly won’t remember.”

“He should meet Nana Nketsia.”

“T.D. Bafoo will be of help.”

“Efua Sutherland can open some doors.”

“How about Geoffrey Bing?” (*All God’s* 133)

In comparison, dialogues are scarce in *La vie*. Because Condé elected the “confessional” mode to talk about her years in Africa, her prose almost has a stream of consciousness quality: the reader is immersed in Condé-the-writer’s thoughts, and views every scene depicted in the book through the lens of her subjectivity. I would argue that one of the reasons Condé limits the use of dialogue in her account comes from the many instances of miscommunication or lack of communication she has experienced during her time there. On the other hand, Condé-the-writer engages in an intimate conversation with Condé-the-protagonist as well as with her reader, and she is careful not to let too many outside elements disrupt these relationships.

Both women immersed themselves in an intellectual community of writers, professors, and activists, with whom they spent most of their time debating the political, racial, and cultural issues that preoccupied the African diaspora in the early sixties. While Angelou held court at the house she shared with her friends Vicki and Alice, Condé’s classroom at the Ghana Institute of Languages “started to become the forum of discussion that [her classrooms] would be afterward” during her teaching career at Columbia” (*La vie* 211).

The two authors lived in Africa at an exciting, unprecedented time: the early years of post-colonialism in Guinea and Ghana, the decade of activism and protest that led to the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and, overall, the emergence on the international stage, of anti-imperialism and anti-racism discourses related to the African diaspora. For this very reason, their role as speakers, public figures, and conversation facilitators was, and remains, crucial. Condé and Angelou were both journalists before turning to literature.

Condé, who started out with her radio experience in Ghana, compares her first time in the studio to the feeling of security and protection of the womb. When she furthered her journalistic path in London, it was at a radio station broadcasting to Africa, connecting the two spheres, and then as a recurring speaker “at roundtables, colloquiums where she expressed her views on African culture and politics” (*La vie* 230).

Similarly, Angelou attempted, with her group of friends, to be the connecting link between African American and African leaders as well as to act as a “visitor center,” so to speak, for freshly arrived African American “returnees” with utopic hopes: “We weren’t trying to discourage you from staying in Ghana. We just wanted to prepare you for what you might, no, you will encounter so you won’t be disappointed” (*All God’s* 42). Angelou and Condé understand that they are meaningful parts of a diasporic generation whose experiences need to be recorded and transmitted. This is the reason why they establish an ongoing, open dialogue with their readers. As activists, women writers, and witnesses, they embed their narratives in a broader corpus of “intergenerational transmission” (Larrier 57). Their stories could either speak to readers of the same generation, as shown by the frequent comment of Condé “as is well known,” or inform and raise questions in the newer one. Because of their respective standing and popularity, both in France and in the United States, their autobiographies have a symbolic and educational impact that they certainly take into account.

Many of these oral elements are perceptible in their respective accounts at the meta-literary level, outside of fiction, but not exclusively. They are also represented in the African traditions of performance, music, and spectacle, which occupy a distinctive

place within both narratives as they accomplish a fleeting moment of unity, beyond language, culture, and history. Angelou and Condé carefully convey the mutual feeling of communion born from attending diverse ceremonies in Africa. Angelou records in great detail her attendance at a thanksgiving feast called “durbar.” She employs a poetic and repetitive language—almost hypnotic—in order to transcribe the musicality of the event and of the Fanti. For that matter, she reproduces the sounds and the rhythm of the songs and instruments and she leaves Fanti words, untranslated:

When men appeared out of the dust scraping sticks against corrugated dry gourds, the crowd recovered its tongue.

“Yee! Yee! Awae! Awae!” [...]

Rasp, Rasp, Scrape! Scarpe, Scour, Scrunch, Scrump. Rasp, Rasp! Scree! The raspers faded into a dim distance. (*All God's* 60)

She captures that feeling of being taken away by the spirit of the feast, so much so that she “could feel the vibrations along the edges of [her] teeth” (*All God's* 60), for the reader to be able to hear it, and, possibly, to recognize the preacher-like sounds of their Church in it. Condé, despite having a rough time in Guinea with Mamadou Condé and his mother, cannot help but be “intensively moved by the magic of the sounds” uttered by the griots invited to her place (*La vie* 101). Both of them succeed in reconstituting a cognitive, visual, and auditive representation of Africa. Thus, they do not differentiate or hierarchize between what Cixous identifies as “the logic of oral speech and the logic of the text” (881). On the contrary, as Cixous continues:

In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we’ve been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the

power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love
which is alive in every woman. (881)

Angelou and Condé are, indeed, not only captured by these experiences of collectivity but also transported by the memories they bring forth. Especially during religious-inspired gatherings, they undergo all at once feelings of belonging and alterity transcending—in addition to language—space and time. During a Christmas mass Condé attends in Senegal, she describes her surprise: “to hear myself sing with no hesitation the lyrics of the songs, which proved that I was not able to fully suppress a part of myself” (*La vie* 265). Towards the end, she “felt the absurd urge to lose [herself] in this [human] flow” (*La vie* 265). Similarly, but the other way around, when Angelou is invited to sing for the president of Liberia, she is surprised that the Africans in the room all start to sing along to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” “with such emotion that tears filled [her] eyes” (*All God’s* 183).

Furthermore, musicality is portrayed as the cornerstone of the whole life of Africans: its culture and traditions, but also its political system. The political vernacular of African leaders such as Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sékou Touré, who was also a poet, impregnates the works of these two women. When Condé attended political meetings, even though she did not understand the language, she was receptive to “the ardor of the speeches, to the chants of the [RDA] Party and to the fervent tirades of the griots” (*La vie* 45). The pride Angelou discerned within the political tirades of Africans moves her too: “That was the spectacular language, the passion of self-appreciation. I had traveled to Africa to hear it, and hear it in an African voice, and in such a splendor of

sound” (*All God’s* 110). Gilroy stresses the power of the traditions of performance that lie at the heart of the African diaspora’s cultures, as well as their significance in experiencing identity (76-8). The reciprocity of performances and interpersonal communication shaped and informed not only Condé and Angelou’s understanding of the continent but also of themselves.

Reading these biographies together, in dialogue, opens up a fundamental space to investigate their differences as a valuable part of their connectedness. Just as Gilroy deplores the fact that the need to distinguish one community from another often calls for the erasure of differences within the community, Condé argues for the practice of plurality within the community because, according to her: “There are several ways to be Caribbean” (113). The testimonial function of their autobiographies, with the focus on interpersonal communication, involves the reader in a journey of self-discovery that ultimately “escapes the restrictive bounds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even ‘race’ itself” (Gilroy 19). As such, *All God’s* and *La vie* consist of several layers of meanings: the individual, the collective, and the universal. During their time in Africa, Angelou and Condé deal with many discourses that “hail” or “interpellate” them (including nationality, Pan-Africanism, gender), but in the end, their trajectories exemplify Hall’s argument that “identification [is] a construction, a process never completed—always ‘in process’” (2).

Both women redefine themselves by asserting their individualities inside and outside of (in Condé’s case), or within (in Angelou’s case) sets of collective values, especially when revisiting the two universal subjects of inquiry that are motherhood and

gender roles vis-à-vis love affairs. Both of their writings constitute a strong claim for freedom as well. Condé's famous saying "I write in Maryse Condé" exemplifies her will not to let such things as the essentialist conception of language limit her space of expression as she refuses the "dichotomy [between] colonial language and mother tongue" (*La vie* 133). Angelou, even though she decides to go back to the United States to help the black community, nevertheless leaves behind her son and her group of friends with their African dream intact. She also speaks out about the responsibility of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade, which was still a taboo topic at that time and remains a delicate issue that has been addressed frontally only in recent years.

Secondly, their journey in Africa is the site where they gain better insight into alterity and cultural plurality. Condé and Angelou respectively conclude that Africa deepened their capacity for empathy: "If the heart of Africa still remained elusive, my search for it brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings" (*All God's* 196); "More than the theoretical speeches of my friends, it's [Guinea] that taught me the concerns of the people and compassion. I understood that nothing carries more weight than the sufferings of a child" (*La vie* 146). Africa transformed them, even if not in the way that they expected.

They also gained awareness of the multiple misconceptions and misunderstandings that intersect across the African diaspora and they start to reestablish an authentic dialogue of understanding and acceptance. Neither Angelou nor Condé ever blames the Africans they met for their behavior towards them, or for their own feelings of rejection. Instead, they take these occasions as an opportunity to investigate and reflect

on their differences in an introspective, empathic manner. In Africa, particularly in Guinea, Condé was able to relate to others' points of view and to denounce her own cultural, and at times privileged, lens. Although many Antilleans warned her that Africans despised and hated them, Condé sought to understand the distance that separated them:

I refused to believe, what was commonly accepted, that Africans hated Antilleans. [...] Such a belief seemed simplistic to me, I would rather persuade myself that they didn't *understand* them, finding their involuntary westernization offensive. (*La vie* 70)

Condé thus acknowledges the role that history and the slave trade played in shaping these relationships, very much like Angelou formed herself to her own understanding that “years of bondage, brutalities, the mixture of other bloods, customs and languages had transformed [African Americans] into an unrecognizable tribe [...]” (*All God's* 20).

As they both realize, there are instances when they themselves were guilty of apprehending and approaching people with monolithic cultural expectations. For example, Condé addresses her enmity with Condé's mother, which she first blamed on ethnicity, before wondering if, in unconsciously comparing Moussokoro to her own mother, and by extension, to the set of values and attributes associated with her, she had not “remolded her according to criteria that weren't suitable to her?” (*La vie* 103). As for Angelou, she is sometimes surprised at the western prejudices she has, as when she thinks that her house boy, Kojo, is going to ask her to pay for his school, or when she suggests to her hairdresser, Comfort, to go see a doctor when the latter believes that she is the victim of a spell. Their somewhat narrow and fixed definitions of blackness and

diaspora(s) at large have evolved and deepened into a more fluid, inclusive, and decentered perspective.

The journey within the journey, a trip to Germany for Angelou and a one year stay in London for Angelou, is even more revealing of the evolution of their critical thinking about selfhood and community. In Berlin the question is crystalized. First, Angelou's black American friend let her know that: "Africans find it hard to forgive us slavery [...] and even more terrible, they can't forgive themselves" (157). She then proceeded to question her attitude towards race and culture as she performed for the second time in Genet's play *The Blacks*:²⁶

The scripts vilified all Whites, and we used each opportunity to shout profanities at the German audience which accepted each calumny [...] I wondered how well another play with other actors would have fared. Would the audience have stood and thrown roses if the actors had been Jewish, re-enacting a scene in Dachau? I knew the answer and I disliked the Germans for pandering to us, and I disliked myself and the cast for being bullies. (*All God's* 173)

This reasoning that contrasted so significantly with her usual confidence and militancy forced her to reconsider the structure of binary oppositions that framed her thinking. The representation and the incident that happened around it drove her to adopt a more global outlook on the "intersectionality" and "relationality" of power structures and she questioned her own role within it. During her stay there, she was invited by a German

²⁶ The 1958 play is particularly symbolic because this is the play in which Condé, by her own admission in *La vie*, pretended that she saw Mamadou Condé for the first time: "He played the character of Archibald at the Odeon only in 1959 while, our marriage being far from successful, we were going through our first separation" (12).

family and asked an actor from Israel to accompany her for reasons that remained unclear to her but that resembled defiance. As the lunch went awry between the Israeli and the hosts, Angelou was shocked to discover that she was invited because the family wanted her to trade African art for their collection. She attributed her temporary “innocence” to the years spent in Ghana, understanding that “Africa had creolized” her and that she “had become something other, another kind of person” (*All God's* 173-4). Concerning Condé, her children and she experienced racism and prejudice during their trip to London, but it was also the place where she first witnessed “cultural diversity” (*La vie* 228) and grasped the “obvious similitude of fates between the Jewish ‘race’ and the Black ‘race’” (*La vie* 235).

These unexpected meetings in another land (as opposed to the “mother” land) and the fostering of relationships and friendships with someone or something that was once clearly delineated as “other” (as opposed to Africans who were conceived as “same” and proved to be reluctant “sames”), created opportunities for Condé and Angelou to question their own fixed modes of representation, identification, and categorization. On one hand, they learned how to accept Africa’s otherness as an inherent and valuable part of the connection it retains with them and the African diaspora; on the other hand, they grappled with their own alterability, even if sometimes reluctantly. During her stay in London, Condé’s friend, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, told her that “Africa is not impenetrable nor indecipherable” (*La vie* 231), warning her about any attempt to fetishize it as different. As for Angelou, whose attitude towards Africa is the flip side of Condé’s, her friend and actor Roscoe alerts her about the risks of losing herself in the “other”

Africa as she tries to dismiss its and her differences: “You went to Africa to get something, but remember you did not go empty handed” (*All God's* 176).

Conclusion

The recurrent scenes of bonding in these autobiographical accounts are powerful means for the two authors to exchange, compare, and affiliate with others beyond cultural differences. Throughout these webs of connections, Condé and Angelou either witness the commonalities of their lives or gain a better understanding of their differences (their own and others’). The quest for identity is both a subjective and intersubjective process during which the contradictions and differences lend themselves to being creatively explored. Towards the closure of both accounts, the two writers are learning to navigate the fluid, dynamic in-between space of the “changing same” (Gilroy 122). Condé, in her keynote address at the joint meeting of the Comparative Literature Association and the African Literature Association in 1998, entitled “O Brave New World,” asserts, quoting Stuart Hall, that “diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and differences” (4). As Gilroy reminds us, mutability, diversity, and adaptation are dynamic forces that “have constituted the Black Atlantic as a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding” (198).

Similarly, in many episodes depicted in *All God's*, “the contradictions of race, culture, and nationality are too strong to disappear and too fragile to preserve” (Lupton

142). Such views challenge the notion of authenticity too often complicit in ethnic and cultural essentialisms that have divided the diasporas, and the world, into monolithic, impermeable entities. At the same time, their cosmopolitan positioning refuses the temptation of homogenization, simplified moral relativism, and the dismissing of differences in the name of a universalism that is too often synonymous with Western values. Angelou and Condé's works reevaluate the place of Africa within their own diasporic identities, and African diasporas overall. "Should we fetishize it, completely eradicate it or integrate it into our culture and not think about it as a separated element anymore?" ("Entretien avec Maryse Condé" 1095) Condé wonders in an interview with Marie-Agnès Sourieau. At the end of her narrative, Angelou claims her African heritage as a legitimate component of her African American culture, and she also refuses to consider its transformation through displacement, the passage of time or relocation (Gilroy 80) as a loss or dilution:

As we carried [Africa] to Philadelphia, Boston, and Birmingham we had changed its color, modified its rhythms, *yet* it was Africa which rode in the bulges of our high calves, shook our protruding behinds, and crackled in our wide-open laughter. (*All God's* 208)

Both writers spent time in Africa at a moment when Africa was itself changing due to the recent independence acquired by some countries. While witnessing the ongoing mutations of Guinea and Ghana, as well as their personal transformations in contact with the diversity they encountered there, the two writers must question the stability of a racial culture (Gilroy 97) and assert their "liberty of movement" (Thomas 82). Indeed, although both autobiographies revolve around Africa, they insert a

multiplicity of places within the big journey such as the United States and Europe. While Angelou embraces her double consciousness as a symbol of resilience and creativity, Condé evokes the possibility of a brighter future across the world, and with a white, British man (*La vie* 284-5).²⁷ Similarly, she argued in “O Brave New World” in favor of a solidary globalization and the revaluation of *métissage* through the example of:

The evolution of the Caribbean people: from a secluded, easily classified community to a nomadic people, creating a world of its own wherever it finds itself. Maybe to be Caribbean or African is no longer a matter of the *place* where one is born, *the color* of one’s skin, and the *language* that one speaks. (5, emphasis mine)

Condé and Angelou have traveled and lived in several countries, and their experience is fully part of their writings, as this flexibility and aesthetic of movement also shows through the diversity of the genres they produced and in which they felt comfortable including autobiographies, plays, and fictions. The fact that both endings portray them as in transit, questioning their pasts but with their head turned towards the future, illustrates their openness to the possibility of change—changing themselves as well as being agents of change.

bell hooks also elects the expression “brave new world” to refer to a time when “it seemed like [...] difference could be understood and embraced, where we would all seek to learn from the ‘other.’ whomever that other might be” (1-2). Angelou’s and Condé’s accounts are emblematic of the birth and growth of this theory and of Cixous’s 1975 rallying cry for “Women [to] be unafraid of any other place, of any same, or any other”

²⁷ The encounter with the “other” opens up the world to her.

(890). And indeed, hooks and Cixous's ethic of love still informs contemporary black women writers, as we shall see with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Léonora Miano in the third chapter. According to hooks, it is this practice of love that is needed for the theory of "a brave new world" to create sustainable and concrete change within the dominant cultures (2).

How does this quest persist and change in the new generation of writers from the African diaspora, the "postcolonial children"? How do they position themselves in relation to their predecessors' theories and practices of identity? Is it still performed through the same circular lens, the triptych Americas-Europe-Africa? Where are writers such as Léonora Miano, Alain Mabanckou, Teju Cole, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie looking, and how are they apprehending their own complex racial, cultural, and literary inheritance?

CHAPTER 2 : TRAVELLING ARCHIVES/TRAVELLING BODIES: MEMORY, OPTIC(S), AND HERMENEUTIC IN ALAIN MABANCKOU, *BLACK BAZAR* AND TEJU COLE, *OPEN CITY*.

The Nigerian-American writer and photographer Teju Cole has published many works that directly contend with the complex relation between the written words, captions, stories, and the photographic image. The mark of his formation as a photograph and art historian can also be found in his novels that do not feature his photographs and critics often compare these texts to visual artists such as the directors Wong Kar-Wai and Krzysztof Kieślowski. In fact, in an interview for *The Guardian*, Cole cited the French filmmaker Chris Marker, and his 1982 canonical essay film *Sans Soleil*, as one of the main influences for his novels, especially *Open City*, the first one he published in the United States in 2011.²⁸ However, so far, the novel has not been examined through the lens of what I call the cinema-photo-graphic influences and principles that support the narrative.

Akin to the protagonist of *Open City* who, in the course of his travels and strolls preoccupies himself with the interconnectedness of things he observes, Marker's fictive cameraman Sandor Krasna's quest in *Sans Soleil* opens with the question of how to link together all the film images and memory-images he has collected throughout his travels and in public archives. The movie is composed of fleeting images and shots, some personal, some found, and some distorted through a synthesizer, edited with the voice-over of a woman who reads aloud the letters in which Krasna reflects on the role of

²⁸ Interview with Sean O'Hagan. "My Camera is like an invisibility cloak. It makes me more free." *The Guardian*, 25 June 2017.

cinema in representing and fixing the past. Krasna grapples with the way the past is being written and rewritten with the use of images, especially in official history records but also in the collective illusion that a perfect, direct memory is accessible. The film thus highlights and challenges the role, mediation, and manipulation of images in narratives, whether official or personal/autobiographical. Towards the end, Krasna wonders: “how do people remember things, [people] who don’t film, don’t photograph, don’t tape?”²⁹

The same concern with recording and collecting the present, in correlation with accessing and interpreting the past, that lies at the heart of Cole’s and Marker’s narratives, is at work in *Black Bazar*, the 2009 novel of Alain Mabanckou. The protagonists of the two novels exemplify different experiences of migration and their relation of past to present: while Julius has moved to the United States from Nigeria after high school and is completing his residency to become a psychiatrist in Cole’s novel, the Congolese “Fessologue”³⁰ of *Black Bazar* has been living illegally in France, where he has been working at a printing shop, for over a decade. And yet, they similarly deploy their own visual “system” to code, “decode” (Knox 84), and archive what they see and how they are being seen—engaging in a practice of looking and reading that questions the hierarchies of images’ classification, representation, and commemoration.

Because Cole is also a photographer and an art historian, the interrelation of visual arts within his writing practice appears very clearly and his photographic approach has

²⁹ All the quotations from *Sans Soleil* are from the movie transcription that can be found at *Markertext.com*, www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm.

³⁰ *Black Bazar*’s narrator has earned the nickname of “fessologue,” that literally translates as “the buttologist” in English, for his ability to “read” women’s behinds.

permeated the very structure of *Open City*. Even though the intermediality of Mabanckou's work, that is the fusion of and relation between different mediums in a creative artifact, has not been acknowledged as much as in Cole's production, the French-Congolese writer has long engaged in this process.³¹ Mabanckou developed an ongoing intertextuality with other texts as well as with movies, media, painting, and photography. While some of his works, such as the highly personal novel *The Lights of Pointe-Noire*, incorporate photographs and other archival documents within the text, others, like *Black Bazar*, maintain this dialogue with other mediums in the fabric of the writing itself.

In literature, a photograph often works as the starting point for the act of remembering: it functions as a symbolic object that reactivates the memory of the narrator or protagonist.³² In *Ces photos qui nous parlent. Une relecture de la mémoire familiale*, the psychoanalyst Christine Ulivucci explains that "photographs do more than revive the past, they trigger memories and mental images, they foster associations and the exploration of buried things" (27). It is especially true in narratives that address the theme of immigration as for migrants, the objects they could bring with them often assume greater significance and take on an emblematic dimension. Oftentimes, these objects consist of photographs, easier to carry. This narrative device opens up a gateway that enables a travelling back and forth between two or more places—the here and there, and different times—the now and then. The narrators and main protagonists of Mabanckou's

³¹ The artist Dick Higgins developed the concept of "intermedia" in the article "Intermedia."

³² Incidentally, one of the books that Fessologue mentions in *Black Bazar* is entitled *Le Songe d'une photo d'enfance*. It is written by his friend the Haitian writer Louis-Philippe—Louis-Philippe Dalembert in real life.

Black Bazar and Teju Cole's *Open City*, respectively named Fessologue and Julius, engage in a variation of this travelling, one comparable to the cinematographic technique of the "travelling," in English "tracking shot," which aims to reproduce human motion. It is not necessarily an object or photograph they have brought with them that prompts this "travelling," but more often than not, an encounter with, or a reference to, a cultural artifact—a movie, a building, a book—that substitutes itself for the missing image/object.

In the course of their peregrinations in the city of Paris for one narrator, and New York City and Brussels for the other, they develop a visual language to translate their street-level practice of gazing and reading their surroundings, whether neighborhoods or bodies. Through this process, they create their own alternative archive, a collection of impressions that both records the present and creates the possibility of rewriting or reading the past anew. Achille Mbembe defines the archive as a "collection of documents, normally written" kept in a building that works as the "symbol of a public institution" (19). Mabanckou and Cole, both extremely visible personae on the global literary stage, are aware of the power of the archive in generating and controlling our understanding of the world and have grappled with this system through their writings and online presence on Twitter and Instagram. The question of archiving, as it relates to the film image's relation to memory and official History also lies at the core of *Sans Soleil*, whose themes recall a short film directed by Resnais, *Toute la mémoire du monde*, that scrutinizes the space of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France as one of France's main gatekeepers of the country's historical and cultural heritage.

In this chapter, I explore how Fessologue and Julius engage in producing new forms of knowledge and meaning-making through the visual language they develop and their interactions with cultural artifacts. Ultimately, they establish their own grids for reading and interpreting information and narratives, calling into question the relation between art and reality, and the reader/viewer position in regards to the novels themselves. Throughout the analysis, I will explore the visual dimension of *Open City* and *Black Bazar* alongside *Sans Soleil* as a point of reference, in order to highlight the commonalities of their themes—history, memory, identity, archive—as well as of their cinema-photo-graphic techniques. In accordance to the chapter’s goal, I refer to an array of scholars that have developed foundational theories pertaining to visual arts, including André Bazin, Susan Sontag, and Roland Barthes.

Clichés

In English, the word “cliché” is used to characterize something that has become commonplace, a hackneyed theme or situation, and/or a trite phrase or expression.³³ In French, in addition to designating something banal or stereotyped, the term “cliché” can also refer either to the negative of a photograph or to the photograph itself. There is indeed a strong connection between clichés and pictures, as stereotypes often express themselves in the form of images easily reproducible, visual traits or characteristics that we associate with a certain gender, race, or religion, for instance, in the collective

³³ “Cliché.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clich%C3%A9. Accessed 12 August 2018.

imaginary. The literary critic Frieda Ekotto, in the introduction of her book *Race and Sex Across the French Atlantic*, analyses in particular the role clichés have played in the creation of the category “black:”

Effectively, stereotypes are the identical reproduction of the elements of a thing or being that allows us to set aside its non-reproducible variation—that is, its singularity.

Stereotypes are the factory of images, at once visual, mental, social, and racial clichés.

Cliché is a thing of the eye, since it captures the epitome of stereotype, and the eye informs the imaginary, which in turn creates the myth of the *nègre*. (2)

Clichés as photographs can work, and have long functioned, as an effective tool for embedding and spreading fixed and biased representations of people and things. Many scholars have studied the role photography played in preserving and legitimizing colonial expansion and the scholar Carol Mavor reminds us in an article on Marker’s *Sans soleil* that “it is obvious (nevertheless it is important, difficult, troubling): photography [a story of dark and light] has always been struck by racial adjectives and metaphors” (749). It is all the more instructive to analyze *Sans Soleil* alongside Mabanckou’s and Cole’s visual writing because the movie internalizes cinema/photography’s existence in tension between dark and light. The images of the cameraman Krasna’s travels in places that are traditionally marked as “exotic,” Japan, Africa, are assembled in a way that interrogates the dark corners integral to any modes of representation and mediation. The intertwined function of darkness and lightness in filmmaking, as *without sun* there are no films but it is in the *Sunless* darkroom that Marker could develop it, materializing the processes of memory and history-making composed of gaps and silences.

Fessologue and Julius are certainly aware of the fraught history of photography and they reflect on and use clichés, both as photography/cinema and stereotypes, to comment on its power (emphasizing that “voir,” to see, is a condition of “pouvoir,” power). In *Black Bazar*, Mabanckou plays with the double meaning of the word “cliché.” This play on words is particularly explicit when he compares the fixed vision his Afro-descendant girlfriend, who is of “couleur d’origine,” holds about Africans, as “black and white clichés” (52). Due to her upbringing in France, her conception of Africa is not only stereotyped and reductive. It is also composed of direct images inherited from French history textbooks, television,³⁴ and visual arts such as comic strips (*Tintin in the Congo*, for example, which was originally published in black and white): “She talked to me about the mud huts, the tree houses, the black magic of Africans, the witchcraft that rendered human beings invisible, the swamps that swallowed trees, the wild animals, the red soil that dirtied the faces of children with swollen bellies” (53). The mud, the black magic, the witchcraft, the swamps, and the red soil all convey an image of Africa associated with darkness, the absence of light replicates the absence of modernity.

With this in mind, in humorously describing her clichés as “black and white,” Fessologue suggests that in addition to being a historical construct, they are products of racial ideologies, of a system of knowledge that conceives of the world only in a binary mode. While Fessologue compares these clichés imprinted in his girlfriend’s mind with his own very colorful memories of Congo Brazzaville, he doesn’t hesitate at times to use these same clichés or to invent new ones to serve his interests. For instance, he likes to

³⁴ *Sans Soleil*’s protagonist pertinently characterized T.V. as a “memory box.”

exaggerate the behavior of his Paris-based Congolese friends, claiming that they will “yell all night until the cops arrive” and “pee in the building’s lobby” (52), to discourage her from coming to parties with him. Occasionally, he likes to “invent new stories that speak about love to entertain” her (57), if his previous recollections have saddened her. In doing so, Mabanckou stages the notion of the writer as trickster.³⁵ Like a modern-day Scheherazade, the budding writer Fessologue understands the significance of storytelling, of weaving vivid and picturesque images into narratives that can ultimately benefit him. In a place that discursively defines him through the lens of black and white clichés, Fessologue claims his right to in turn, collect, subvert, or embrace these images to tell the story of his choice. This becomes a way for the character to expose how institutions, such as the media, manipulate images while participating in the storytelling process as a creative and active agent of that “factory of images” (Ekotto 2).

Fessologue’s variation on clichés, stock images of Africa and Africans, and his own memories recalls the function of the machine “the zone” in *Sans Soleil*, a synthesizer through which film images can be distorted so as to show them for what they are: images. By letting the reader know about his own rewriting, Fessologue demonstrates that images such as the ones “couleur d’origine” holds of Africa, are not “documents that bear an essential relationship to the real” but that they “privilege a certain version of past events, fixing them” (Montero, about the “zone” in *Sans Soleil*, 113-4). The synthesizer of the “zone” enables its inventor, Hayao Yamaneko, not only to break the illusion of the image

³⁵ For more on the subject, see De Souza, Pascale. “Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's Black Bazar.” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 42, no. 1, 2011, pp. 102–119.

as “capturing the past,” and reality, but also to “reinterpret” them outside of their fixed meaning (Montero 113). It is precisely what Fessologue is doing in revisiting the memory-images of his past, this process bringing to mind Krasna’s suggestion in *Sans Soleil* that “if the images of the present don’t change, change the images of the past.”

Moreover, Fessologue accumulates clichés, commonplaces, stereotypes, and platitudes to the point of absurdity, as is the case during his interactions with his Caribbean neighbor who:

[...] affirms for instance that, as most of the black people he knows, I put the cart before the horse, I’m not worth a dime, I’m empty-headed, I am fickle in love, I am broke, I am knee-high to a grasshopper, I have a brain the size of a pea, I talk a lot of bull, I push up the daisies, I’m a potato couch... (35)

In reproducing clichés ad infinitum, Fessologue dismantles the very structure of the clichés-system that creates a reality more than it expresses it. The above accumulation demonstrates that, taken out of context, these highly figurative expressions appear to be contentless, meaningless, and existing in pure abstraction. The linguistic and visual overdetermination of the many characters of the novel highlights their construction as “others,” easily reducible to certain images and/or denominations. It also points out the hierarchy of images as well as the privilege of the white gaze within the society in which he is evolving. Mabanckou displays the layers of clichés—both stereotypes and images—that inform our reading of other bodies and creolizes them by juxtaposing them, inserting new ones, and personalizing old ones. In this context, the cyclical reproduction of clichés is ever-so-slightly disrupted by a variation that engenders new images, opening up the possibility for different imaginaries and ways of seeing.

In her essay on photography, Susan Sontag contends that “there is an art and there are fashions of seeing things in order to make them interesting; and to supply this art, these fashions, there is a steady recycling of the artifacts and tastes of the past” (175). In his perpetual recycling of clichés—stereotypes, trite images and metaphors, common expressions and proverbs—Mabanckou does actually produce a unique text. Fessologue employs and interprets clichés that are part of the public archive and collective imagination in a new context, one of global exchange and interactions. The rewriting of clichés drives the reader to see them in a different light as they take on a new significance. Finally, the clichéd images have a phatic function: they open up a space of dialogue between narrator and reader. Because they bring known images to the mind of the reader, they function as a sort of eye contact, a moment of encounter with the other that instigates the conversation.

In the same fashion, in *Open City*, Julius is hyper aware of the network of clichés and images that make up the fabric of his world. He recollects the multiple occasions he has been the target of racist stereotypes while strolling the streets of major cities, such as the following interaction he had with two children on the New York subway:

Hey mister, she said, turning to me, wassup? She made signs with her fingers and, with her brother, started laughing. The little boy wore an imitation Chinese peasant’s hat. They had been mimicking slanted eyes and exaggerated bows before they came to where I was. They now both turned to me. Are you a gangster, mister? Are you a gangster? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs. (31-2)

Even though Julius doesn’t offer more comments on this episode, it is possible to read it in light of the thoughts he had right before the encounter while he was at the movie

theater. While watching the film, he recalled a movie he used to watch in Nigeria when he was younger, concluding that “the images [of *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*] were genuinely shocking because, unlike the blood-spattered American war movies we also enjoyed [...], the victims in [this movie] looked like our fathers and uncles” (29-30). In that respect, Julius highlights the influence of images perpetuated by media, like Fessologue does, showing that everybody has an *idea* of what certain people are supposed to be or do based on popular clichéd images.³⁶ He also discerns the different impact these images have on the spectator’s relation to reality and vice versa: even though the children on the subway admit that Julius does not dress as a “gangster,” the representation of black men as gangsters they have most likely seen in the media prevail over this factual observation.³⁷ On the other hand, young Julius and his friends could distance themselves from American war movies because they staged characters that they did not encounter in the reality of their everyday life.

In addition to this very explicit instance of prejudice, Julius is constantly dealing with verbal stereotypes—repeated comments, generalizations, and expressions that have become commonplace to him. Thus, when the doctor he meets on his flight to Belgium tells him that Nigerians are arrogant, he not only responds that he has “heard much

³⁶ The power of media representation is addressed again during a later conversation Julius has with a Moroccan immigrant living in Brussels. Khalil asks him: “The American Blacks—he used the English expression—are they really as they are shown on MTV: the rapping, the hip-hop dance, the women? Because that’s all we see here” (119).

³⁷ In her book *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fears, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Macroaggressions*, the law scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown uses the term “criminalblackman” to describe how interrelated these two concepts are in the collective imagination.

worse” (89), he also entertains the idea, adding: “We think of ourselves as the Japanese of Africa, without the technological brilliance” (88). The analogy between Japan and Africa is of particular interest because both countries feature prominently in *Sans Soleil* as “the two extreme poles of survival.” In an insightful investigation of Marker’s orientalist tendencies in the film, Travis Alexander reads the images of Japan as representing the country as the epitome of technological advancement and thus modernity while Africa and Africans, the forgotten of history, are “the most recurrent placeholder[s] for the natural (that is, non-technological) world” (Alexander 51-2). In this light, Julius’ comparison harbors an intricate play on clichés: it leans into the stereotypes that portray Africans as “natural” and Japanese as “modern,” civilized, and completely voids the relevance of such an opposition in presenting them as similar in the confident positioning. His witty response also carries the idea that Nigeria, much like any other nation-state, understands the importance of self-conception and self-representation with regard to the image they desire to uphold on the global scale.

As a matter of fact, Julius acknowledges that he lives in a world where everybody embodies some sort of cliché and that it might be impossible not to be a cliché of oneself, one way or the other. Be that as it may be, there is a sense of playfulness and freedom in his analysis. The doctor he talks to on the plane laughs at his bit about Nigerians and Japanese and such was his intended goal, to convey the image of a smart and entertaining interlocutor. If Julius refuses certain claims made upon him, such as the ones expressed by other African immigrants for instance, he at times chooses to adopt other ideas people hold of him. During his interaction with two Moroccan immigrants residing in Brussels,

Farouq and Khalil, he realizes that: “I was pretending to an outrage greater than I actually felt. In the game, if it was a game, I was meant to be the outraged American, though what I felt was more sorrow and less anger” (120). Similarly, in this exchange, Farouq and Khalil assume the roles of “*extremists*,” and their speech is a reflection of “how Americans think Arabs think” (120). In the same way as Fessologue, Julius is conscious of the role clichés play in terms of what the scholar Ato Quayson calls “urban performativity” (22)—the set of spoken and unspoken rules that are at work within social spaces determined by the act of seeing and being seen. For instance, because for outsiders he is predominantly determined by his blackness, Julius has to act accordingly in order to remain safe in public spaces.

However, Julius, throughout a kind of stream-of-consciousness narration, demonstrates that there exist many versions of his cliché-self, from the “compassionate African” (70) to the classically trained erudite, by way of the “outraged American” (120). Many critics have characterized Julius’ way of being in the world and with others as a kind of “alienation,”³⁸ but his behavior could just as well be understood as a rather pragmatic—if flawed—way of adjusting to the different logics and “orders of reality” (Mbembe 258) that confront him. In their quality of African immigrants, although under very different circumstances, Fessologue and Julius both demonstrate an understanding of the power of narratives, especially when they are rooted in vivid imageries: at the end of the day, the one with the more convincing narrative wins.

³⁸ See Emily Johansen’s article “History in Place: Territorialized Cosmopolitanism in Teju Cole’s *Open City*” in *Diaspora* and James Wood’s, who refers to Julius’s “productive alienation” in his *New Yorker* review entitled “The Arrival of Enigmas.”

In addition to sometimes serving as a means of “*self-styling*” (Mbembe 242) or a way of assuming a posture during interpersonal interactions, clichés can be manipulated to create a fiction of reality and a narrative of the self over which one has authority. Doing so is all the more urgent in Fessologue’s case as migrants and refugees, especially from Africa, usually have no say in the way they are publicly represented as the images that flood the media portray them either in a negative light or as powerless, speechless victims.

In this respect, migrants sometimes use photographs, in addition to the letters they send back home, as proof that shows that their integration is going well, by capturing and portraying an image that conveys all the exterior signs of success. For the Congolese community of migrants to which Fessologue belongs, it is called “*faire le parisien*.” As a matter of fact, Fessologue is the proud member of the “*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*”³⁹ (43) in which attention to clothing, colors, and brand name designers prevails. Mabanckou’s care in depicting this lifestyle, this creative construction/stylization of the self, is not only a way to record the fashion of *la sape*, but also to highlight the different interpretations of what a Parisian is and looks like. *Sapeurs* have their own codes and system of knowledge when it comes to the definition of elegance and class and they are transforming the notion of French elegance, yet another cliché of life in Paris. The city of Paris itself can even be appropriated and owned as an accessory to make one look more elegant, as Fessologue explains: “Silk ties, some with the Eiffel Tower or the Arch of Triumph on it. That’s my style” (44). Apart from the

³⁹ The Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People.

patterns of his clothes, these images *par excellence* of Paris are completely absent from Fessologue's account.

And yet, famous monuments, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Statue of Liberty in New York, are symbolic of these two metropolitan cities that attract tourists and migrants. As such, they certainly work as cliché(s), as the commonplace images of happiness and glory that these cities are supposed to typify. In cinema and media, the two cities are often reduced to these images and monuments that convey ideals of grandeur, beauty, and wealth. In her book *Paris and the Cliché of History: The City and Photographs, 1860-1970*, the scholar Catherine E. Clark refers to the role photographs have played in constructing the city of Paris and its past on a global scale, encouraging “residents and visitors to consume the city as an image, as a visual spectacle on the boulevards, at the Universal Expositions and the wax museum, in picture postcards, and on the screen at the cinema” (5). Therefore, the photographic construction of Paris, and New York for that matter, as pure images, “museum-cities” (Clark) acts as a cover that conceals grimmer realities such as poverty and discrimination. In *Sans Soleil*, as well as in most of his production, Marker also shows a predilection for what stands behind clichés and stereotypes of a country or a people, exploring the “fugitive signs, embedded in the texture and habits of everyday life, that reveal how nations and cultures organize themselves” (Lupton 41). The 1963 documentary *Le Joli Mai*, directed by Marker and Pierre Lhomme is perhaps the best illustration of this approach. Against the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower and the Arch of Triumph, the two directors interview passersby, students, and workers about life, happiness, and politics.

In *Black Bazar*, the spectacle-images of Paris are replaced by the neighborhoods of Château-Rouge and Château d'Eau where many people from the African diaspora reside, and by the centrally located Caribbean-Cuban bar *Le Jip's*.⁴⁰ From the shopping district les Halles to Château-Rouge by way of Château d'Eau and the train station Gare du Nord, Fessologue remaps a different Paris than the one usually advertised. He substitutes it with another, more diverse imagery of a postcolonial France filled with African hair salons, music shops, and libraries. His Paris does not invite the reverie of flaneurs/tourists eager to consume the “spectacle” of Paris. On the contrary, his travels are goal-oriented and punctuated around specific spatial markers that are part of his routine, which reveals him to be, paradoxically, a “true” Parisian.

In *Open City*, a priori universal and eternal images of New York, like the Statue of Liberty, are not absent. Instead, they are decoded as historical and cultural artifacts through the deconstructive gaze of Julius. The latter unearths the memory-images obscured by these kinds of memorials, shifting their meaning from commemoration and/or consecration to burial. Julius notably reflects on the site of Ground Zero and what History/histories were erased even before the attack of the World Trade Center:

There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay. (59)

⁴⁰ The *Jip's* actually exists and is a bar in the center of Paris favored by writers and artists. Once again, Mabanckou uses a real referent that he tweaks within the fiction.

In his essay “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” Achille Mbembe contends that commemorative events and structures are a way for some states to control how the past, and its archive(s), can be “consumed” by people. According to him, “commemoration [...] is part of the ritual of forgetting” (24), that is to say that we archive and commemorate the past to better “mourn” it, forget it, and move on as a society.⁴¹ Along his walks, Julius precisely focuses on the architectural archives of New York, and later of Brussels, as “catacombs” (94) and “graveyard” (150). In the same way that Marker’s *Sans Soleil* fictive protagonist from the future has “lost forgetting,” and not “memory,” as one would assume, Julius brings back to the surface all of the events and information data that have been buried under the modern-day cemetery that New York is for him.

Through his photographic-like vision, Julius uncovers the layers of time, the pictures or absent-pictures that lay behind official urban monuments, to debunk the hegemonic narratives that have instituted New York as an imaginary landmark of freedom and a land of asylum. His process is reminiscent of film theorist André Bazin who, in his comparison of plastic arts to visual arts, argues that arts like sculptures aimed to “extract” beings and objects from “time” (11), fixing them for eternity, whereas photographs preserve time itself.⁴² Commemorative structures, that most often take on the form of sculptures or buildings, are meant to transcend the event they commemorate, generating a collective forgetting that would allow society to move on from that event.

⁴¹ Mbembe’s argument that archiving is also an act of forgetting concurs with Derrida who, in the same collection of essays entitled *Refiguring the Archive*, describes it as “a work of mourning” (54).

⁴² Bazin actually uses the term “embalm time” to characterize photography’s mechanism (16), which brings us back to Mbembe’s perspective of archiving as mourning.

Conversely, Bazin argues that photography captures a slice of time. If we adopt Bazin's conception of photography, we can consider that Julius, via his "cine-mind" (Mavor 751) operates a rereading of the past and of time itself, an active act of remembering history, against what Mbembe designates as the "chronophagy" (23) of the state. He remembers real or imagined/reconstructed images of past events that have been displaced or erased, or have never been recorded in the first place.

Archives are not neutral, contrary to how they present themselves, as they are the product of a careful process of selection supervised by people in positions of power. As a result, official accounts and records translate more often than not the (hi)story of a country from the point of view of the dominant, ensuring that the images and testimonies that do not fit the authoritative narrative are discarded. Ultimately, archives and clichés raise the question of who has ownership over the past and the present, as well as what does or does not belong to the public domain. In *Black Bazar*, Fessologue claims both ownership and belonging. Even though he feels that he doesn't fit the figure of the political African writer in exile, like his Haitian friend Louis-Philippe, he nonetheless inscribes himself within the imagery of a long tradition of drunken-fueled canonical authors in Paris such as Ernest Hemingway or Henry Miller. Just like *A Moveable Feast* and *Tropic of Cancer*, Mabanckou casts the character of a writer meandering within a Parisian universe revolving around bars and parties where alcohol fosters animated and comical conversations between male protagonists. Fessologue thus affiliates himself with the Paris of writers—a timeless place archived in literary works.

Moreover, the bar *The Jip's* where Fessologue spends most of his days can by all means be considered a heterotopia, as defined by Foucault, because: (1) it is to some extent a place of “deviation” (Foucault 25) where Fessologue and his friends, most of them undocumented immigrants, meet, exchange, and drink during the day; (2) despite being a public place, the *Jip's* has its own “system of opening and closing that both isolates [it] and makes [it] penetrable” (Foucault 26). The regulars have their own codes (nicknames, for instance) and outsiders such as “le Breton” or Sarah, Fessologue’s new girlfriend, enter this space to learn about them. Le Breton, who Fessologue briefly suspects to be a spy, wants to know: “how you, Africans, judge our politics and what’s happening back home” (234). As for Sarah, she came into the *Jip's* to find someone willing to pose for a portrait, more specifically someone as “flamboyant” as Fessologue (248). Most of all, the *Jip's* works as a “heterochrony,” according to Foucault’s fourth principle of what constitutes a heterotopia: in addition to being regulated by specific opening and closing time slices, it appears to be a place ruled by its own intrinsic time where regular customers engage in recurring, repetitive conversations and rituals. Contrary to official archives such as museums and libraries (emphasized by Foucault as examples of heterotopias/heterochronies), the literary space of the *Jip's* does not purport to be a “general archive.” If anything, it deflates the official archive’s “will to enclose in one space all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes [...]” (Foucault 26) as it is at once an alternative collection of African migrant types/clichés, a farcical theater of social performativity, and a contested site of knowledge production.

Julius and Fessologue challenge the boundaries between inside and outside, as well as question what a public, open space and archive constitute. Their relation to space and representation departs from the clichés of what one expects African migrants to look like and the way literature and the news have traditionally mediated their experience. In parallel, they play with other cliché figures, such as that of the flâneur⁴³ for Julius and that of the poser/writer in Paris for Fessologue. Like fugitives,⁴⁴ the two narrators attempt to escape what Mbembe identifies as “the conception of identity as geography” (271) while being continually brought back or pinned down to it by others. In reframing, evading, deframing the cadres of clichés, belongings, and public records, they create their own alternative archive—an archive driven by their physical and cinema-photo-graphic “travellings,” blurring the lines between time and space, memory and H/history. The notion of “deframing,” developed by Pascal Bonitzer, is particularly fruitful to conceptualize Fessologue’s and Julius’s visual practices. Found in paintings and photographs, its potential was heightened by the new techniques of cinema and its ability to decenter the gaze, to “displace [...] a point of view” to focus on elements that remain usually “off center,” unseen because judged unaesthetic, unimportant (Bonitzer 200).

⁴³ Susan Sontag in her essay *On Photography* envisions the camera as an “extension of the eye of the middle-class flâneur” that she describes as an “adept of the joys of walking, connoisseur of empathy, [who] finds the world ‘picturesque’” (55).

⁴⁴ Pieter Vermeulen in his article « Teju Cole’s *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism” argues that Julius turns out to be closer to the figure of the “fugeur,” “a [psychiatric] condition marked by unwanted restlessness and ambulatory automatism” (40), than that of the flâneur. Fessologue is not a fugitive per se, but he does not have a legal status in France and is living and working there under someone else’s name.

Travel in time (in memory, in the past) and travel in space (within a city and transnationally) are of equal importance in *Sans Soleil*, *Open City*, and *Black Bazar*: Krasna is a globe-trotter cameraman who wants to make a movie about a time-traveler from the future, Julius' observations of his daily walks and his trip to Brussel resemble the genre of the travelogue in its form and the goal of Art History in its intent, and Fessologue, in playing with the codes of migrant literature, revisits past literary traditions.

To continue with the analogy of cinema-photo-graphic "travelling," I argue that Julius's and Fessologue's gaze is not only a way to constitute an alternative "form of knowledge" (Sontag 4) and seeing, or informal knowledge (de/recoding of clichés,) but also a means to "take possession of a past that is unreal [and] a space in which they are insecure" (Sontag 9).

Framing

In this section, I investigate what kind of specific frames delimit the screens of Julius's and Fessologue's gaze. Through which lens are they looking at their surroundings and the people therein and what do these mediums tell us about their own connections to space and time, to memory?

It is significant that *Open City* opens up with a scene in which Julius is portrayed looking out his window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the migrating geese. The depiction is telling of Julius' gaze throughout the novel in that it establishes Julius right away as an observer of the outside, a character looking at things from within. Even so, the window is

not only a means to observe other people, as it would be expected from the cinematic trope of the window as spyhole or voyeuristic embodiment (as in Hitchcock's classic film *Rear Window*).⁴⁵ Rather, it also functions as a sort of frame that delineates Julius' vision and directs his focus on presence-as-absence (and vice-versa); the stated repetition of the scene, introduced by the adverb "often," mimics the cyclical process of memory and history as forgetting and remembering.⁴⁶ Indeed, the geese squadrons are rare and hardly identifiable from such a distance, quick to disappear into the blind spot at the edge of the window:

Often, as I searched the sky, all I saw was rain, or the faint contrail of an airplane bisecting the window, and I doubted in some part of myself whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist. (4)

Visions from the past, haunted sights, and fleeting apparitions frequently interrupt the space of Julius' look and flash into his present. If at times the long periods without seeing a migrating bird make him feel like "I couldn't trust my memory," (4) at other times he cannot entrust his very own eyes:

What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head

⁴⁵ Libby Saxton suggests that the qualities of the windows, "at once aperture and frame," make it a good allegory of cinema (73). Therefore, the opening of *Open City* places it immediately in conversation with the medium of cinema, with both the symbol of the window and the depiction of Julius as viewer.

⁴⁶ As Christine Ulivucci reminds us in *Ces photos qui nous parlent. Une relecture de la mémoire familiale*, "the union between presence and absence" is precisely what is reflected by "the very particular spatiotemporal configuration of any old image [photograph]," ultimately "representing an actual temporal *fort-da*. [*gone and there*]" (24).

to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind. (75)

We could call these visions, or lack thereof, interferences or glitches within Julius' framing screen. These interferences can either conflate different times (images from the past irrupting into the present, for instance) and/or different spaces (through flashes of memories that work as mental/imaginary "travellings"). Much as photographic records aim to do, Julius' glitches function as evidence that something did happen, that something or someone was there. It forces the reader to (post)remember or acknowledge the practice of progressive erasures and rewritings that is at the heart of official History and collective memory. Significantly, only a few pages before recounting this vision of a hanging body, he was reflecting on 9/11 and on how modern atrocities are characterized by "the absence of bodies" (58). Julius appears to be particularly concerned with how easy it is to forget something once it is not part of your visual frame anymore, as illustrated by the scene with the migrating birds.

If on the one hand he worries about institutional forgetting, on the other hand, when it comes to exploring his personal memory archive, he himself actively engages in this process of exclusion and inclusion. Certain images, especially of his mother, keep on being discarded or displaced by others. Even though memories of his father's death and burial occupy an important part of his childhood recollection, no moments of happiness or bonding between the two of them are described. His mother is mainly grasped through their unexplained "rift" (77), their relationship characterized by the negative spaces of silence, lack, and absence. Meanwhile, the image of his grandmother, that he met only

once when he was a young boy, has become more and more poignant. This displacement and projection from the mother—standing for an unreachable past—to the grandmother adheres to Marianna Hirsch’s description of “screen memories,” inherited from Freud, in her influential article “The Generation of Postmemory.”⁴⁷

The images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and the structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered, may be screen memories—screens on which we project present or timeless needs and desires and which thus mark other images and other concerns. (120)

His grandmother does act as a sort of screen memory on which to project his desire to find his history, “the line that connected me to my own part in these [generations] stories” (59). This is not uncommon because grandparents, and the grandmother in particular, often play a key role in 20th and 21st century texts as figure(s) of substitution and the one(s) that pass(es) on memory/history.⁴⁸ At the same time, during his trip to Belgium, Julius does not make much effort to find his grandmother and abandons the project after a few days.

Indeed, his search for his own narrative keeps being displaced to other maternal figures, such as Dr. Maillotte that he meets in the plane and the older woman he spends

⁴⁷ Marianne Hirsch offers the following definition for the term “Postmemory”: “Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (106). Julius’s mother is also part of the postmemory generation as “she had retained the memory of having been aware of this hard beginning [World War II]: not the memory of the suffering itself but the memory of knowing that it was what she had been born into” (*Open City* 80).

⁴⁸ It is particularly prevalent in African societies and literatures, as I have discussed in chapter I regarding the relationships of Maya Angelou and Maryse Condé with their respective grandmothers, “Momma” and Victoire.

the night with and whose name he “forgot immediately” (110). Above all, and that despite his desire for connection, Julius is more drawn to others’ stories and “mediated forms of knowledge” (Hirsch 106) that he gets from visual arts, literature, urbanism, and other collective archives and sources. For instance, he recalls that when his mother started to reminisce about her childhood in Berlin immediately following World War II, he did not listen carefully to it. Instead, he developed an interest in these memories and this past only years later, most likely through studying and reading, and for “[his] own sake” (80). Through Julius’s relation to his family and the arts, Cole revisits the notion of generational gaps in a productive way with regard to postmemory, as defined by Hirsch, and space.

As discussed above, Julius’ frame of reference is primarily cultural: a highly compiled, classically trained “memory card” that shapes the lens through which he looks at and processes subjects/objects as well as the past. Transcribed into photographic terms, his visual perspective would be comparable to the concept of the *studium*—one of the two ways a viewer can be affected by a photograph, as established by Roland Barthes in his intimate essay on photography entitled *Camera Lucida*. As a matter of fact, *Camera Lucida* is among the books that Julius has been recently reading. The *studium*, describes the interest one might find in a photograph as a cultural, historical, and/or political scene. In this context, the photograph is appreciated as an object of study and knowledge. The *studium* is highly representative of Julius’ approach to his surroundings. It is to be contrasted to the *punctum*, which *breaks* this “average affect” (26). The *punctum* is

something in the photograph, “an accident which pricks [the viewer],” for “*punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole” (27) that pierces the viewer.

Teju Cole gave a powerful illustration of the *punctum* effect in his November 2017 monthly essay on photography for the *New York Times*, in which he reflected on the traces and archives that remained after a mass killing event, in particular the Las Vegas shooting. Turning his attention to the photographs of the event, Cole concludes that: “the images that have stayed with me [...] are of broken glass,” a remark that chronicles the significance of glass as both subject (windows, mirrors, etc.) and material (the lens of the camera) in photography’s history. The (broken) glass can be envisioned as a metaphor for looking—the camera lens as an extension of the eye—as well as a paradigm for memory—if we conceive of memories as the cinema of the mind and if we account for the role movies and photographs play in preserving them (Cole, “The History of Photography is a History of Shattered Glass”). Furthermore, broken glass is quite literally something that evokes the possibility of being cut or punctured.

Julius does sometime let in a detail, a crack in the “crystal of time,”⁴⁹ which brings back memories of his childhood, for instance, but he never let himself be “cut” by it. Rather, the accounts of the strained relationship with his mother are always reported in a distant, emotionally detached fashion, much like an analytical report. Just as the novel

⁴⁹ Julius’s images of the personal past are aligned with Gilles Deleuze’s conception of the perfect crystal, one “which would hold life to freeze it” (89). Indeed, Julius’s recollection of his private past is stuck on a closed series of displacements and selected images (such as the funeral of his father) that prevent any leap into the present, and present as future, to happen. As a result, there are no “cracks,” except for these fleeting fissures with his mother evoked earlier, “through which we could, we should, leave to reach life [...] (89). Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

tests the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, Julius' outlook oscillates permanently between the objective and the subjective, between the recollection of intimate memories and the stored knowledge of historical and cultural data. Pieter Vermeulen fittingly compares some of Julius's observations to Wikipedia entries (50). Julius conveys his flashes of memory in the form of unanticipated images that emerge suddenly in his cine-mind, or free associations, and yet, the way he processes these images is machine or computer-like. Akin to the impression of instantaneity and objectivity that we falsely get from surfing the web and accessing content online, Julius's "transparent" travellings turn out to be meticulously edited. He wants to have control over what he sees, how he is seen, and what stories of his past he remembers and shares with the reader/viewer. In this respect, Julius' gaze closely matches Sontag's argument that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like *knowledge*—and, therefore, like *power*" (4).

In contrast, we don't learn much about who Julius is, despite seeing the world through his eyes. There are few counter-shots of him, that is, we rarely get to witness how others perceive him and when we do, it is always regulated by Julius' own self-narrative. Julius's resistance to others' gaze can be apprehended as a refusal to be seen and possibly consumed as a cliché, to be literally enframed by others. The viewer can get a better understanding of Julius only in the crack(s) of the narrator's stream-of-consciousness—cracks that stand for the missing image(s) of what happened between his mother and him or what happened with Moji, the woman who accuses him of rape at the end of the novel. To borrow Cole's argument about Brett Weston's 1937 photograph

“Broken Window, San Francisco,” Julius’ complete self-portrait would be “in that darkness,” in the blind spot of memory.



Figure 1: Brett Weston, “Broken Window, San Francisco,” 1937, gelatin silver print, MoMA Photography Collection. (Art Resource)

The holes in Julius’s personal past figure the act of remembering, which is never a linear, continuous process. Going back to *Sans Soleil*, if we consider the observation from the cameraman Krasna that remembering is “not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining,” we can envision memory as being comprised of images punctuated by lapses and blanks. The past is not something that is readily accessible nor do we remember everything that happened, but only certain moments, images that have stayed with us or that we revisit to make sense of the present/future. Therefore, the absent images, the gaps in Julius’s story are just as significant as the memory-images he provides, because they break the illusion of the past as being a fixed, stable stock of images that one would only have to retrieve. Personal memory, if it can function as an alternative to the official records of the archive, does not escape its logic of inclusion/exclusion. They both are, as Mbembe contends, “a montage of fragments [that] thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity” (21). It was one of Marker’s main intentions to disrupt this illusion of

continuity and wholeness, that he believed was also found in movies, by reproducing the dynamic of the process of remembering into the structure of *Sans Soleil*. He accomplished it through the juxtaposition of images connected to each other by mental associations, and through the use of a black leader at the beginning of the movie, that serves as the “lining” of the first image, the first memory: “if they [the audience] don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.”

The visual framing of Fessologue’s life offers instructive insights into how to read *Black Bazar*. Another variation of the budding narrator-writer of Mabanckou’s 2005 eponymous novel *Broken Glass*, Fessologue reads and portrays his surroundings through different windows/screens. First, he spends a lot of time observing things and people through the window of his headquarters, the bar Jip’s, that is centrally located in Paris’ 1st arrondissement. Cafés and bars are indeed a prime location to see and to be seen and Fessologue takes full advantage of the location. Secondly, the glass from which he drinks and the alcohol he consumes while at the *Jip’s* function as another kind of screen, as they reinforce the disjointed style of the narration that mimics the hazy and turbulent vision and memory of Fessologue. But perhaps the best analogy for *Black Bazar’s* visual language is that of the snapshot, photographs taken quickly, on the spot, and characterized by their instantaneous quality. As Sontag describes it, the Polaroid works as a “handy, fast-form of note-taking” (6). In the case of Fessologue, who aspires to become a writer throughout the book, it is by means of dialogues and quick, on-the-go, descriptions that he achieves the impression of spontaneity and vitality rendered by the Polaroid.

Conscious of the omnipresence of TV as a hegemonic means of representation, Mabanckou's novel seems to anticipate, in 2009, the upcoming age of the smart phone along with its realm of possibilities and misuses. In fact, six years later, in 2015, Cole suggested that we start to think of Africans as "African digital natives" in his keynote speech of the 41st annual meeting of the African Literature Association. His main point is that "the interface of 'the African' is not the mud hut, is not the grass skirt, but it is rather a piece of glass, usually a touch screen" (39). The vision of a technology-savvy Africa, in opposition to the anthropological cliché images of the mud hut, is palpable in Mabanckou's characterization of Fessologue. That being said, Fessologue's distortion of images also anticipates the facility and rapidity with which images can be manipulated via technology nowadays and (mis)information widespread.

The snapshots, polaroid-like images created via descriptions or conversations in the text, broadcast, by their sheer number and flexibility, a diversity of representations. Juxtaposed to the mediated images shown on TV about neighborhoods such as Château-Rouge and Château d'Eau as well as African countries, they compete with and fragment TV's monolithic narrative, its "single story," by displaying different series of perspectives and points of view.⁵⁰ Fessologue sketches his surroundings as a multi-layered space of knowledge, interpretation, and signification. Consequently, his graphic writing produces a "broken mirror" effect, one that uses a multiplicity of images, that confounds the simplistic "dual mirror" effect often used to portray the Europe/Africa

⁵⁰ See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk on "The Danger of a Single Story," www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

binary. Certainly, the snapshot scenes crafted by Mabanckou promote a conceptualization of identity as fluid, continually changing and transforming through time and space. Even though some of the characters come across as walking “clichés,” they are nonetheless talking for themselves and creating together a manifold, heterogeneous, and complex portrait of life in Paris for African migrants.

Moreover, in his depiction of this life, Fessologue discloses what the frame of the photograph or the camera frequently conceals. According to Bazin, “the screen is not a frame like that of the picture but a mask which allows only a part of the action to be seen” (105). The part of the action that is left out of the screen, the off-screen reality, does appear briefly in *Black Bazar*. It encompasses everything excluded from the clichés of Paris. Among other things, the several years Fessologue had to share one room with multiple people or the account of his hardships working on the docks at Pointe-Noire—stories of a life in exile mentioned only sporadically and which take on the form of an “*aparté*,” an aside out of focus. To be sure, these images matter to Fessologue. He does not completely discard them as others sometimes do, such as, for instance, the character called “the man of Barbès” in Fatou Diome’s novel *The Belly of the Atlantic*, who works only small, menial, temporary jobs but goes back home every summer and pretends to be living like a lord. Fessologue is aware of the split between his physical appearance, that is, his official narrative, and his living condition. This is especially true when he refuses to let his then girlfriend see the place where he lives: “She would pass out because she would see that if I was always clean-cut, well dressed with the most expensive French clothes, I was actually living in a real pigsty” (93). She is not allowed to *see* this “pigsty,”

but he tells her about it, although he always redirects the story to a funny or entertaining episode, like the time when a woman who just arrived from his native Congo-Brazzaville stayed with him and his roommates for a while and they were all obsessed with winning her sexual favors.

His cinematic framing enables him to choose what he wants to focus on and show while not completely erasing the more negative images of his lived experience as an illegal immigrant, whose reality is felt in the edges of the off-screen. Furthermore, these images of his life are not his primary focus because he is not telling the story of his immigration but the one of his journey to writing. Even though Fessologue doesn't always have power over how others see/read him, he has control, like Julius, over the images that will be part of his personal anthology and inventory.

This process reinforces the fact that Fessologue is not only a master storyteller but also a skillful editor. The difficult images of his migrant experience appear only within the screen of Fessologue's eye-camera, thanks to his visual and imaginary memory-“travellings,” that unveil, even if just in passing, the off-screen space and reality. But it is through his montage that Fessologue-narrator inserts past scenes and juxtaposes them with present moments, at times jumping from one to the other abruptly or manipulating memory-images to suit his audience. From this perspective, what I call Fessologue-writer can be compared to a filmmaker and his writing to the phase of film editing. Indeed, Jean-Luc Godard envisions the film editor, incarnated by the figure of the film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, as “[h]olding in his hand, the past, the present and future” (Lundemo 496). Fessologue's handling of time and image echoes the montage of images

in *Sans Soleil*, and at times, their repetition: Marker's film opens and closes with the image of three children in a small city of Iceland, Heimaey. The image, first presented as the "image of happiness" by the voice-over narrator, shifts meaning when it reappears toward the end of the movie, uncut: "I picked up the whole shot again, adding the somewhat hazy end, the frame trembling under the force of the wind beating us down on the cliff: everything I had cut in order to tidy up [...]" (11).



Figure 2 & 3: Stills from Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1983, Argos Films). The first one is the "image of happiness" presented at the beginning of the movie and the second one is the uncut shot.

In a similar way, Fessologue-writer is letting the reader know about his editing and his process of selecting images as *Black Bazar* recounts its own genesis. Together, this assemblage interrupts any sense of continuity by disclosing the fragmented nature of Fessologue's memory archive. Through his narrative framing, personal memories, historical events, and popular images from T.V. and movies are juxtaposed and combined into an imaginary archive with no clearly established categorizations and with porous borders.

A good illustration of this is when Fessologue, after hearing on TV that an African president was suspected of poisoning his opponent, reminisces about a similar

anecdote involving the president of Congo who allegedly killed his rival, Moleki Nzela. Prompted by a seemingly true event, the news, Fessologue's absurd story depicts the president as an imbecile, "le roi des cons," (211) who has his rival murdered because he is jealous of his visiting the same prostitute as he does, "Fiat 500." The tale is full of references—Moleki Nzela is actually the title of a song by a Congolese artist, J.D.T. Molopwe—that are left for the reader to unpack as Fessologue develops his own knowledge system that highlights the mediation between fiction and reality. These references hold different layers of signification depending on the reader's knowledge because, for example, the reader that would be familiar with J.D.T. Molopwe would know that the song talks about infidelity, something Fessologue has recently experienced (Knox 73). Others, like me, will have to either find the information online, or accept to remain in the realm of a self-referring fiction.

But above all, this story demonstrates that Fessologue's mechanism of *décalage* is comparable to Julius's practice of displacement. For one thing, every time Fessologue evokes a painful memory, he does so through a humorous, satirical (screen) filter that shifts the reception of the recollection for him as well as for the reader. There is, at stake, the will not to be reduced to these tropes (immigration, poverty, etc.), but also, in blending fiction and reality, an urge to keep himself from being fully affected or stung by them.

The Posing

The question of the image, of self-representation and reception—how Julius and Fessologue want to be seen—is crucial to both novels. The two narrators develop a web of cultural references (literary, artistic, musical) that provide, and attempt to determine, the setting for their own characterization. To describe this process, we could use the analogy of the “shelfie” which, as its name indicates, is a picture of a bookshelf that stands as an equivalent for a “selfie.” Portraits of famous, canonical writers standing or sitting in front of a fully stocked bookshelf are abundant, and as such, a trope of the figure of the author. They convey the idea of a solemn, knowledgeable intellectual who has mastered the components of an established and recognized literary system. A rapid online search offers plenty of such staged images of Mabanckou and Teju Cole, as well as photographs of their works on shelves and more focused images of the books’ covers. Moreover, the selfie/shelfie image involves a staging of oneself within one’s environment or background, convoking and controlling, therefore, the images with which one can be associated.

Indeed, Julius’ impressive background of “high culture” functions not only as an aperture that circumscribes and informs his own vision, but also as a frame that structures his own representation of himself to others. Julius is acutely aware of others’ gaze at him, a gaze that positions him or hails him as a subject-object (as demonstrated by his reluctance when another black person claims him as a “brother” or fellow African), turning him into a still image, as does a camera lens. This “still-image” transformation is an experience that Barthes also grapples with in *Camera Lucida*, describing the feelings

of being in front of the camera, where: “everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (10). A photograph, however, even if it presupposes a “posing” of the self, escapes its subjects’ intention. Julius and Fessologue are deeply interested in the reception of their “image,” thus they are wary of leaving too much room for this kind of indetermination. This leads us back to Chris Marker who was notoriously famous for being a deeply elusive person, with very little pictures of him existing in the public records. Many of these pictures include the camera in the screen, as a sort of cover that obstructs the view. Like Fessologue, the name Chris Marker is an alias, and the director had many others (Mavor 745).

As a result, the portrait, especially when executed in the form of a painting, is of particular interest to them. In fact, the painted portrait allows a staging of the self in a hermeneutic realm that could be more enclosed than a photograph or a film. In describing the frame of a painting to a border that separates the painting from reality, Bazin, after Heidegger, argues that “the picture frame polarizes space inwards,” therefore, “emphasiz[ing] the difference between the microcosm of the picture and the macrocosm of the natural world [...]” (165-6). In the same way, Fessologue attempts to delimit a space of subjective creativity that he could fully regulate according to his own reading-grid. Even before Fessologue has his portrait painted by his soon-to-be girlfriend Sarah, he decides to adorn himself with all the attributes associated with images of writers. The glasses and the typewriter he purchases are symbolic clichés of the intellectual, but in this process, they are also becoming what Barthes called “biographèmes”: “a few details, a

few tastes, a few inflections” (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 9) that Fessologue arranges in the construction of his own authorial posture. He does buy glasses to “fit the image that the audience holds of a writer,” but he bought “the most expensive ones in the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré” (186) as any self-respecting “sapeur” would. Fessologue would like to be apprehended and remembered as a writer only through objects, like the glasses, or anecdotes, like his stories, that he would have carefully selected and crafted. For instance, after Sarah talks to him about one of René Magritte’s quotations on painting, he goes away with the following lesson:

[...] this Magritte had provided all the arguments to defend his interests. This might be what all artists should do before kicking the bucket: not letting others define their creation. They should leave here and there the keys to their work in order to prevent professional babblers from distorting their lifetime experience and hard work. (254)

The scene of the portrait, when Sarah comes to his house to paint him, can be read, in a way, as a self-portrait: an act of authority wherein Fessologue attempts to assert his creative agency and anticipates his own commodification as a writer, as an image to be consumed among other images and artwork. The painted portrait is not only a tool to defeat death (Bazin 10) or to assert one’s social status,⁵¹ it is above all a way to be represented with all the qualities one wishes to display. As Barthes wishes in *Camera Lucida*: “If only I could ‘come out’ on paper as on a classical canvas, endowed with a noble expression—thoughtful, intelligent, etc.!” (11), Fessologue desires to be painted as an ideal version of himself. However, he and Sarah hold conflicting views in terms of the

⁵¹ Sontag conceives of the painted portrait of the 18th and 19th Century as an “invention,” “a replacement” of memory (165).

painting's purpose. While Fessologue has cleaned up the place for the day of his meeting with her, she wants his apartment to look more realistic so not to "stack the deck" (251). It is yet one more instance of how Fessologue constantly needs to negotiate others' gaze at him. Indeed, Sarah is not interested in classical, noble subjects, but, much like Diane Arbus and other post-modern photographers, prefers the people and places that have been usually left out of the frame: vagrants, the inhabitants of Château-Rouge, and an "extravagant" guy like Fessologue (248).

These are the visual associations that Sarah initially connects to Fessologue and this tension, between his self-conception and others' conception of him, arises again when she tells him that he looks like Miles Davis, a comparison he strongly rejects after looking at a picture of the jazzman in a photography store, because he finds him unattractive. As we have learned earlier in the novel, Fessologue instead links himself to another African American, Martin Luther King Jr., whose picture he carries in his luggage. The picture actually conveys a double association because in it the reverend is himself posing in front of a picture of Gandhi. These conflicting images are revealing of Fessologue's struggle to find his own voice throughout the novel, as well as the trajectory of his stylization of the self. As will be discussed later, Fessologue realizes towards the end of the novel that he can embrace a multiplicity of referential images without compromising his self-identity. Despite his reluctance to be compared to Miles Davis, he ends up enjoying his music and developing his own taste for it, as for instance when he disagrees with Sarah on which of his tunes is the best one.

In a similar way, his conception of painting somewhat parallels his own evolution as a writer, as he slowly gets a better grasp of what being an artist entails. The many comparisons Sarah draws between the two arts contribute to his realization that writing is not all about imitating the classics and the techniques of celebrated writers. Before Fessologue ends up sharing his life with the painter Sarah, he did not enjoy painting at all, as we learn early on in the novel: “I don’t want to hear about painting! [...] Contemporary painting irritates me” (18-19). Interestingly enough, the painting he mentions to illustrate his statement is Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, a work usually considered as a breakthrough moment and the start of Modernism in art history. The choice of this particular painting is, of course, not innocent. I would like to read this reference, as well as Fessologue’s take on it, which appear at the very beginning of the text, as a paradigm of reading an artwork. On the one hand, it is one of Mabanckou’s favorite works that he celebrates for its transgressions of norms, something he aspires to achieve as a writer, especially in regards to all the expectations by which African writers tend to be constrained. In his essay *Le sanglot de l’homme noir*, Mabanckou denounces:

[the] surreptitious ‘order,’ the obligation that is whispered to African writers [both by the western audience and the “gatekeepers of African authenticity”] and that consists in having them write about what is expected from them, taking away from them any possibilities to take a different path, a different avenue, in order to make the most of their diversity. (115)

On the other hand, Picasso’s groundbreaking painting raises many questions about what was, and still is, considered art. It was conceived at the beginning of what is now called Picasso’s “African period,” during which the artist found inspiration in African

arts, especially in the masks that inspired the geometrical, otherworldly faces of *Les demoiselles*. In an interview for *Afrique Magazine*, Mabanckou posits that even though African art was overlooked at the time, its influence contributed to Picasso's success and to the evolution of Western art history and standards ("Alain Mabanckou: 'Je suis un écrivain tricontinental'"). Therefore, the painting can be read, as Mabanckou did, as a disruption of the Western hegemonic definition and framing of art. Similarly, Mabanckou claims his right to write in French, despite the arguments that "partisans of authenticity" (115) may raise against it, to create something new.⁵²

Moreover, the painting that depicts five women in a brothel—the kind of scene and subject matter that would surely interest Sarah—is first and foremost "a painting about looking" (Jones, "Pablo's punks") and about the power structures of the gaze, with some of the women staring straight at the viewers. We find a similar transgression of the conventions of the work of art, problematized by the gaze, in *Sans Soleil*.⁵³ There are two images that particularly stand out in the film: two shots that each shows a woman, an African woman, looking directly at the camera. These shots are the only ones, at the exception of the images of the zone, that interrupts the flow of memory-images to "sting" the viewer, whose turn it is to be observed. And in the same manner as *Les demoiselles*

⁵² In *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, Mabanckou dedicates a whole section in response to the African writers and critics, such as Boubacar Boris Diop or Patrice Nganang, who assert that "French language carries 'codes' of enslavement [and] syntax structures unfit to the African phrasing [...]" (102).

⁵³ A convention that Krasna challenges in *Sans Soleil* when he asks: "Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?"

and *Sans Soleil*, *Black Bazar* summons the question of the position of the viewer/observer, via Fessologue and his entourage's reception and digestion of images and information. Fessologue is at the same time the center of the gaze and an assiduous observer in *Black Bazar*. As in *Les demoiselles*, he hails the reader's attention and gaze in making her or him a participant in this game of mirrors. There is an indeterminacy, an ambiguity in the text that unsettles the reader's position in relation to it: how are we to stand in relation to this gallery of exaggerated characters depicted by Fessologue? How are we to interpret his male gaze on women's behinds, which earned him the nickname of Fessologue? Despite this gaze, Fessologue is also part of the scene with them, being read, and looking back at the reader from behind his many masks, just like some of the *Demoiselles*.

In *Open City*, visual arts also inform Julius's reading and viewer position, both in relation to his surroundings and to his past. More specifically, references to paintings punctuate Cole's text as Julius often associates people and places he sees with his recollection of paintings from Vermeer, Velasquez, Cezanne, and other canonical artists: "Three men sat playing cards in a corner of the café [...], the clutter of the bottles on the table cumulatively created an exact Cézannesque tableau" (116), "I would never find out, for she possessed her secrets fully, as did those women that Vermeer painted in this same gray, lowland light [...]" (140). This web of comparisons and analogies is particularly telling of the way he approaches others: the detour through artifacts, drawn out from his cultural frame of reference, is a necessary step for him to apprehend others, destined to join his mental gallery. More often than not, artifacts progressively come to substitute

themselves for the person or the thing with which they were linked, shifting Julius's relation to reality.⁵⁴ For instance, while travelling back to New York from Brussels, he realizes that the view from his plane is reminiscent of something he had seen before, "the sprawling scale model of the city that was kept at the Queens Museum of Art" (150). However, he continues, "in this case it was the real city that seemed to be matching point for point my memory of the model [...]" (151). In fact, more often than not, his recollections of cultural artwork supersede his personal memories, in the same way as for Marker's cameraman: "I remember the images I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory." In Julius' vision and mind, people and things are indeed connected with each other like paintings and other works of art in that they are part of an ensemble: they communicate something about each other, they interact within his own system of knowledge that helps him make sense of the world. However, this analogical gaze, similar to photography and its "chronic voyeuristic relation to the world," ends up "[leveling] the meaning of all events" (Sontag, 11) and all people. One of the most striking examples of this process happens when Julius is having the previously mentioned conversation about terrorism with Farouq and Khalil in Brussels. As the discussion becomes more and more perilous, Julius suddenly realizes that Farouq is the spitting image of Robert De Niro in the role of Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II*, a resemblance that he "must have been

⁵⁴ His friend and mentor, Professor Saito, seems to operate by the same process as Julius notices that his place is filled with collections of books and artifacts, but that "All that were missing [...] were photographs: of family members, of friends, of Professor Saito himself" (170). Later on, however, Julius speculates that perhaps these artifacts were the "legacy" of people Professor Saito had loved.

subconsciously working on” (121) since they met. By the end of the encounter, this is the only image that Julius can perceive:

[Farouq] had brought me too close to his pain, and I no longer saw him. In his place what I saw was the young Vito Corleone, who moved stealthily across the rooftops of Little Italy, making his way towards the house of the soon-to-be-usurped local godfather; this Vito whose will would carry him much further than he could ever imagine [...] (129).

Julius uses his own code of references to make sense of things around him, but this code functions as yet another means of displacement, of distracting him from any experience that could significantly affect him in the long run. Paintings and other artifacts work, in practice, as screens that prevent him from being “pricked” (Barthes 49). Even though the compilation of these references helps him make sense of his experiences, it also piles up between him and his memories and, as such, creates a sort of voluntary amnesia. That is to say that Julius’s archiving of art works, his mental museum, contributes to the forgetting—the displacement, the substitution—of certain memories, especially those from Nigeria and his childhood. This is perhaps best illustrated when Julius relates his father’s burial, explaining that:

I had complicated the memory of the day, not with other burials, of which I attended only a few, but with depictions of burials—El Greco’s *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*—so that the actual event had taken on the characteristics of those images, and in doing so had become faint and unreliable. (228)

The scholar Felwine Sarr, in an interview with *Le Monde* on the subject of the restitution of African art works taken by European countries during colonization, explained that the hole in archival material that this dispossession created had a

detrimental impact on the population of these countries' history and memory. According to him, the "spoliation of art works [...] has altered the intergenerational transmission of memory and History," thus resulting in "individuals stricken by amnesia who have difficulties constructing their identities and looking to the future" ("Felwine Sarr: 'En finir avec le musée ethnographique qui fabrique un discours sur les autres"). In the case of Julius, it appears that, for many reasons, the intergenerational transmission of memory and History did not happen: his father died when he was relatively young and he has been estranged from his mother for even longer. Even though his mother was German, she seems to be the one who took the strongest interest in Nigerian culture and Yoruba art, something that is rather absent from Julius's frame of reference.

Consequently, Julius constructs his own archive, as suggested earlier, in choosing a lineage of his own composed of artists and thinkers with whom he feels related and who enable him to connect with the world in his own way. After all, the reason why he decided to leave Nigeria after high school was so he could "begin life in the new country, fully on my own terms" (85). At college, he met Professor Saito, who taught his English literature class and became a friend: "I came to view him as a grandfatherly figure entirely unlike either of my own grandfathers [...]. I felt I had more in common with him than with the people who happened to be related to me" (10).

Most of the people Julius feels connected to have experienced some kind of trauma in their lives—Professor Saito was imprisoned in Japanese camps during World War II, Dr. Maillotte was a teenager when Germany occupied Belgium, his friend grew up in an environment filled with poverty and drugs, etc. The main way Julius

communicates or gets into contact with these people is through items of culture such as a book, a painting, or a photograph, and via stories. But paintings are, as Bazin acknowledges, essentially “centripetal” (166), which seems to indicate a certain limitation to that interconnectedness that Julius, and Marker’s protagonists before him, are seeking. Pieter Vermeulen, in his article on *Open City*, argues that Julius’s behavior demonstrates the failure of such aesthetic connectedness: “even if the novel is thoroughly occupied with the question of how aesthetic form can contribute to the furthering of cosmopolitan understanding, it ends up as a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections by artistic means” (42). According to him, because of Julius’s “dissociated mind,” all the aesthetic connections he makes do not transform into genuine human connectedness, nor are they conducive to social change or action (42-49). Such an observation is in accordance with Sontag’s argument that “living with the images of suffering [...] does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate” (20).

Quite the opposite, Julius proves to be rather suspicious of other people’s narrative of sufferings because they are precisely that for him, personal narratives, that can be forged, amplified, or embellished. That idea is nowhere more apparent than in the two following instances. The first one is when he visits a detention center for undocumented immigrants in New York and questions the veracity of the story told by the man from Liberia with whom he meets: “I wondered, *naturally*, as Saidu told this story [of an innocent refugee], whether I believed him or not, whether it wasn’t more likely that he had been a soldier” (emphasis mine 67). Nevertheless, he doesn’t say

anything about his doubts to his then girlfriend Nadège because he “had fallen in love with that idea of [himself]” as “the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to someone else’s life and struggle” (70). The second instance is when Moji, the sister of an old childhood friend from Nigeria, accuses him of rape. Not only does Julius express no feelings of guilt or sympathy, but he even strips her story of credibility ahead of the reader encountering it by reflecting on how we craft our own self-narratives in which we never take on the role of villains.

Therefore, to equate Julius’s character fully with the failure of aesthetic cosmopolitanism and the figure of the “*fugueur*” is to undermine his agency in the process of the selection and exclusion of what he considers to be valid stories (of sufferings) or not. It is not only about art as a means of connection, it is about knowledge and power. I purposefully used the term of “mental museum” to refer to Julius’s frame of reference because museums belong to official archives. Although Julius’s cine-mind helps to recover erased (hi)stories of struggle, pain, and suffering in the streets of New York and Brussels, it often applies a similar principle of inclusion/exclusion as the official records when it comes to personal memories. In constituting his own ambulant archive, Julius offers his vision of society, one that is male and somewhat privileged. If others’ memories cannot be fact checked, if they are not verifiable, if they do not match his own memory or something he has read in a book or seen in a museum, then they are subjective and can be disputed as such. Julius’s curiosity for others’ stories actually resembles his interest in art: they matter only to the extent of what they evoke in him and what self-image they reflect of him.

In conclusion, despite his penchant for cultural connectedness, the “inwardness” of the painting brought up by Bazin is especially true of the way Julius wants to be perceived, like Brewster’s portraits of deaf children that he contemplates at the American Folk Art Museum of New York City, “each of [them] a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter” (37). Like a meticulously curated Instagram profile, the artistic web of references threaded by Julius throughout the book do not work, as the reader is keen to believe at first, as a transparent window into his self but as opaque layers that obscure our perception of him.

Visual Readings

The action of reading, and misreading, its lining, guides the narration in both novels. As the two narrators engage in and reflect on the interplay of gazes, they order the world around them in line with their own system of knowledge. In spite of their many differences, in terms of their socio-economic background, level of education, and immigration status, Julius and Fessologue share a rather similar reading grid. They both represent a system within which outside elements and/or people’s external appearance can be decoded to offer insight into internal realities. The visual world lays out in front of them as a text that demands to be examined or deconstructed.

It is especially so with Julius who, in his capacity as psychiatrist, acknowledges that it is part of his profession to “attempt to use external Signs as clues to internal realities” (238). Even though he adds that such an attempt might be tenuous because “the relationship between the two is not at all clear” (238), this system informs most of his

interactions with others. Indeed, Julius is particularly preoccupied with the desire to read the people he meets, to gain direct access to their thoughts and personality. This translates into an acute attention to details about people's physical appearance (in particular the eyes and the direction of the gaze) as well as the way they speak (the intonation, the density of the voice), sometimes at the expense of what they are saying. This is the result of his awareness of the fact that people are storytellers, just like he is, which makes him resist taking all stories at face value. As a consequence, he feels the need to decipher the individuals he meets, to read them by *studium*, as he would a work of art. In fact, in the case of one of his patients, V., who is a writer and a scholar, Julius does read "Signs," one of her books, to try to get better access to her psyche: "[...] I also hoped that the book might, in those moments when it left the strict historical record and betrayed some subjective analysis, give me further insight into her psychological state" (27). Julius's need to accumulate knowledge about others, and this is especially true of people that he finds inaccessible or surprising like Farouq and Moji, reinforces his inability to connect.

In perpetually matching and associating things, people, and events together, like one would do with artworks, Julius pins them down within "a pre-existing totality," his system of knowledge, an act that ultimately reduces others to the same (Downing & Saxton 8). The linking or unlinking of people with other images or memories functions at times as its own quotation or caption system.⁵⁵ As the scholar Saidiya Hartman strongly notes in her indispensable *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, sometimes a caption

⁵⁵ According to Susan Sontag, a photograph can work as a quotation when it is used as a point of reference or a matching visual to comment on another photograph (71).

can not only “arrange and classify disorder” but it also “produces what appears. It subsumes the image to the text” (20). Because he rarely tells the stories of the people he meets using direct speech, preferring instead to mediate it through the filter of his own mind, Julius exerts full authority on how others will be “seen” by the reader.

In a similar fashion, Fessologue owns his personal reading grid in order to organize his environment. As his nickname indicates, he is well known amongst his friends for his reading of women’s behinds. It is a science and an art that he describes to the readers of *Black Bazar* as follows: “I came to the conclusion that, just as with ties, it is possible to read the psychology of a human being by the way they are moving their backside” (70). As mentioned in this quote, this system also functions with clothing and the way people choose to style themselves, as for Fessologue you are what you wear. Fessologue’s classification of people according to external signs also functions as a caption of some sort, which echoes Mabanckou’s assigned role in real life when he publishes pictures of *sapeurs* on Twitter with the following mention: “SAPE: they do it, I theorize it.” As a matter of fact, Fessologue knows that he is evolving in a world that constantly categorizes him and his friends according to criteria over which he has no control, such as the color of his skin.

His reading of other people can then be perceived either as a way to forge his own system of knowledge or a means to denounce, by exaggeration, the systematic categorization of beings, especially of those whose voices are marginalized. There is, however, an evolution within Fessologue’s trajectory that makes him reconsider his reading grid. In the same way that Sarah expands his preconceived ideas about

contemporary painting and literature, his theories about people are reevaluated. For instance, despite her very dark skin, his ex-girlfriend “*Couleur d’origine*” (Color of origin) was not born in Congo but in France. As for Sarah, the French-Belgium painter and avid reader, she does not have the flat bottom that he associates with intellectuals but one that Paul-The-Ivoirian judges the equal to the women of Abidjan. On many occasions, the outside does not match what he expected the “inside” to be, according to his frame of reference. Fessologue has firsthand experience of being misread, making one of this “misreading a focal point for [the novel’s] own readers” (Knox 85). One day while he is feeling especially well dressed and full of himself, he is confused as to why the passersby start yelling at him before realizing that he is wearing the same outfit color as the agents of the Parisian public transportation system, who are yet again on strike. Contrary to Julius, however, he is capable of growing and exceeding his own reading grid to integrate new and different realities, forging meaningful connections in the process.

Julius’s own experience of misreading results in more pain, as he recounts the evening when he was attacked by two young Blacks in the street of New York. Before the mugging, he had passed by the two boys and wildly misread the situation:

There had earlier been, it occurred to me, only the most tenuous of connections between us [...], a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being “brothers.” [...] It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here. (212)

In this scene Julius thought, wrongly, that he had a connection with these teenagers, thus issuing the same claim of brotherhood that he is rejecting from other African descendant characters he meets in the novel. The boys might have perceived him as an easy target, a

man walking by himself in Harlem at night, as a foreigner, that is, a non-American Black, or they could have misinterpreted his nod as a “sexual question” (54) as Julius did with the guard of the American Folk Art Museum who approached him earlier that day.

Fessologue and Julius are aware that a certain reified identity, accompanied by a specific set of characteristics that are associated with it, is assigned to them from the outside—a projection that they use as well on others. In a society that organizes itself around a classification system like that, one struggles to be perceived otherwise or to change and reinvent oneself. Just like the art works that appear in both novels, rigid frames delimit Fessologue and Julius: borders that they wish to be porous but that people are constantly using to contain them. Indeed, any deviation from the norms and values attached to the delineated racial, gender, national, and/or class identities can and, more often than not, will be read negatively. For instance, when Fessologue tries to find who he is as a writer towards the end of *Black Bazar*, with the influence of Sarah, some people accuse him of betraying his African identity:

A Gabonese who was hanging out in front of the McDonald’s at the train station suggested that I was pathetic, that if I straighten my hair it is because I was not comfortable with my negritude, that I had a serious condition, and that I brought shame upon the most beautiful race in the world, the one that lies at the origins of everything in the world. (244)

The remarks of the Gabonese illustrate what Mabanckou calls the politics of authenticity, a logic he is wary of and challenges in many of his books. He addresses it more specifically in *Le sanglot de l’homme noir*, where he gives examples of how this politics has sometimes led to dire consequences, such as during the “zaïrianisation” of Zaïre under Mobutu Sese Seko (101), and responds to African intellectuals and writers who

have conceptualized authenticity in regards to literature. Mabanckou, along with other writers like Léonora Miano, vividly refutes the idea that an African writer should not write in French, as I have mentioned earlier, and that she or he ought to sound the praises of an idealized Africa. Katelyn Knox, in her article “Selling (out) on the Black Market: *Black Bazar*’s literary Sape” contends that the interplay of gazes at work in the novel, the process of reading and misreading, “closely parallel the scrutiny and assumptions to which black authors and their works are subjected” (58). In a similar way that for the Gabonese character Fessologue has to conform to a certain image of what an African is supposed to look like, Mabanckou argues that some African critics expect writers from the continent to restrict themselves to predetermined images of Africa, at the risk of being accused of literary depigmentation.

Julius encounters similar nativist claims when the employee of a New York post office, who describes himself as a poet and writer, tells him:

‘Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland. And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean. Let me tell you something: I am raising my daughters as Africans. (186)

It does not come as a surprise that Julius dislikes this interaction, given his reluctance to be claimed from the outside, especially when it is linked to Africa, something with which he has somewhat severed ties. Moreover, Julius is more interested in the two Spanish-speaking men he observes before and after entering the post office, highlighting the fact that he involves himself in narratives that speak to him for one reason or another, not with the stories that are laid upon him. Julius actually goes to the post office to send

Farouq a book by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, a work deeply concerned with the morals and principles guiding our approach to others. It is notable that in Brussels, Julius and Farouq had a conversation on literary authenticity in which Farouq reacted negatively to Julius's latest read, a novel by the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun:

But Tahar Ben Jelloun, as I was saying, writes out of a certain idea of Morocco. It isn't the life of people that Ben Jelloun writes about but stories that have an oriental element in them. His writing is mythmaking. It isn't connected to people's real life. (103)

However, as Julius pursues the discussion further, it becomes clear that what Farouq is denouncing is Ben Jelloun's position as a Moroccan author within the publishing market place, as according to him, writers in exile benefit from "a certain *poeticity*" (104). This is a remark that Fessologue also makes when he envies his Haitian friend Louis-Philippe: "I wish I were Haitian in order to be a writer in exile, to understand the singing of the migrating birds [...]" (183). Farouq's argument is something that both Cole and Mabanckou are used to hearing as they live and write outside of their native countries.⁵⁶ It is true that writers in exile often enjoy more visibility as Western publishers favor them but, as a result, they tend to face the previous criticism of being disconnected from African realities and thus of relaying inauthentic images of it.

Julius and Fessologue exemplify their authors' conviction that there is not one single way to be authentically African, as opposed to an original fixed image of "Africanness." In *Black Bazar*, the multiplicity of subjectivities, representations, and

⁵⁶ Teju Cole was born in the United States by Nigerian parents but raised in Nigeria.

cultural references subvert the validity, and the values, attached to the notion of the original and hence, of authenticity. Fessologue interacts with many Africans and Afro-descendants that are all different from each other, hold diverse visions of the world, and express themselves differently. Even though Fessologue does use his own system of categorization, there is no hierarchy of Africanness in his eyes. To continue with the snapshot quality of Fessologue's depictions, even if the Polaroid allows one to take many pictures very quickly, "each print is a unique object" (Sontag, 125)

The questioning of the binary oppositions between authentic/inauthentic is also at work in both novels' treatment of cultural artifacts in the form of original/reproduction (or copy). Mabanckou's novel contains an impressive amount of cultural references, ranging from the literary canons to mainstream popular movies that are evoked side by side. The literary knowledge of the characters, most of them barflies, demonstrates the influence that the written text has on their imagination, representation, and reality. The diversity of the writers quoted throughout the novel also highlights that Africans share many cultural references with people across the world and that there exist universal themes that can find a global resonance. In fact, the question that the regulars of the *Jip's* ask to the budding writer are those related to originality: what is Fessologue going to write about, is it possible to write about something that hasn't been said already? Mabanckou addresses these suspicions in *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, when he asserts that "a topic, by essence, is not static. It is often *explored* and *re-explored*" (112).

The references to other writers and artists and the indirect, often distorted quotation of their work are so numerous that they constitute a significant part of the

written text. Moreover, the names of the writers are often left out and there are never any quotation marks. These stories or quotes have become fully part of the protagonists' everyday lives so much so that the stories seem to belong as much to them as to their original writer(s). As a consequence, during his writerly quest, Fessologue is placed on an equal footing with these canonical authors while they nourish the very substance of his prose (Knox 88). This system of quotation, however, just like his reproduction of clichés, is not passive; rather, it is a means to create a new literary and personal style. In the era of mass reproduction, a cliché (or a theme) can be infinitely duplicated, distorted, or even re-appropriated, eventually becoming distinct from the original. It creates a new story in its relationship to the "original." Even though Fessologue inscribes himself in the continuity of these writers, he finds his own voice toward the end of the novel and completes his book thanks to this artful montage. Knox refers to this quotation system as "literary *sape*" (58) because Fessologue assembles many different literary references, like a *sapeur* does with clothing brands, to fashion/style himself into a writer of his own.

As I have shown earlier with the example of the panorama and the city of New York, in Julius's vision, reproductions can sometimes feel more genuine than the original(s) or reality itself. The link between original/reproduction appears even more relevant if we apply it to how Julius metaphysically conceives of his relationship to the world and reality. Indeed, one day, during a visit to a Chinese shop, he sees a marching band passing by outside whose music reminds him of the songs he had to sing during Military School in Nigeria. There, he experiences "the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from its mirrored wall, could

clearly see the world doubled in on itself. I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began” (192). Such an episode is telling of Julius’s conceptualization of reality as a spectacle, which as Guy Debord advances in *The Society of the Spectacle*, is “not a collection of images [but] a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (4). This fragmentation—*dédoublement*—“to be both original and reflection” (*Open City*, 192) is expressed through the images that are associated with us as well as the stories we create around people and events.

Although Julius is not a writer per se, and there are no anecdotes about him writing, it is possible that he considers himself as being part of the same creative field as when the post office poet asks him about it, he answers: “No, I said. I wouldn’t exactly call myself a writer” (188). It is true that his gaze constitutes a permanent act of rewriting the city and others and when he comes home from his walks, his remapping of time and space: “I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming” (6). Julius is first and foremost a storyteller and an avid consumer of stories. Nonetheless, he takes more interest in the narratives surrounding people, events, or monuments than these things themselves, establishing connections with originals via the mediation of description, representation, and reproduction. Likewise, he attempts to know more about his grandmother by proxy, through interactions with people that resemble her in some way. Ultimately, Julius does not view anything as unique, fixed in time and space forever; he sees the world as composed of a network of infinitesimal resonances and reflections.

In addition, Julius does not hesitate to tell second-hand stories and pass them off as his own, thus engaging in small acts of plagiarism. A striking example of that is when he spends the day at the park with his friends, including Moji, and he tells them stories about his patients to entertain them, “even passing some of [his] colleagues’ patients as [his] own” (201). Julius essentially suggests that we all are participating in this storytelling process, at times imitating others or self-plagiarizing ourselves, choosing the narratives of the self that best fit the situation. The conversation between Farouq, Khalil and Julius, mentioned earlier, is a good instance of what could be seen as an “inauthentic” conversation as Khalil and Farouq follow their script as extremists, and Julius follows his as the outraged American. At the same time, Julius does not seem to perceive this “inauthenticity” as inherently negative, not even in his case. For him, all speakers are inauthentic, just like every image, every memory betrays something about the truth, the “real” thing, the “real” event.

Katelyn Knox notes that in *Black Bazar*, Fessologue lists one of his favorite clothing brands as “Cerruti 1884,” while the right name of the couturier is Cerruti 1881 (60). Instead of reading it as a mistake or as a sign of Fessologue’s inability to understand the market to which he wishes to belong, she argues that it could be a conscious choice and that “*Black Bazar* leaves open the possibility that what critics might interpret as signs of authors’ ‘inauthenticity’ are, instead, calculated moves that undermine this notion’s most basic tenets” (60). While it could also be a way for Fessologue to play with his audience and check their knowledge of the *sape*, I agree that it could be read as another instance of Fessologue taking liberties with reality and claiming a different kind of

relation to truth and authenticity. In his latest publication, *Rumeurs d'Amérique*, Mabanckou highlights this link between *sape* and literature. He argues that if the *sape* is often conceived of as being the reverse of African authenticity, because of its emulation of the style (literary and sartorial) of the colonist, sapeurs have created their own tradition that has in turn become influential (137-8). They are, in sum, uncertified copies of an original that has become harder and harder to secure.

Literature and other cultural artifacts circulate within a global market that Cole and Mabanckou, along with their narrators, have to acknowledge and negotiate. Both writers tend to be affiliated under the label of Afropolitan writers, a category that faces criticism for catering to a Western audience and for presenting an aesthetic and privileged dimension of Africa over a political one. However, their novel problematizes the commodification of black culture, and in fact, of cultural artifacts in general. As Knox points out, the multiplicity of cultural references without the names of their author/creator in *Black Bazar* “suggests that all cultural works—not just African ones—are subject to processes of commodification in cultural markets” (65). Within this context of mass reproduction and mass distribution, Cole and Mabanckou interrogate the notions of truth and knowledge as stable entities. Along with “the stability of the past,” especially when it is accessed through images (Montero 110), Cole, Mabanckou, and Marker before them, question the stability of enunciation, representation, and mediation.

Their writing investigates the tension, in art, between the expectations of authenticity, in the sense of “conforming to an original” or “based on facts,” and the demands for originality, in the sense of “novelty,” offering something different and

unique.⁵⁷ Doesn't the act of writing always imply forgery, in the archaic sense of invention? Images, films, memories, and stories function at once as exposure and concealment of facts and things, a duplicity that became the very structure of *Sans Soleil*, *Black Bazar*, and *Open City*. The relation between art and reality is even more complicated by the fact that Cole and Mabanckou share many autobiographical details with their fictive narrator/protagonist. We find a similar blurring of identities in *Sans Soleil*, in which the different protagonists, "Sandor Krasna, the cameraman," "Michel Krasna, his younger brother," the composer of the film's soundtrack, and "Hayao Yamaneko, the video-artist" and creator of the Zone are all one and the same person: Chris Marker ("Behind the veils of *Sans Soleil*").

Conclusion

Black Bazar and *Open City* are two novels deeply concerned with the reception and circulation of a work of art, especially in the era of globalization, mechanical reproduction, and digital diffusion. It is remarkable that both texts leave the reader unsettled, with an open ending that gives her or him room for interpretation, and in so doing, a responsibility as a viewer/reader. Mabanckou's novel closes on Sarah, Fessologue's new girlfriend, reading his manuscript that will eventually become *Black Bazar*: she asks him "Is my color also a color of origin?" before bursting into laughter.

⁵⁷ Definition adapted from the *Merriam-Webster dictionary* ("Authentic." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic>. Accessed 30 February 2018).

As a matter of fact, laughter and humor run deep in Mabanckou's prose and his caustic tone constitutes the hallmark of his production. Many elements of the novel bring, indeed, laughter or a smile on the part of the reader. Nevertheless, Sarah's reaction remains difficult to decipher: is she dismissing his prose, interpreting it as something not serious? Is she laughing because she feels uncomfortable after reading it? Or is she, quite simply, entertained by Fessologue's creativity? Mabanckou maintains that ambiguity, not telling us more about her opinion of the text or about Fessologue's response, because this last scene determines the relationship of a specific audience to the text, a Western, white audience represented by Sarah. Although throughout the whole novel, African protagonists offer their two cents to Fessologue about his project, it is on Sarah's reading that the book focuses.

Fessologue waits until the end of the novel to extend very clearly the ethical question of the act of gazing/reading to his readership. The problematic has been thoroughly discussed in the discipline of film studies, particularly by Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton in their work *Film and Ethics, Foreclosed Encounters*, in which they wonder: "Who is looking at whom, and how, and what kind of relationships are established or dismantled in this encounter?" (20) Because of the visual texture of the text, the reader could be required to reflect on both her or his reading and viewing practice (Knox 88). Is a Western, white audience, to which I belong, allowed to laugh at Fessologue's collection of clichés about Africans? Is that laughter a genuine sentiment or the only remedy when we are faced with something that shocks us, something that demands that we look at our own actions and blind spots? After all, Fessologue's story,

beyond its “happy ending,” recounts the life of an illegal immigrant, whose journey from Congo to France was painful, and the tragedy of a man who was deceived and left abruptly by his girlfriend and will probably never see his daughter again.

Nonetheless, Mabanckou plays with the discomfort the images he convoked creates within the reader and does not offer any clear explanation. The last words Sarah pronounces are words of love, an invitation for Fessologue to move in with her, which seems to indicate that it is precisely by working through this discomfort that people can get closer to one another. Julius also understands the power of laughter as a means to find relief when we hear, see, or look at something that makes us uneasy. During the day at the park with his friends, this relief comes from a funny line by Lise-Anne, the girlfriend of Julius’s African American friend, that breaks the uncomfortable silence that fell on them after that friend mentioned his traumatic childhood. A few pages later, Julius reflects on the stories about his and other doctors’ patients that he told to entertain his friends and comes to the conclusion that “There is a long marriage between comedy and human suffering” (208).

By his own admission, Cole is “attracted, in art, to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader” (“Palimpsest City,” *3:AM Magazine*). This explains why *Open City* contains a similar moment of destabilization as in *Black Bazar* towards the end, when Moji confronts Julius about what happened in Nigeria when they were both younger. Moji’s accusation is unsettling enough, but Julius’s reaction to her, or lack thereof, completely shifts the perspective the reader had of the narrator so far. If we were to read the novel a second time, this event would change the filter through which we

would perceive Julius from the beginning, acting as an underlying caption that would completely transform our idea of the narrator. The revelation of Julius's alleged crime disrupts the idea the reader holds of herself or himself as a "compassionate" listener (*Open City* 70), just like Julius with the undocumented immigrant he visited in jail. This time, however, the narration offers no way out, no comic relief. The readers need to come to term with the scene on their own, by accepting the uncertainty of the scene and making peace with the fact of not knowing. *Sans Soleil* arose a similar feeling of uncertainty within its viewers, which leads Mavor to envision the black leader of the opening as "interpretation postponed" (750). We never get the meaning of the first memory, the image of happiness, and the film aptly ends on a question, that comes not from the cameraman Krasna but his addressee (the reader): "Will there be a last letter?"

The visual art objects and the visual language that traverse the text matter, because they duplicate the story and open another, active space of reception for both novels and their artifacts. Cole and Mabanckou have gone beyond recording and archiving the images that compose their everyday life, they have fashioned their own visual and aural references outside of these texts: Cole collaborated with the jazz artist Vijay Iyer to create an "Open City suite," Mabanckou produced a music album entitled "Black Bazar" in collaboration with the Congolese musicians Modogo Abarambwa and Sam Tshintu.

CHAPTER 3: GENDER/GENRE NETWORK – RELATIONALITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S *AMERICANAH* AND LÉONORA MIANO’S *BLUES POUR ÉLISE*.⁵⁸

In 2018, superstars Beyoncé and Jay-Z created the buzz with their music video for the song “Apeshit” recorded in an exclusively empty Louvre in Paris. During the six-minute-long video, the couple occupies the space, posing in front of canonical artifacts from Delacroix to Egyptian art, becoming themselves works of art in narrating their story of self-made success. The video made a great impact because of its symbolic gesture: the claiming of a space of classical, “high culture” that has traditionally been perceived as white, the juxtaposing of pop culture embedded in hip-hop and rap with the most established of artworks. The two singers do not present themselves as others “invading” the legitimate ground of the Louvre—they inhabit it quite naturally (and stylishly), with ease—nor are they catering to it or being assimilated to it—they revisit the museum and its artworks following their own direction and imagery. In doing so, they create new possibilities, new relations, new narratives that challenge some of the binary oppositions, such as the high-brow/low-brow (pop culture) one, underlying the cultural field.⁵⁹

Throughout his research on pop culture, the scholar Stuart Hall emphasizes the idea that mainstream culture does not consist of fixed, hierarchized concepts or categories but rather that it is made of interconnected power relations that are constantly evolving

⁵⁸ Parts of this chapter were published previously in the following article: “Réseaux de genres : relationnalité et intersectionnalité dans *Americanah* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie et *Blues pour Élise* de Léonora Miano,” *Études Littéraires Africaines*, n°47, pp 101-117

⁵⁹ In fact, the Carters’ pop culture power brought on more visibility to the historic museum. In 2018, following the release of the music video, the Louvre reached its highest number of visitors: 10.2 million of people visited the museum that year (“Beyoncé and Jay-Z help Louvre museum break visitor record in 2018,” *The Guardian*).

and changing place (106-7). The two writers we are studying in this chapter, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Léonora Miano, understand the significance of cultural power and the need for African and Afro-descendant art to position itself in a different fashion with regard to its relation with Western culture. Indeed, both of them refuse the principles that portray African culture, in this case specifically African literature, as geographically limited and specific as opposed to a Western culture that would be universal. Not only does African literature suffer from what Miano identifies as its “non-universality” (*Habiter la frontière* 43), it is also mainly approached through a sociological and anthropological lens, or restricted to its oral and traditional characteristics. On the other hand, European names fill up the archives of high culture and general academic subject matters. Miano and Adichie aim to escape this dichotomy that forces a work to be *either* African, following criteria of authenticity designed around specific themes and aesthetic modes, *or* universal (by-default Western) in addressing mainstream topics and espousing styles dictated by Western publishers and audiences.

The categorization of African culture resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of masculine domination, according to which “the particularity of the dominant is that they are in a position to ensure that their particular way of being is recognized as universal” (62). As the writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous pointed out in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, the conception of an African continent kept at a distance and characterized by its alterity, opacity, and strangeness bears many similarities with the androcentric vision of the woman, that is of the feminine gender as a sexual habitus. With regard to this, Bourdieu explains that these principles of division, at work in the ways of

thinking that support gender and sex-based differentiation, is legitimized and naturalized by its insertion into a larger “system of homologous oppositions [such as] up/down, above/below” (7). And yet, this very system rests upon arbitrary constructions, consequences of a specific historical and social process.

To fight against this categorization process, Miano and Adichie, in *Blues pour Élise*⁶⁰ and *Americanah* respectively, adopt an approach that emulates the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins’ conceptualization of the both/and that lies at the center of her research on black feminist thought. The “both/and” status as developed by Collins applies specifically to African American women as they experience intersectional identity positions, notably as *both black and women, both black women and American* (238).⁶¹ Taken as a theoretical framework to read Adichie’s and Miano’s texts, the both/and concept works as a driving force that subverts and complicates the binary schemes sustaining an enduring social order of domination. In *BPE* and *Americanah*, the rethinking of genre and gender is inextricably linked. It provides a different logic and a different knowledge system based on the multiplicity and fluidity of real-life experiences rather than on the structural system that aims at containing them via oversimplification. To do so, they favor a politics and a poetics of relationality and connectivity that unfold within the fiction as well as at the formal level of the text.

Both of the novels engage stylistically and formally with other genres and mediums of culture, the most important being pop culture whose soft power Miano and

⁶⁰ *Blues pour Élise* will henceforth be referred to as *BPE*.

⁶¹ We find the both/and concept in the works of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall as well.

Adichie consider and examine as a narrative device and plot element. Such an experimentation can be tricky because as African women writers, the two of them already face many boundaries and expectations about what they can or cannot do. It has traditionally been harder for women to be taken seriously within the intellectual field, therefore integrating elements borrowed from a TV sitcom and popular music (Miano) or from romance stories and internet blogs (Adichie) considered lighter and more playful—low-brow—could pigeonhole them into overlooked categories. However, Miano and Adichie embrace a transversal approach to the relations between genres and mediums, focusing on the new tensions and complexities these combinations create and produce rather than on their legitimacy. Published in 2010 and 2013, respectively, *BPE* and *Americanah* are both strongly oriented towards the future and the upcoming generation. They both come to terms with the shifting and evolving fabric of cultural power in foreseeing a society in which a class like “Beyoncé Feminism. Rihanna Womanism” can be part of a university course catalog.⁶²

In questioning the monolithic conception and limitations imposed on what constitutes or does not constitute valid, legitimate knowledge, Miano and Adichie have to address the gender and racial components that affect cultural power relations. Disturbing the schemes of binary oppositions that lie at the center of the cultural field goes hand in hand with debunking dualisms that support a patriarchal and socially unequal order. For

⁶² A course that Omiseeke Natasha Tinsley, Associate Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at UT Texas created in 2014 and has taught since then. The course’s subject matter gathered a lot of attention from news outlets and is extremely popular amongst students on campus.

instance, in their “Apeshit” music video, Beyoncé and Jay-Z reclaim not only a normatively white institution but also a traditionally masculine space in which men are the artists and women their object of study. Throughout the art works they carefully showcase and the staging of their bodies in space, in relation to the art and to one another, the couple promote a crafted representation of gender equality in which they both are their own Pygmalions of their relationship.⁶³

In *BPE* and *Americanah*, the transversality and fluidity of genres and mediums at the formal and fictional levels are paralleled in the interpersonal interactions and identifications of the characters of the novels. Both texts present a great multiplicity and diversity of protagonists whose connections are emblematic of the Internet age and the unique way of sharing and communicating it created. Miano and Adichie observe how their characters interact with the cultural representations that influence their understanding of what constitutes their gender and racial identities. They also investigate how these perceptions can be transformed by the experience(s) of love and friendship. These relationships open up a space within which the reconfiguration of the modalities of the feminine and the masculine appears to be possible, reinforcing the scholar bell hooks’ conviction that all the “deconstructive explanatory theory is meaningless if it is not rooted in the recognition that the most fundamental challenge to domination is the choice to love” (199).

⁶³ Taylor Hosking offers an insightful and nuanced analysis of the couple’s “new vision of gender in ‘Apeshit’” in her article for *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/06/beyonce-and-jay-zs-new-way-of-looking-at-gender/563360/.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theorizations of taste and domination, bell hooks and Alain Badiou's philosophies on the practice of love, Françoise Vergès' plea for a decolonial feminism, and Patricia Hill Collins's seminal work on black feminism, the present chapter examines how, through this literary and creative practice and strategy, both authors criticize dominant models of knowledge and legitimacy and defy the traditional system of genre/gender classification (cultural and sexual). In harmony with the main argument of this chapter about the role of pop culture, references to pop culture punctuate the analysis with a special attention to the election of Barack Obama—a central event in both texts—and its impact on the cultural field.

Fluidity of Gender/Genre: Refusing Compartmentalization and Hierarchization

When it comes to defining *Americanah* and answering the usual interview question of “What is your book about?” Adichie states that: “My new novel is about love, race...and hair” (*The Guardian*). This answer reveals her will to not elect one specific genre or theme and, therefore, to not hierarchize or categorize her novel. More importantly, it also affirms her choice to adopt the style of the romantic novel. Indeed, the title *Americanah* seems to refer more to the theme of migration since the term, slightly mocking, is used to describe the attitude of a Nigerian who, after a prolonged stay in the United States, acts as an “American” when she or he goes back home. An “Americanah” typically behaves as a foreigner and sometimes expresses condescending views about life in Nigeria. However, even if the element of migration plays a central role in the narration, it remains an integral part of the larger plot that follows the fates of Ifemelu and Obinze's

relationship. This preeminence of the love story is the key element of the romance genre in which “the main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (*Romance Writers of America*).

Adichie’s stance is a way to reject the postulate that consists in electing one genre, one style, one theme, often considered as noble or academic—in this case, the novel tackling the subject of race and immigration—in opposition to another, that would then be low-brow or popular—the romance. She reiterates such an aesthetic stand when developing her answer during the interview with *The Guardian*, in which she adds: “It is about love. I wanted to write an unapologetically old-fashioned love story. But it is *also* about race [...] And it is *also* about hair...” (emphasis mine). Through such a statement, Adichie acknowledges the existence of a highly connected, gender and genre bending readership that have consumed and transformed popular culture and its definition in the last few decades. Even though Bourdieu’s system of distinction under which people aim at distinguishing themselves from others and other groups via the expression of their cultural preferences and tastes remains in effect, the internet culture definitely modified its initial hierarchical structure. Although not everyone has access to the internet and it remains ruled by a capitalist, dominant regime, it does allow for a diversity of people to express themselves, to connect through, and exchange about their cultural preferences and their personal experiences in a more direct, democratic way. The reader of *Americanah* can take an interest in Ifemelu’s thoughts about the issue of race and its politics in the United States while not being able to stop wondering if the young couple will eventually reunite.

And, indeed, the novel meets the second criterion that characterizes the romance genre, as defined by the Romance Writers of America organization, because it has “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” that concludes with the triumph of Ifemelu and Obinze’s true love. The fact that she “wanted to write an unapologetically old-fashioned love story” (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: ‘Don’t we all write about love?’” *The Guardian*) expresses Adichie’s awareness that the genre of the romance and the theme of love have been and still are derided as a lower and frivolous cultural taste.⁶⁴ What is more, many scholars have commented on the conscious or unconscious linking between romance and women in the collective imaginary. It seems that love stories derive their lower status mainly from its association with the feminine. As scholar Laurie Langbauer argues, romance has been constructed as the novel’s other just like women have been constructed as men’s other (3). Needless to say, *Americanah* is not officially categorized as a romance: you would not find it alongside the Harlequin romance series in a library or bookstore (not that these are not worthy of academic interest). However, it is necessary to account for Adichie’s choice to incorporate elements of a genre so negatively marked by the feminine and the pop culture market.

Love and romance also drive the narration in Miano’s *BPE* in which the group of friends navigate the joys and hardships of love and sex that young, urban, professional women encounter. Miano continues to explore these themes in her more recent

⁶⁴ In the survey conducted by Bourdieu with regard to the “Tastes and Cultural Practices of Classes and Class Fractions,” the category “love stories” ranks the lowest for upper classes and middle classes alike and obtains the higher percentage amongst the working classes. Table A.4, *Appendix 3, La Distinction*, p. 530.

publications, such as the collective work *Volcaniques: Une anthologie du plaisir* (2015), composed of twelve short stories about women's sexuality penned by writers from the African diaspora, and her latest novel *Rouge Impératrice* (2019). In an interview with *Mediapart* following the release of *Rouge Impératrice*, Miano asserts that "Africa also has the right to be the embodiment of love." She has commented many times on the fact that Sub-Saharan writers are always restricted to specific, delimited "African" themes. According to her, they are not only expected to talk about Africa (from the conventional perspective of the catastrophe), but also that they do so in a so-called "authentic" way—that is to say, according to conventions that have been actually considerably constructed by the West. As a writer and a reader, she deplores the fact that the topics of love and pleasure are mainly absent from the representations of Sub-Saharan people and that if they are addressed, it is mainly through the angle of pain and suffering ("Rentrée littéraire : rencontre avec Léonora Miano," *Mediapart*).

Through works such as *Americanah* and *BPE*, Adichie and Miano can highlight the diversity, freedom, and creativity of their sensitivity and style. In both novels, the authors reclaim their rights to tell love stories, despite their negative association with a lower, feminine culture (adding to the fact that African writers already tend to be considered a subcategory in literature) and the presumption that grandiose love tales with a happy-ending are the privilege of a mostly white, western population.⁶⁵ Miano and

⁶⁵ The Romance Writers of America (RWA) organization published in an official statement about their RITA awards that between 2000 and 2017 "the number of finalist books by black authors is less than half of 1% of the total number of finalist books" and that "no black romance author has ever won a RITA."

Adichie appropriate, reinvent, and revalorize a genre and a theme whose traditional definitions concentrate many underlying prejudices and power dynamics. At the heart of this determination lies the will and the need to disturb the boundaries between genres/genders and to propose alternative stories of relationality catering to an audience that moves freely and fluidly from mainstream pop culture to the literary world, from the quick connection of the web page to the solitary reflection of the printed book.

Miano is comfortable playing with many genres, which she demonstrates via the richness of her production, from the novel to the essay, by way of the theater. And yet, *BPE* differs indisputably from the rest of her work. Subtitled “Afropean segment, season 1,” the novel has been rightly compared in Nicki Hitchcott’s article “Sex and The Afropean City” to the TV series *Sex and the City*.⁶⁶ Just like its small-screen counterpart, it follows the lives of four women friends who have to juggle the sometimes-conflicting matters of their careers, romantic and sexual relations, and personal fulfillment (Hitchcott 124)—with the exception that the characters are Afropean. It is an important departure from the premise of the popular American TV show that has been criticized for centering only on white, privileged, straight women.

In *BPE*, the reader gets to know the characters through vivid vignettes that immerse her or him in the middle of the young women’s everyday life while offering a rapid depiction of their physical and personality traits. You have Shale, the independent,

⁶⁶ Although Miano clearly designed her novel as a template for a TV show, it is unclear whether or not she ever intended to turn it into a series. In her book *Race on Display in 20th-and 21st Century France*, Katelyn Knox mentions that “network executives refused [*Blues pour Élise*] airtime” (97), but I couldn’t find any official corroboration of this.

androgynous artist; Amahoro, the extravagant friend always in a good mood; Akasha, fragile and unhappy in love; and Malaïka, the *bon vivant* who has embraced her imperfections. In her article entitled “Emerging Afro-Parisian ‘chick-lit’ by Lauren Ekué and Léonora Miano,” Susanne Gehrman conceives more broadly of *BPE* as Miano’s adaptation of “Anglo-American chick-lit conventions” (215). This genre details “the trials and tribulations of young women searching for mates and/or struggling in jobs, often in the publishing world, while doing a lot of shopping along the way”(Tania Modleski qtd. in Susanne Gehrman, 216). By claiming the codes of the sitcom and combining them with her poetic and musical writing, both arts belonging to the “high-brow” culture, Miano forges a new connection with reality and the reader.

The impression of instantaneity that the composition of the novel conveys reinforces the representation(s) of Amahoro, Akasha, Malaïka, and Shale as modern young women whose experiences are simultaneously singular and familiar. Despite the criticism that *Sex and the City* faced towards the end of its broadcasting, and that I discuss later in relation to *BPE*, many scholars and critics have insisted on the innovations and influence of the show. Besides its creative ability to “[reshape] conventional wisdom about women and sex” (97), the writer Andi Zeisler points out in *We Were Feminists Once* that the HBO series “remains a turning point in feminist television because its characters were so polarizing, flawed, even unlikable” (99). Zeisler is actually the co-founder of *Bitch Media*, a feminist media organization whose main goal is “to take pop culture seriously as a force that shapes the lives of everyone, and argue for its importance as an arena for feminist activism and analysis” (2). This statement rings

especially true in the case of *BPE*, which borrows some of the playful traits of the chick-lit and the sitcom *and* addresses serious social and political issues such as racism, trauma, traditional gender roles, and body normativity. As a matter of fact, Miano states that *BPE* was criticized and targeted as an “anti-white text because its main focus is on black couples” (*Habiter la frontière* 76). Therefore, despite its more playful tone and style, the novel remains a site of politicization and polarization in a way that escapes even the writer’s stated aims. The combination and balance of genres and themes allow Miano to achieve what she repeatedly asserts as one of her goals: talking about the important problems and questions that impact people of Sub-Saharan descent in France while never painting them as victims.

In addition to its romance inflexions, the form of *Americanah* also integrates elements of pop, social media culture. One of the central aspects of the novel revolves around the successful blog that the main protagonist, Ifemelu, manages—just like Carrie, the star columnist of *Sex and the City*. The contrast between the fiction and the blog, whose entries are sometimes integrally incorporated into the narration, allows for readers to get involved on two different levels: they become at once the recipient of the novel and of the blog. Adichie plays with the advantages offered by the form of the blog, notably its instantaneous-like quality that seems to abolish the distance between the authors and the Internet users. The blog entries, in which Ifemelu expresses herself “directly” on the role of race in the United States, are in turn nuanced, or supplemented, by the narrative voice of the novel that comments on the blog entries and provides more background to understand them.

Besides, this interplay is a means to get a message across via different voices and routes. In the days of “Twittérature” and of the ever-growing presence of writers online, the narrow definitions that delimited the literary genres and restricted the legitimacy of mediums and forms of expression have started to crumble. Ifemelu’s blog thus moved from fiction to reality with the website www.americanahblog.com created in 2014 that pursued the conversation started in the novel online. Internet access enabled a freer circulation of cultural and artistic productions, making obsolete the old delimitations between high and low culture. In fact, the more political subjects treated in the novel appear mainly in the embedded speech of the blog in which Ifemelu decodes some events of her life from a racialized perspective/race conscious perspective (for instance, her ex-boyfriend Curt becomes “The Hot White Ex”). If the subject matters explored in the blog are extremely serious, Ifemelu elects an urban, informal language shared amongst pop culture consumers and the digital generation.

Moreover, the style of the blog itself, which allows other Internet users to comment on posts and interact with Ifemelu, and the specific tone that Ifemelu adopts in hers, blur the frontiers between written and oral expression. Ifemelu’s blog has an oral-like quality that makes it especially accessible and attractive to a wide range of readers across class lines. Just like Adichie wanted to write unapologetically about love, Ifemelu uses the blog form to unapologetically address race-related issues in the United States in both an informal and serious manner. Through this medium, she reaches both a general audience and an academic one, who then court her and invite her to give talks. The use of the blog is particularly compelling because it is a space that fuses individual and

collective expression, the private field with the public domain. The opposition between public and private also belongs to the dividing system that Bourdieu explained, the private being traditionally associated with women while the public was considered as the ultimate masculine space. With her blog, Ifemelu succeeds in taking over a public space in which she can express herself freely and transform the personal and the private into a communal, radical political force.

Miano also crosses genres and mediums of expression in *BPE*, through her nods to the characteristics of the sitcom and chick-lit as well as through the powerful force of music that has always driven her writing. The reference to music is embedded in the title itself, *Blues pour Élise*, that inscribes the influence of music on the novel from the very beginning while already hinting to the mix of genres that characterizes the text: Miano adds a blues twist to Beethoven's classical "Lettre à Élise." She also integrates into her diegetic and extra-diegetic world musical titles of all genres that work as "sound atmospheres" in each section. The very structures and rhythms of the novel draw inspiration from music, more particularly from jazz and blues, emblematic genres of the African American vernacular culture. The blues genre holds a particularly dear place in Miano's aesthetic and creative process as, according to her, it excels at grasping "everyday life in its most miserable and wonderful aspects" (*Habiter la frontière* 22).⁶⁷ This is a feeling that resonates with the novelist Gayl Jones's appreciation of blues as a

⁶⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the place of music in Miano's work, see Catherine Mazauric's article "Débords musicaux du texte : vers des pratiques transartistiques de la désappartenance (Léonora Miano, Dieudonné Niangouna)" in *Nouvelles Études Francophones* (2012).

music that “talks about the simultaneity of good and bad [...] Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once” (qtd. in Collins, 152).

Is it not this kind of simultaneity, this acknowledgement of both feelings at once that the genre blending and bending practice of both novels aim to achieve? If jazz and blues are amongst the arts whose classification has evolved historically, as when Bourdieu wrote *Distinction* in 1979, they were in the process of being legitimized, Angela Davis remarked that “women’s blues was often designated as ‘low’ culture” (qtd. in Collins, 108). And yet, Davis, Collins, and many of their prominent peers who have conceptualized and written about black feminism have emphasized the political and social ramifications of the genre. Just like the medium of the blog, music for Miano, and the blues tradition in particular, has the capacity to combine the sphere of the individual and the realm of the collective. Commenting on the social power of the blues, Collins notes:

The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place, and yet this atmosphere is intensely personal and individualistic. When Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African American women. (106)

BPE opens up with a scene of Akasha getting ready for an evening of speed-dating while listening to what she calls her “soul therapy,” a playlist essentially composed of the best songs of the R&B and soul singer Millie Jackson. The music and its lyrics resonate deeply with her while she reminisces about her personal dating history, analyzing her past relationships and drawing conclusions about what kind of love she wants in the future. Akasha identifies strongly with songs that speak to her, despite the fact that they have

been written in the American context of the sixties and the seventies, not only on a personal level but also on the collective level about the role that race, gender, and colonialism play within the reality of romantic relations. For Miano, in addition to constituting a space of communication for black women, the blues is imbued with universality because it addresses themes of pain and joy that are common to all humankind (*Habiter la frontière*, 21). As seen earlier in this chapter with regard to previously derided categories such as pop culture, chick-lit, and sitcoms, the women's blues tradition becomes a transformative aesthetic and energy under Miano's pen.

The reconciliation and combination of genres that have been structurally constructed in binary opposition, such as good and bad, high and low, serious and frivolous produced texts that are incredibly dynamic and absorbing for the reader. If in *Americanah* music seems less palpable at first, the very theme of the work is rooted in contemporary African diaspora's popular culture, whose main mode of expression is sound. For Paul Gilroy, "the stories which dominate black popular culture are usually love stories or more appropriately love and loss stories" (201). In Adichie's novel, the variation love-loss applies to her relation with Obinze, her connection to Nigeria and the United States, and finally, to her link to her evolving self-identity. Above everything else, it is music that operates as a link between the two lovers in *Americanah*.⁶⁸ After all,

⁶⁸ It is instructive that in the music world, the term "Americana," which is distinct yet fully part of the Nigerian word and title of Adichie's *Americanah*, refers to: "[...] a contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B and blues, resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw." (<https://americanamusic.org/>)

music, which as Bourdieu explains is “bound with interiority” (*Distinction* 19), often acts as a staple of romance. When Ifemelu and Obinze first meet at a party, music starts playing and they share their first dance in a scene resembling any other rom-com “meet cute” moment. Then years later, when they reconnect in Nigeria, it is through the intermediary of music that they are implicitly able to reaffirm their love for each other:

Obiwon’s “Obi Mu O” started and she sat still and silent as the words filled the car: *This is that feeling that I’ve never felt... and I’m not gonna let it die*. When the male and female voices sang in Igbo, Obinze sang along with them, glancing away from the road to look at her, as though he was telling her that this was really their conversation, he calling her beautiful, she calling him beautiful, both calling each other their true friends. (546)

While some readers might be familiar with this contemporary Nigerian song, others can nonetheless relate to that feeling of a music or a song that resonates deeply with a specific situation or context, so much so that it seems to have been written for them. Bourdieu actually emphasizes that one of the main characteristics of the arts deemed to belong to “low” culture resides in the audience’s participation. Popular taste demonstrates the “desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters’ joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and ideals, living their lives [...]” (*Distinction* 33). Of course such an investment from the reader can express itself through works that we consider as canonical. These two particular texts nevertheless entice their readers’ participation on another level thanks to their respective use of a music soundtrack and a blog.

The characters of *BPE* and *Americanah* demonstrate a desire to connect with others, a desire that parallels the narrative strategies deployed by both authors, and to

start a conversation that could extend beyond the text. It is often the case that pop culture items, or other “higher” cultural artifacts that have been appropriated or diverted as pop-culture material, find a life of their own online. For instance, some Internet users have manipulated and reinterpreted scenes from *Sex and the City*, which was criticized for its lack of diversity and at times for its tone-deaf comments, to imagine a more inclusive show. It created an internet trend called “Woke Charlotte” which consists in reconstituting scenes in which the character of Charlotte, the most conservative and gender traditional of the friends, takes a stance that is informed by social and racial inequalities in reaction to blatant discourses of privilege and prejudice.

Within their novels, Adichie and Miano tap into different sources of knowledge. The code switching that results from the diversity of genres and topics they compose disturbs legitimate culture. Indeed, the reader who is not familiar with soul and blues music might want to do some research and look up some of the artists featured in the soundtrack of *BPE* in order to fully comprehend and be completely immersed in the atmosphere of the text. In a somewhat familiar fashion, Miano draws attention to Afropean designer brands, presented as references, which will probably be new to some of her readers. While reading *Americanah*, one needs to be comfortable transitioning from literary to pop culture references as well as from the academic, theoretical discourse around race to the vernacular language that accompanies the day-to-day experience of race. Although these works are not restricted to a specific audience, both will certainly appeal to readers that are as connected as their main characters—people who are navigating fluidly between different spaces and mediums, reading with their laptop open

or their cell phone within reach, ready to engage the texts in a variety of ways.

This fluidity translates itself beneficially outside of the realm of fiction too. While the popularity of Ifemelu's blog opens the doors to success and to the prestigious halls of Princeton University, Adichie's popularity as a writer gave her access to the status of icon within pop culture, especially with Beyoncé's sampling of her text *We Should All Be Feminist* in the song and video clip *Flawless*. There is no question that the singer broadcasted Adichie's name and words to a larger audience, reaching out in the process to a part of the population that the publishing industry does not necessarily embrace. Adichie rose to prominence on the public stage through both her literary production and her presentation of two TED Talks (Technology, Entertainment, Design). Using the format of short videos, TED Talks invites professionals to explain a concept, or share their takes, on a specialized subject ranging from philosophy to technology. The main goal of the talks is to make these ideas accessible and comprehensible to a large audience that does not belong to the specific field. Therefore, TED envisions itself as a mediator: providing high-brow content in a middle-brow/lower-brow form. Adichie's TED talks, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009) and "We Should All Be Feminists" (2012), which collected millions of views, are telling of her public persona, whose popularity crosses through the spheres of low and high brow. Both dimensions complement her persona.

Although Miano has deleted her blog, on which she used to write about her own work and to share her thoughts about her current readings of mainly Afro-descendant writers, and hasn't been active on Twitter since 2010, she still uses Facebook to promote her work as well as the creations of other Afro-descendant artists. Some of her novels

have been adapted for the theater, notably *BPE*, and she has also written plays and produced performances that transcend the genres of theater, literature, and music. Knox usefully highlights the “intermediality” of the novel as an artifact that does not abide by the exclusion/inclusion dynamic of categorization systems, an artifact that is “a literary novel” and “a television series,” and “a music album” (113). *BPE* was purposefully produced to be more accessible, in the same way as her 2008 collection of short stories *Afropean Soul et autres nouvelles* that can be read by adults and teens alike, and it is through the incorporation of pop culture that Miano accomplishes that goal without sacrificing the important issues about which she cares.

This perspective calls to mind Barack Obama, a central figure in both novels as their characters witness his election as the first African American president of the United States. The main protagonists, along with the readers, evolve in a world where it is possible for a black person to become the president of one of the wealthiest western countries and for that president to be deeply immersed in pop culture. In this way, *BPE* and *Americanah* are representative of the social and political context in which they were created—a time when the delineations between the political and the cultural were already blurred. A time when a president dared to sing Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together” during a public speech for a fundraiser in NYC and when the White House maintained genuine ties with the hip-hop community (Ta-Nehisi Coates, “My President Was Black”).

As she expresses throughout her collection of conferences, *Habiter la frontière*, Miano claims this fluidity of boundaries in response to “the ones who believe in the fixity of things, including of identities” (25). If boundaries can be envisioned in a positive

perspective, which Miano advocates, as a place of connection and sharing, it is then possible to rattle the system of oppositions that determines our schemes of thought. For example, if we consider with Bourdieu that the opposition high vs. low reproduces and incorporates the division masculine vs. feminine, then, a revalorization of “low culture” could be used to shake the masculine domination and its hegemonic, by-default neutral vision. It is precisely this association between low culture and women that is at play within the critics, and also the contempt, leveled against chick-lit and romance literature. Indeed, the consumption of low culture is seen as passive, subaltern, and influenced solely by emotions, all characteristics attributed to women, in opposition to men, in a system that supports the current social order. In *Americanah*, this correlation between high culture and masculinity is directly addressed within the fiction. Blaine, Ifemelu’s Yale professor boyfriend, intends to take on the role of her teacher and he is disappointed whenever she cannot appreciate what he deems to be worthy culture: abstract paintings, John Coltrane’s jazz, etc. (387). However, Ifemelu successfully resists his formal, inflexible training and learns to value and assert her own tastes and form of intelligence. Her personal trajectory within their romantic relationship illustrates this shift. When they first meet on the train, she hides her women’s magazine, and after that, she adopts his views that she associates with goodness and rightness. Towards the end, she realizes that there is more than one way to be “good” or “deep” and that all the topics she addresses in her blog, from hairstyle to politics, are valid insofar as they foster conversations.

The schemes of binary oppositions also incorporate the relation white/black, which is at stake in the two texts and which has been discussed at length when it comes to

the question of the cultural field, especially regarding readership. As we have seen with the video clip of Beyoncé and Jay-Z, legitimate, high culture is often considered as a primarily white space. For Michel, one of the main protagonists of *BPE*, the association between high culture and whiteness is so strong that he fears that having a classically educated public black figure like Barack Obama will force black people in general to become White (155). As excessive as Michel's opinion may seem, in its view of high culture and whiteness as synonymous, it conveys how important culture is as a site for contesting power and categorization. In their 2000 address during the César award ceremony, the writer Calixthe Beyala and the director and actor Luc Saint-Eloy denounced the lack of representation of Afro-descendant people in French cinema and media, critiquing the assumption that some people were considered as actors (active), Whites, and others as spectators (passive), Blacks. Andi Zeisler furthers the argument when she notes that there is an underlying belief in Hollywood fiction that "women, as well as non-white people, are not an audience" (49). If non-white people are not perceived as actors nor as audience, their voices and experiences are thus entirely absent from the realm of visual representation.

In looking at issues of race, gender, and genres all at once, Miano and Adichie position themselves as intersectional thinkers whose points of view align more with Françoise Vergès' definition of decolonial feminism. One of the central arguments of Vergès' essay questions the universal conception of gender as defined solely by European women's experiences. According to her, European feminism "only perceives the difference between men and women [which] contributes to the division of the world in

two” as it erases the additional struggles faced by people of color, women and men, and dismisses “the other conceptions of gender that exist outside of western ideology” (45).

In undermining the norms that regulate the power struggle between classical literature and pop culture, the two writers create new connections and open up the possibility for a space in which what Miano calls “frontier identities” (*Habiter la frontière* 25) have the opportunity to flourish outside any binary modes of thinking, while challenging the fixed thought processes that support the notions of race, femininity and masculinity, and legitimate culture.

Genre/Gender and Sexuality

Françoise Vergès favors a “multidimensional analysis” to an intersectional one because she rejects the “dividing of race, sexuality, and class in categories that would be mutually exclusive” (34).⁶⁹ *BPE* and *Americanah* embody a similar conviction in many ways and they do so more effectively through their focus on relationality and interconnectedness. The question of gender is central to both works, but it also takes into account the dynamics of race, class, and cultural capital, amongst others, and of the role they play in gender construction. Through the relation that the characters have with their

⁶⁹ Multidimensionality is both a continuation of the intersectional framework of analysis and a response to its perceived limitations, especially the ones expressed by LGBTQ+ theorists. It offers a more flexible tool to examine complex identities, paying special attention to context, social identities, and hierarchical structures. See Darren Lenard Hutchinson. “Identity Crisis: ‘Intersectionality,’ ‘Multidimensionality,’ and the Development of an Adequate Theory of Subordination.” *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, vol. 6, issue 2 2001, <http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/facultypub/387>; Athena D Mutua. "Multidimensionality Is to Masculinities What Intersectionality Is to Feminism." *Nevada Law Journal*, vol. 13, Issue 2 , Article 4, 2013, <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/nlj/vol13/iss2/4>.

bodies and the bodies of others around them, Miano and Adichie create a flow of encounters and echoes, both collective and individual.

In *BPE*, by means of an omniscient narrator whose compassionate focus enables the readers to apprehend the characters from the outside and the inside, Miano focuses successively on each friend individually before examining their relations of group and how these interactions influence and complicate the (self)-representation of each character. The novel, composed of scenes from everyday life—or snapshots—crafted vividly, borrows from the cinematic technique of parallel editing. In cinema, parallel editing allows the audience to follow different actions—in this case, the daily lives of several protagonists—simultaneously. This often leads to a scene in one common location—in *BPE*, like in *Sex and the City*, a bar or a restaurant where the friends meet.

Miano and Adichie use the links that connect the characters to one another, within a group of young people around the same age as well as across generations, as the vantage point to translate the complexity and plurality of their experiences as Afrodescendant men and women. In the case of Ifemelu, the plurality of voices favored in *BPE* finds its expression in another way. Readers follow Ifemelu's experiences and personal transformations over a much longer period of time thanks to the analepsis structure of the work. This allows them to witness her many social interactions and her grappling with different self-identities and voices. The passages that focus on Obinze's life complement the story of Ifemelu and help fill in the blanks of her past, creating a multi-dimensional depiction of the young woman. Adichie facilitates the shift between the chapters dedicated to Obinze and the ones dedicated to Ifemelu via a digital

connection—Ifemelu sends Obinze a text or an email, Obinze receives or replies to one of her messages. A narrative strategy that produces smoother, seamless transitions between the two points of view as well as a technique that recalls the call-and-response Gilroy invokes to characterize the dynamics of black music.⁷⁰ For the scholar Catherine Mazauro, the sound atmospheres that Miano provides at the end of each section have a similar effect in generating a “creation-reception community” (100), a sensory space that gathers people together. The particularity of the call-and-response, or antiphony, as developed by Gilroy, lies in this very sense of community it creates: the delineations between the audience and the performer are ruptured, making possible a space for “new, non-dominating social relationships” (79).

The search for this kind of non-dominating social relationships is the cornerstone of both works, from the challenging of genre classifications to the rethinking of what binds people together and how they can connect in societies that rest on binary oppositions, to the sweeping away of existing divisions and their consequences. Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* has been criticized for its lack of consideration of gender and lack of focus

⁷⁰ Antiphony is a “responsive alternation between two groups especially of singers” (“Antiphony.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antiphony. Accessed 3 Apr. 2016); it was originally a song that was performed in alternation by two choirs in Christian liturgy. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy revisits this process of the antiphony, or call-and-response, to characterize the relations between a black artist (especially musicians) and their audience, as well as the reception and transformation of this art that follows: “A relationship of identity is enacted in the way that the performer dissolves into the crowd. Together, they collaborate in a creative process governed by formal and informal, democratic rules. The performer takes on a communicative function comparable to the role of the storyteller which Walter Benjamin mourns [...]” (200).

on women, in general.⁷¹ However, through the readings of *BPE* and *Americanah*, the energy of the call-and-response, whether conscious or not, becomes a means to address gender and the possibility of relationships, and more particularly love relationships, that would be a “suspension of symbolic violence” (as Bourdieu already announced in *Masculine Domination*, 109).

The two writers record a multiplicity of possible representation and identification modalities and sketch the moving contours of a plural, ambivalent, and indefinite “feminine.” In *BPE*, the specificities traditionally associated with a particular gender or race are mobile. The *Bigger than life* are financially independent women who all live in inner Paris: downtown Paris is *their* Paris, “an Afropean metropolis” (Hitchcott 127) where they have their habits, their hangout spots, and their codes. Thus, contrary to many representations and stereotypes, these Afropeans do not speak from the margins; they are, as Hitchcott indicates “black *and* French *and* middle class” (127). Furthermore, they speak frankly and freely about their everyday life, their pride, their fears, and their relationships with men. The four young women are active on every level. Sexuality is an integral part of their lives and their conversations, without their being reduced to it.

Through these scenes and conversations, Miano treats many topics that will be familiar to the contemporary reader: ranging from expectations of gender performances during sexual intercourse, homosexuality, orgasm, body complexes, infidelity, etc. Altogether, the four women (six if we include Estelle and Elise, Shale’s sister and

⁷¹ Similar shortcomings were pointed out in *Masculine Domination*, in which Bourdieu did not acknowledge or cite much of the rich feminist literature that nourished the discourse of the time.

mother) draw a pluri-dimensional portrait of what womanhood can look like, backed by the voices of Millie Jackson, Valéry Boston, Sandra Nkaké, Marvin Gaye, and the list goes on.

The protagonists inscribe themselves within, carry on the discussion, and sometimes respond to generations of artists that have sung about love, sex, and self-identity. In society, constructing and controlling women's sexuality remains a central stake in sustaining a patriarchal, capitalist system of oppression. As such, sexuality is often apprehended along with other intersecting categories such as race, class, and gender that form the complex matrix of domination. However, Patricia Hill Collins argues compellingly that:

Studying Black Women's sexualities reveals how sexuality constitutes one important site where heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender as systems of oppression *converge*. For Black women, ceding control over self-definitions of Black women's sexualities upholds multiple oppressions. This is because all systems of oppression rely on harnessing the power of the erotic. (emphasis mine, 128)

It is then by taking control over their own sexuality and the representation of their bodies and by claiming their "erotic autonomy" that women, and black women in particular, create sites of resistance and empowerment (Collins 128). *BPE* and *Americanah* contain many sex positive messages with female protagonists that do not hesitate to tap into the power of the erotic, but in the process, they confront and challenge a variety of stereotypes and limitations imposed on them. In spite of the environment in which she was raised, Ifemelu is at ease with her sexuality. Although during her first intercourse with Obinze she had been haunted by the righteous faces of her mother and Obinze's

mother—who placed the responsibility of sexual intercourse solely on her because “women are more reasonable than men” (87)—she is the one who does not hesitate to take the initiative and is more active in that matter:

The first time she let him take off her bra, she lay on her back moaning softly, her fingers splayed on his head, and afterwards she said, “My eyes were open but I did not see the ceiling. This never happened before.” Other girls would have pretended that they had never let another boy touch them but not her, never her. (24)

Afterwards, she would go on to call Obinze *Ceiling*. Since the beginning of the novel, the narrator depicts her as different from the other girls in the class, especially through the words of her classmates: even though people generally like her, she does not belong to the most popular group as she does not fit the stereotypes of what femininity should look like according to Nigerian society. Besides the fact that she does not have the same fair skin as her friend Ginika, she is neither discrete nor quiet. For that matter, Obinze’s friends warn him: “Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees” (73).

The explicit and implicit comparison of Ifemelu with the other women that she or Obinze encounter, are designed to highlight Ifemelu’s impetuous nature. The depiction of Kosi, Obinze’s wife, raises the strongest contrast. Contrary to Ifemelu, her behavior is entirely dictated by the social and cultural norms that define the “good” woman and wife. Compliant, Kosi does not ask questions and is willing to do anything to keep up appearances. For instance, even after her husband admits to her that he is in love with Ifemelu, she suggests that they stay married anyway. For her, sexuality is mainly a means to satisfy the other and to keep her spouse, while Ifemelu demands more and wants to

have her pleasure met. Although Ifemelu possesses many characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity, or at least deemed unfeminine, she is rewarded with success and happiness in her romantic life at the end and Obinze loves her precisely because of this erotic energy.

Finally, the fact that Adichie acknowledged several times that she has instilled some of her personality traits in the character of Obinze just as much as in Ifemelu, if not more, contributes to reinforcing the fluidity of the masculine and the feminine in the novel. In many respects, Adichie offers her own rewriting of traditional romance stories in which normative gender roles are challenged within an Afro-diasporic context. When she meets Obinze for the first time, Ifemelu remembers that when she and her friends would reenact some of the scenes from the UK's main publisher of romance books, Mills & Boon, she would play the role of the man. *Americanah* operates as an alternative reference of what romance can be and look like for modern young women such as Ifemelu.⁷²

Miano's interest in the question of desire and pleasure that she would investigate later as editor of two collections of short texts that focus on the subject (*Première nuit : Une anthologie du désir* (2014) features ten black male writers and *Volcaniques : Une anthologie du plaisir* (2015) gives the floor to twelve black women writers) is strongly

⁷² Although it is not further developed in the text, the fact that the main references and representations of love and romance for Nigerian girls come from an English publisher says a lot about the potential role of a novel like *Americanah*. In addition to the normative models of femininity Mills & Boon romances mainly present (at least at the time of Ifemelu's youth), it is safe to assume that most of these stories were about white couples embodying westernized ideas of what love ought to be.

felt in *BPE*. If Miano believes that desire and pleasure are two universal themes, the two collections made up for the absence and/or misrepresentation of black women's sexuality in literature. Black women's sexuality has been controlled, on the one hand, by the principles of racial oppression, supported by the "myths of Black hypersexuality," or the jezebel (Collins, 129), and, on the other, by the principles of gender oppression, upheld by a heteronormative regulation of male and female sexual life.

As shown through Obinze's comment about Ifemelu, women are expected to be innocent and act respectably when it comes to intercourse. In *BPE*, Amahoro, the free-spirited friend, faces a similar situation when her boyfriend Michel refuses to talk to her for several weeks after she tried something new with him in the bedroom. Even though he enjoyed it, he is upset to discover that Amahoro might have more sexual experiences than he thought and than he has had. The fact that he conceives of it as a betrayal is telling because it unveils the unconscious scheme of thought that is at work: the man must be in control while the woman must assume a more passive and submissive role to reassure him of his masculinity. And, indeed, Michel comes to the conclusion that he is more worried about losing control ("Crazy stuff, impossible to let any woman touch you this way, too risky, too unsettling" 56) and having it known than the gesture itself. In line with the prevailing system of binary oppositions previously mentioned, Amahoro's active sexual role would place him on the "wrong" side of the divide, by inversion, in association with terms such as weak, low, passive, emotive.

Miano's and Adichie's characters do deconstruct some of these sexual and racial categorizations that regulate their bodies and their interactions with others. Yet, such

change entails a long and complicated *process*. Contrary to the recipe of many traditional romance stories, these are not stories of straight, linear emancipation of the self. None of the characters are paragons of feminism or models of self-actualization. Quite the opposite, the authors chose to reveal these young women in their everyday life, while they negotiate the multiple modalities and referents that shape the frame of their gender and diasporic identities. In other words, Miano and Adichie seize with precision and humor the insidious apparatus of the symbolic domination and study specific points of tension that it engenders on the individual and collective levels. Michel is not the only character who has to deal with his own oppressive bias. Indeed, these women *in the city*, these strong-headed women keep on being undermined, sometimes, by outside imperatives that impose on them representations with which they cannot identify, and models to which they cannot conform.

For example, Akasha and Malaïka both suffer from their weight because their bodies do not fit the image of feminine beauty that the media diffuses. Even though Malaïka stopped doing the drastic diets that her friend follows, she still has a lot of insecurities regarding her power of seduction. The discrepancy between “the real body and the ideal body” (Bourdieu, 95), perpetual source of self-deprecation, is the result of what Bourdieu calls an “internalized relation of domination (revealed in shame)” (55). The dominated have at their disposal only the system of oppositions, at the service of masculinity, with which to apprehend themselves. This mode of thought inscribes itself within the minds and bodies as natural and evident. So much so that Malaïka begins to doubt the intentions of her partner and wonders: “Why would an honest man, a *normal*

man, want to spend the rest of his life buried under a huge pile of fat like me?” (70, emphasis mine). For Akasha and Malaika, the tyranny of body norms and what a beautiful woman is supposed to look like, is aggravated by the fact that these standards are mainly dictated by white ideals of beauty. Their other friend Amaharo, for her part, dresses as she pleases and does not hesitate to be proactive in her love life. However, she still needs the approval of men’s looks to support her self-confidence.

Miano subtly depicts a young woman grappling with her genuinely strong, positive, sensual personality and the constant need to uphold these character traits at all times for others. In this regard, she appears to be the closest to *Americanah*’s portrayal of Ifemelu. At times, Ifemelu also worries because of the social pressure that weighs upon her regarding her gender status, particularly when she is in Nigeria, and she wonders about the behavior she should adopt to fit in with her surroundings. This is the reason why, at her new job in Lagos, she pretends that she is still dating her African American boyfriend Blaine, and that he will soon join her in Nigeria. This is a lie she already told to her hairdresser before leaving the United States, despite her being a complete stranger. Ifemelu is aware that she embodies a strong, bold woman in the eyes of her entourage, something she even enjoys: “She had always liked the image of herself as too much trouble, as different, and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that kept her safe” (73). Because of the “masculine” energy that has come to characterize her, she has a hard time showing her vulnerability. It is during these moments that the reader can witness that she still struggles with binary opposition schemes, a thinking that leaves her isolated when facing difficult times.

It is not the intention of this chapter to suggest that the domination system is inevitable, nor to justify it by showing that the dominated often participate and reproduce these schemes of thought, but rather to insist on the fact that:

The effect of symbolic domination (whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic, etc.) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousnesses but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself. (Bourdieu, 37)

In fact, the young women sometimes themselves convey and adopt behaviors that objectify and oppress masculine bodies. They have certain expectations of what a “real” man is, especially in terms of how one expresses one’s virility and manhood. When Amahoro and Shale meet for a drink, they quickly start talking about Shale’s new lover, Gaétan (his look, his body, and their sexual intercourse), who differs from her ex-boyfriend that she describes as a “doll,” a “beautiful little thing” (118-119). Certainly, the comparison between her model-like ex-boyfriends and Gaétan helps emphasize the healthier, more genuine connection that unites the two of them. However, the fact that they are negatively dismissed and their virility questioned because “they had no authority” or “they light up when she was around them,” which she interprets as their being “easy, comfortable, disposable” (118-9), the way objects are, shows that Shale’s reflection remains framed by the patriarchal order.

Similarly, the group of friends do not understand Malaïka’s choice to marry Kwame that they find “too ordinary” (61) because he does not speak French very well and does not have a good enough job and social status. Despite their proclaimed

independence, they equate being a good man with being able to provide financially and to present the social and economic symbols of success. As for Malaïka, she on the contrary enjoys the fact that her fiancé “fits pretty accurately the classical description of the male person” (68), subscribing to the old cliché that men come from Mars and women from Venus which reifies and essentializes alleged differences between genders. Their conscious and unconscious perpetuation of some of the dividing principles that form the basis of masculine domination are complicated by its intersection with race categories.

The example of Estelle is particularly telling: during intimate foreplay with a man with whom she is smitten, she is turned off by the fact that he is not circumcised. In her mind, “circumcision” and “masculinity” are naturally linked because “she has been raised in this belief” (*BPE*, 91). According to Bourdieu, circumcision is “the rite of institution of masculinity by excellence” (25) and consequently a central marker of virility.⁷³ Estelle had learned that in addition to being a marker of virility, circumcision was also a marker of “Africanity,” a tradition inherited from the ancestors of Afro-descendants. As a result, the male characters of *BPE* have to fit the, at times, dual imperatives of what a “real” and “good” black man is within a system of racial domination that has consistently restrained their power and treated them as less than (hu)man because of the color of their skin. They are expected to follow at once the defining principles of white masculinity as well as of racial identity and solidarity, sustaining domination and control in the household while protecting and uplifting black women in the public realm (Collins, 155-6).

⁷³ A strikingly similar anecdote appears in one of the early episodes of *Sex and the City* in which Charlotte is disturbed to find out that her perfect new partner is not circumcised. It shows that Miano understands well the codes and topics of sitcoms that revolve around women.

Furthermore, the conception that Akasha holds of homosexual intimate relations is not dissimilar to the stereotypes and dividing vision of gender and sexuality inherited from the system of thought of masculine domination. Indeed, since she discovered that her ex-partner loves men, she cannot help but imagine “the body of the supreme brother pouncing on millions of male individuals of all ages and all sizes, taking them furiously whether they are consenting or not” (30). She not only portrays homosexual practices as abnormal and deviant, but she also employs terms infused with animalistic and predatory connotations that have often been used to describe black men as sexual beasts and rapists.

For all their “new, wild, and postmodern femininity” (*BPE*, 25), the *Bigger than life* still hold blind spots in terms of intersectional and multidimensional thinking. And that is quite all right: they are, as is Ifemelu, flawed human beings trying their best to live and express themselves within a system in which these binary schemes are ingrained. Bourdieu put forward the idea that men also suffer from the patriarchal rule that restrains their emotions and behaviors, a thought that was not always positively received. However, feminist scholars such as bell hooks in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004) and Françoise Vergès in *Decolonial Feminism* (2019) have made a similar point. In her critical reading of Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminist*, Vergès agrees with her that “the norms of heteronormative masculinity are indeed constraining, as becoming a man often implies having to submit to a series of contradictory and repressive injunctions towards feelings, desires, and bodies” and that consequently, “the analysis of the coloniality of gender needs to focus on the diverse masculinities” (83).

In *Americanah*, we don't have as many men's perspectives as in *BPE* because the reader observes most of Ifemelu's relationships through her subjective frame. However, the passages that focus on Obinze are particularly telling in their exploration of the consequences of normative masculinity, especially in Nigeria. After Ifemelu moves to the United States and he stops hearing from her, Obinze tries to live out his American dream in England, where he works illegally and in dire circumstances before being deported. When he returns to Nigeria, he becomes a wealthy businessman and marries a beautiful, fair-skinned woman, thus achieving the social status of what a successful Nigerian man ought to be. And yet, Obinze is far from fulfilled with his life, as his temperament does not fit the capitalistic, profit-oriented prerogatives of his job: his personality does not match the phantasm of masculine performance that it entails.

More importantly, Obinze finds no joy in his marriage. As mentioned earlier, his wife Kosi is especially observant of her traditional role as a good wife which means that she also has high expectations for him to be a traditional man and husband. He needs to assume the role of provider and enable her elite standards while she is solely responsible for their socialite status and the state of their household. This goes as far as prohibiting him to cook at home, even though he enjoys it and is more talented than she, because it is a task reserved for the wife. Obinze resents Kosi for limiting him to the scope of traditional gender roles and making him bend to societal properties. He deeply feels that he cannot be himself within this fraudulent dynamic. When he rekindles his love with Ifemelu and thinks of leaving Kosi, his friend Okwudiba tells him:

Look, The Zed [Obinze's nickname], many of us didn't marry the woman we truly loved. We married the woman that was around when we were ready to marry. So forget this thing. You can keep seeing her, but no need for this kind of white-people behavior. If your wife has a child for somebody else or if you beat her, that is a reason for divorce. But to get up and say you have no problem with your wife but you are leaving for another woman? *Haba*. We don't behave like that, please." (582)

Okwudiba's statement, dictated by social norms, reveals many problematic notions surrounding relationship and family. First of all, we learn that Obinze's marital situation is not an exception but rather a feeling that many other men share, which turns Obinze's experience into a collective one—a convention. Secondly, it becomes clear that within the social realm they inhabit, love and self-fulfillment are not considered as essentials in comparison with public customs and decorum.

The reference to "white people behavior" suggests that divorcing for romantic and sexual reasons is an eccentricity, a foreign behavior, and that Nigerians take the financial and social commitments of marriage more seriously. Therefore, leaving Kosi and his daughter to be with Ifemelu would appear to be a betrayal not only of his family but also of the core values his friends associate with their national culture. The reasons that Okwudiba deems legitimate for a man to divorce his wife are drastic, to say the least, and they are not too different from what women are often being told in similar situations: "if your husband is providing financially and does not beat you, why would you leave?" Ifemelu, on the other hand, has difficulties understanding why her Auntie Uju and her former employer and friend Kimberly would stay with men who do provide and treat them *decently* but who do not make them feel good. Conversely, Auntie Uju and her

friends do not support her when she cheats and breaks up with her “perfect” boyfriend, Curt.

Although I would argue that *BPE* and *Americanah* both adopt a feminist lens to look at love relationships, with narratives that are mainly centered around their female characters, they also represent a diversity of masculine identities that cannot be completely and homogeneously subsumed under the dominant structure of the patriarchy. Rather, they address patriarchy as a system that can negatively impact both genders and turn to an ethics of love to find remedies.

Towards an Ethics of Love and Difference

Characters such as Ifemelu, and *BPE*'s Malaïka, value above all a relationship with someone that enables them to feel self-love. The night she met Obinze, Ifemelu quickly realized that “he made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was the right size” (73). For Malaïka, Kwame was the first man who succeeded in making her forget about her body insecurities during intercourse, allowing her to enjoy the moment fully. Love and relationships are central in both novels because they act as the main instances through which the binary thinking that constructs oppressive ideals of the feminine and the masculine can be challenged and abolished. The heroines of *BPE* and *Americanah* are women, but it is essential for the reader to have a glimpse into their entourage's points of view, such as Michel's and Obinze's, because self-determination is something that happens on the individual level as well as on the collective level and

across gendered boundaries. Indeed, in a conversation with Nicolas Truong about the idea of love in philosophy, Alain Badiou develops this perspective:

In today's world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest. Love is an antidote to that. [...] It takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference. (17)

For Badiou, love is not an experience of otherness, but an encounter of the other that creates the possibility of experiencing the world through the basis of difference and not only identity (24-25). I find Badiou's distinction between seeing the world from a different perspective and seeing the world from the perspective of difference particularly potent for the reading of the two novels studied in this chapter. Miano and Adichie portray characters that are trying to figure out how to value difference for what it is, without getting absorbed by or absorbing the other. In this respect, both *BPE* and *Americanah* are preoccupied with exploring what an ethics of love could look like and what it could mean with regard to resisting oppression, defining oneself, and reconfiguring society. The feeling that Estelle experiences in *BPE* with Ernest, a man she met while she is already in a relationship, "the possibility of a relation with no power struggle, with no taking over, not even alternating" (89) echoes Bourdieu's "postscript on domination and love" in which he acknowledges the "very possibility of the suspension of power relations which seems constitutive of the experience of love or friendship" (110).

Although still complex, interpersonal relationships can operate as sites of resistance and can be freeing. Both novels end on the positive note that when this is the

case, these relationships can lead to a new sense of truth and create “safe spaces” for people to express themselves (Collins 102). They end not with resolutions per se, but with the open-ended possibilities of *une libération de la parole* such love and friendships facilitate.⁷⁴ While Amahoro and Michel, as well as Malaïka and Kwame, have honest conversations and reconcile, Shale finally learns the painful secret surrounding her birth that generates the potential for healing and reconnecting with her family and her roots.

The ending of *BPE* suggests that Elise, Shale’s mother, by being able to utter her trauma: that Shale’s biological father is a family member of her husband who raped her, clears the path that could lead her daughter and her to self-love. Indeed, within the sanctuary and solidarity of these “safe spaces” (Collins 100), the violence of masculine domination can be properly denounced and its effects dismantled. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu finally confides to Obinze the reason why she stopped talking to him when she first moved to the United States: when she found herself in great financial need and unable to find a legal job, a man took advantage of her sexually in exchange for money. The decision she made at that time to cut off contact with him demonstrates how closely tied together love and self-love are; she could not be with him because she hated herself. It illustrates perfectly what Badiou insists is important in his praise of love: “There is a work of love [...] You must be in the breach, on guard: you must be at once with yourself and the other” (81). From this perspective, the truth of love does not simply subvert the binary system of oppositions on which domination rests, and in particular those of the

⁷⁴ For lack of a satisfying translation, I decided to keep the French here to express a freeing of or the opening up of speech.

man/woman and identity/difference, it is also a means to learn how to live in the breach or, as Miano puts it, to inhabit the frontier (*Habiter la frontière* 25).

Ifemelu pushes this ethical stand on love even further as she believes in a politics of love that would not only suspend the power struggles between gender but also between the constructed notions of races. This belief appears in the very first entry that she posted on her blog after having analyzed the reasons behind her breakup with Curt, “The Hot White Ex,” for a while:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow, love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, that kind that twists you and wrings you and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is so set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved. (366-7)

Certainly, just like most of her other blog entries, the tone of this post is deliberately provocative and aims at creating a reaction. It is therefore especially telling that when she recites it at a fancy dinner party hosted by a white liberal couple, her statement is met with silence from uncomfortable guests. It is difficult to pinpoint whether Adichie, and Ifemelu for that matter, endorse such a view of romantic love and the issue of race. There might be an underlying message that criticizes people who think that solving the problem of race in America would be, could be, as easy as “deep romantic love” (366). At the same time, Ifemelu is talking about the kind of romantic love that would dare people to

talk about difference instead of avoiding it, like she did with Curt who preferred to imagine that they were living in a post-racial world.

BPE contains an incredible tongue-in-cheek passage that addresses the same concern: Akasha, disappointed by her past relationships with black men, decides to date only white men. She describes them as modern feminists who are not afraid to treat women well, to be romantic, and to participate in household tasks. However, to prepare to be with such a man, preferably a “*bobo*,” or hipster, she is working on taming her combative personality in order to present them with “a convivial alterity” (25), one that will comfort them in the idea that all differences have been abolished and project back a positive image of themselves. Ifemelu’s blog post echoes on many levels Badiou’s conception of love as a construction and something that requires hard work in order to sustain “the experience of the Two” on the basis of difference (80). Moreover, even though Badiou does not fully subscribe to a politics of love, he remarks that politics and love share similarities: “In love, it is about two people being able to handle difference and make it creative. In politics, it is about finding out whether a number of people, a mass of people in fact, can create equality” (54). No matter how we interpret Ifemelu’s first blog entry or Akasha’s new quest for the white *bobo*, *BPE* and *Americanah* both suggest a deep connection between individual action and collective change as their stories focus on the interwoven fabric of love and politics.

Once again, the best illustration of this notion lies within the representation of Barack Obama in the two novels, and especially of the president’s relationship with his wife Michelle Obama. First of all, Ifemelu and the *Bigger than life* all believe that the

way the political couple is being represented and acts publicly can help encourage and shape healthier, more equal romantic relationships between heterosexual black partners. For instance, Ifemelu publishes an entry on her blog in which she explains why she thinks that by marrying a dark black woman and being proud of her, Obama can help free the black community from the bias of colorism that influences black men to seek light-skinned companions. This is an opinion shared by Michel, Amahoro's boyfriend, even though he does not appreciate as much the "Newbian luv" (149) era that the Obamas inaugurated. In openly showing his love and appreciation for his wife, Barack Obama appears to be the role model of the Newbian love—a playful combination of "new" and "Nubian"—that promotes the "perfect equality within black couples" (149). Michel is wary of this new model of gender equality because, as we have seen earlier, he envisions it as a threat to his masculinity whose notion is still determined by the principles of patriarchal domination. However, the momentum of Barack's election seems, at least at the time being of the novel, to launch a change that cannot be avoided. For instance, despite his reservations about the significance of Obama's victory and the "newbian" love the presidential couple portray, Michel agreed after all to move in with Amahoro on her terms, letting her make most of the decisions.

The first African American first lady of the United States is an Ivy League-educated, independent woman who was her husband's superior when they met and took on an unprecedentedly visible and active role both during Obama's campaign and with his mandates. This fact had collective and individual ramifications in terms of gender and racial representation and dynamics. For Ifemelu, the roles are even reversed as according

to her the wholesomeness of Michelle Obama is a token of quality for Barack Obama: “If she married Obama then he can’t be that bad” (440).

Barack Obama’s election holds such a central role in the two texts because it works as the ideal juncture between love and self-love, representation and self-actualization. In her memoir, *Becoming* (2018), Michelle Obama realizes the full extent of the “symbolism” of Obama’s campaign: “If America elected its first black president, it would say something not just about Barack but also about the country. For so many people, and for so many reasons, this mattered a lot” (258). In *Americanah*, Barack’s election actually rekindled, for a while, Ifemelu and Blaine’s romantic relationship: “Their union was leached of passion, but there was a new passion, outside of themselves, that united them in an intimacy they had never had before, an unfixed, unspoken, intuitive intimacy: Barack Obama” (437). The reactions of Ifemelu and Amahoro demonstrate the importance of positive representations of a community in building loving relationships and gaining self-esteem. Ta-Nehisi Coates expresses a similar feeling of hope and love as them when he reminisces about his state-of-mind during the year 2008:

I had never seen so many white people cheer on a black man who was neither an athlete nor an entertainer. And it seemed that they loved him for this, and I thought in those days, which now feels so long ago, that they might then love me, too, and love my wife, and love my child, and love us all in the manner that the God they so fervently cited had commanded. (“My President Was Black”)

Coates concludes this seminal article, written in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election and the end of Obama’s two mandates, on a less positive note with the painful understanding that this love for Obama did not translate into a massive, accepting love

for all Blacks. A similar conclusion emerges from a critical reading of *Americanah* and *BPE* in which it is apparent that the two writers do not necessarily share the same exact enthusiasm as some of their characters. Indeed, despite the resurgence of hope and love that Ifemelu feels during Obama's campaign, she remains highly aware of the fact that Obama needs to portray the role of the "magic negro"⁷⁵ if he wishes to win. Akin to Ifemelu, Coates expresses his concern that Obama "[appeals] to a belief in innocence—in particular a white innocence—that ascribed the country's historical errors more to misunderstanding and the work of a small cabal than to any deliberate malevolence or widespread racism."

As for *BPE*, even though Michel embodies someone who clings to essentialist characteristics of his racial and gender identity, something that Miano does not describe in a positive light, his voice still legitimately moderates the hectic joy that Amahoro and her friends feel towards Barack Obama. For instance, Michel remarks that even though Michelle Obama receives a lot of praise from her husband and is a successful, independent black woman, she had to sacrifice a lot for this election, including a job she loved. In *Becoming*, Michelle elaborates on the personal and familial difficulties brought on by the presidential campaign and how she struggled to find her own place and pace: "[...] quietly I worried that as my visibility as Barack Obama's wife rose, the other parts of me were dissolving from view. When I spoke to reporters, they rarely asked about my

⁷⁵ The expression "magical/magic negro" is used to refer to a black character, primarily in movies, who plays the role of the wise, benevolent, non-threatening black friend whose main purpose is to help and support the white hero. The term raises many issues as it is often utilized as an insult, it was for example brought up to criticize Obama's campaign by some of his political opponents.

work” (241). Michel uses this observation to further his case against women having too much authority in a romantic relationship, which is very different from Michelle Obama’s argument, but the core of his criticism is oriented towards what he believes to be the purely symbolic significance of Obama’s win.

However, the most interesting of Michel’s points of view lies in his interpretation that the Obama couple and their non-dominant love means that “black men—*and only black men*—would have to stop being men” (151, emphasis mine). Of course this fear stems from a monolithic, rigid conception of masculinity that Miano persistently questions throughout the novel. However, in specifying that only black men would lose their masculinity, Michel also expresses a different concern evoked by Collins and Vergès as well: within a system of racial domination, black men are not considered as equals to white men, and as such, are not considered as men with regard to the hegemonic definition of white masculinity. Miano does not condone Michel’s patriarchal habitus, but she is sympathetic to his struggle for self-definition in a society that negates and diminishes both his manhood and humanity based on the color of his skin.

Both Miano and Adichie show love—tough love, sometimes—for their male characters as much as their female characters. In doing so, they reject the binary thinking of us vs. them, Blacks vs. Whites, women vs. men, to embrace a multidimensional approach rooted in collective and individual agency, love, and self-love. The love that resides at the center of the two texts goes beyond romantic love, it inscribes itself within bell hooks’ summoning of transformative and radical love: “To engage the practice of love is to oppose domination in all its forms. To love will necessarily take us beyond

race, beyond all categories that aim to limit and confine the human spirit. Domination will never end as long as we are all taught to devalue love” (198).

Through the depiction of their characters and their varied relationships on the threshold of Barack Obama’s election, Adichie and Miano skillfully capture the effervescence of a generation who believes in an era of new possibilities and change. Beyond the underlying skepticism that real political change will arise, the two writers acknowledge the great symbolism of such an event. Their representations of black love, of self-love, and love for the United States/France as well as for Africa is also highly symbolic. “But there is nothing ‘mere’ about symbols,”⁷⁶ as Coates reminds us, and the time that the Obamas spent at the White House had real consequences and meaning for the black community as well as for the United States and the world at large. This is also true of the international success and academic recognition from which *Americanah*, a novel primarily focused on a black love relationship, benefited.

The Power of Mainstream Pop-Culture Representations and Feminism, and its Limitations

For better or worse, the Obamas are as much a part of the political scene as the pop culture realm, and Adichie and Miano report on the impact of this double visibility not only on the African American community but also on the global African diaspora. For Afropeans like the *Bigger than life* and *some* of their men, the couple is part of a

⁷⁶ “But there is nothing ‘mere’ about symbols. The power embedded in the word *nigger* is also symbolic. Burning crosses do not literally raise the black poverty rate, and the Confederate flag does not directly expand the wealth gap” (Coates, “My President Was Black”).

long-standing tradition of “modern and valuable” African American public figures (*Habiter la frontière* 75) with whom they identify in the absence of visible, positive black French ones. One of Miano’s goals through her work is to compensate for this deficiency and to debunk yet another example of fraudulent binary thinking in presenting characters that are both French *and* black: “In *Blues pour Élise*, a novel deliberately designed to be accessible to all, I chose to show black people who are educated, make a decent living, are French citizens, do not particularly suffer from any issues related to identity or memory, and have always lived in mainland France” (138).

In the digital era and the consecration of the “*Newbian luv*,” the conceptions of femininity and masculinity (and its corollary of virility) as well as the delineation(s) of blackness are, like everywhere else, more and more questioned and in the process of being reinvented within black communities. Little by little, varied and contrasted representations of black women and men, of black people, and their romantic and interpersonal relations, flourish in literature, pop culture (in music, but also in TV shows like *Insecure*),⁷⁷ as well as on the political scene.

Representation matters, especially when it comes to promoting positive images of black love. While in both novels love cannot simply be reduced to politics, it indisputably has a political agenda that Adichie and Miano have clearly expressed within the texts and during interviews. When talking about her latest work *Rouge Impératrice* (2019), Miano

⁷⁷ *Insecure* is a TV series written and produced by Issa Rae, who also plays the main protagonist. It follows the everyday life of a twenty-nine-year-old African American woman, Issa, as she juggles her love life, professional life, and personal fulfillment in LA. Now a successful show on the mainstream network HBO, Issa Rae started it on the YouTube platform under the name “Awkward Black Girl.”

insists on the fact that it is a transgressive act to produce stories with black loving couples with whom identification is possible (“Rentrée littéraire : rencontre avec Léonora Miano,” *Mediapart*). A statement that rings true of *BPE* as well, as a diverse readership can identify and sympathize with the intimacy issues that the different couples experience. As for Adichie, she clearly denounced the double standard when it comes to literature about love, pointing out that “When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story” and claiming her right to write an “important” love story (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: ‘Don’t we all write about love?’” *The Guardian*). Indeed, the theme of love inevitably engages a conversation about culture and its practices, because as much as love inspires the arts and literature, culture shapes, in return, people’s conception of love and romantic relationship.

BPE and *Americanah* exemplify how love stories can lend themselves to foster a challenging conversation about gender that pays special attention to the mechanism of the matrix of domination. It is hard to subsume these two texts entirely under the label “feminist” for many reasons, not least due to the authors’ wariness of categories. While Adichie embraced the term, in her own way and definition, in books such as *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Miano has publicly questioned it in many interviews. However, both narratives, coupled with the aesthetic choices that sustain them, show the will to establish a renewed aesthetics and social commitment, one that is less preoccupied with the main Afro-diasporic tropes of immigration and nationhood, to name a few, and more interested in

the everydayness of their characters within these contexts. As Bourdieu concludes in *Masculine Domination*,

[...] the feminist movement has made a major contribution to a considerable enlargement of the area of what is political or can be politicized, by making it possible to discuss or challenge politically objects and preoccupations excluded or ignored by the political tradition because they seem to belong to the private domain. (116)

Bourdieu's remark recalls the popular slogan of second-wave feminism (1960s-1980s) that "the personal is political." That slogan stemmed from the reflection that because identities such as gender, class, and race were socially constructed, what was considered personal, or private issues such as sexuality, couple relations, and household chores had in fact political implications. Not only were these issues perceived as intertwined with "public" systems of domination, but personal awareness, or using the personal to bring awareness to one of the larger apparatus of power structures, gained legitimacy as a political tool. bell hooks highlights the "power" the slogan had because of "its implied naming of the self as a site for politicization, which was in this society a very radical challenge to notions of self and identity" (*Talking back* 114). This idea of an interconnectedness between the personal and the political was particularly potent, at the time, for black women whose personal experiences occurred at the intersection of gender and race.

Through their characters, Adichie and Miano do look at some topics that are traditionally considered "private," such as romantic relationships and friendships, through a politicized lens. And yet, at the same time, they question some of the consequences and limitations the very politicization of such areas entail. The two writers are aware that

presenting positive models of black couples can be transformative and participate in shaping a collective consciousness, and as such it holds social and political implications. However, they regret that this “transgression” stems from the fact that black experiences still need to be normalized. Ifemelu and Amahoro are subjected to a certain scrutiny of their personal lives that reads by default all of their choices as political because they are black, an expectation that inevitably results in a denial of their humanity. In *BPE*, Amahoro gets upset at her boss when she asks her if she has ever had a white boyfriend. First of all, she does not understand why the skin color of her boyfriend matters because it has never been a determinant factor for her and it does not say anything about what type of man he is (46). Secondly, her boss’ question seems to indicate that Amahoro’s preferences in terms of men could be an indicator of her “integration” and that the two would have more in common if Amahoro had, indeed, ever had intimate relations with a white man. Miano comes back to this subject matter in her 2012 work *Écrits pour la parole*, in the section entitled “Communautés:”

[...] if you say that your current lover is black, the look on you changes, it darkens a little, it shifts away, you become some kind of Black Panther because it’s a good thing to love black people when you are not black, otherwise, it’s a militant act, it’s communitarianism [...] (34)

Similarly, Ifemelu resents Curt when he asks her if she cheated on him with a man who was White, because it implied that it would be less of a betrayal, more understandable in some way, if the man were to be black.

Throughout her blog, Ifemelu deplores the fact that all conversations around race are so taboo in the United States, either because it makes people uneasy or because they

are convinced that they do not see color. On the other end, she remarks that most of her actions are interpreted through the lens of racial politics. The most striking example of that lies in the topic of natural hair, a key theme of the novel that has been discussed by many scholars. Ifemelu does not consider wearing her hair naturally as a political act, because for her, it comes from a place of self-love and self-acceptance that refuses to inflict anymore harm and pain to her own scalp: “No, it’s not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either” (368). However, others read her decision as an activist statement, asking her if she did it for political reasons or even if she is a lesbian because she now has short hair (262). Despite expressing such a point of view, Ifemelu ends up making hair about more than hair and/or a private choice when she calls out Beyoncé for never wearing her natural hair or when she wonders what Michelle Obama’s hair really looks like.⁷⁸ She understands that hair in America, as well as Nigeria, became a “metaphor for race” (367) because beauty has long been racialized and only white people have the privilege not to think about what some black women have to go through to get straight, sleek hair and why they have to do so.

In her article on the “hair politics” of *Americanah*, Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez explains that the hegemony of western beauty canon to define what is “good” “may cause devastating effects in identity-formation processes inasmuch as for Black women, ‘gender (and sexuality) comes into *being* through adherence to an *inauthentic* hair

⁷⁸ Ifemelu speculates that if Michelle Obama were to wear her natural hair publicly, it would have a negative impact on Barack Obama’s election. It is interesting to note that in 2018, five years after the publication of *Americanah* and two years after Barack Obama’s last mandate, Michelle Obama appeared for the first time ever on the cover of the magazine *Essence* with natural hair.

standard” (66-7). For that reason, the adoption of natural hair has a political dimension because it implies an act of self-definition that defies societal norms. Gutiérrez rightfully notes that Ifemelu’s raising awareness about her hair coincided with her going online to find advice and support, which in turn led her to the creation of her blog (74). The correlation between hair and politics, considered a serious, public matter, is instructive because within the system of difference presented by Bourdieu (8), hair would belong to the private, the feminine, and the domestic all elements falling under the “low” side of the binary division.

The politicization of hair also appears as a heavily charged topic in *BPE*, especially in the scene in which Akasha gets into an argument with another customer at her local hair salon. While Akasha judges the other customers who are here to get their hair straightened, something she believes to be a sign of “alienation, and self-hatred” (37), the latter consider that they have the right to wear their hair the way they want without being shamed for their choice. The last sentence of this second section, entitled “Radiée de la douceur” sums it all up: “In an hour or two, they will pay Coco [the hairdresser], enter the subway again, and try just to be women” (40). Caught in a world in which everything they do can be seen through a racialized and/or politicized lens, black women are often not allowed just to be humans making subjective decisions. Interestingly, in the scenes in which Ifemelu is at a hair salon, in the United States, she also experiences conflictual interactions with other women from the African diaspora. Her hairdresser, for instance, does not know how to care for her natural hair. In contrasting the traditional hair salon with the online natural hair communities, Gutiérrez

contends that although the former holds much “significance [...] as a cultural institution for Black women” (68), the latter appears to be a “modern safe-space” (70) that support bonding and agency without the “identity negotiations,” such as class and culture differences, that the beauty salons sometimes entail (70).

There exists a heightened awareness in both novels that the (over) politicization of some of the “private” areas of women’s lives, and in particular black women’s lives, if necessary, include the risk of being assimilated and appropriated within an increasingly decontextualized and depoliticized environment. Gutiérrez recounts that “Hair Movement I and Hair Movement Two [ended] in the 1970s and 1990s with the fallacious depoliticization of natural hair, and the essentialist appropriation of tokenistic objects of African practices which do not reflect or foster a deeper understanding of different cultures” (72). The capitalist co-optation of black women’s radical use of the “private,” here related to the body as a means of political resistance, into the mainstream is one example of the dangerous drifts “the personal is political” idea faces.

Pop culture operates as a great vehicle to debunk prejudices and spread alternative, positive representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. But, by entering the public circulation of the mainstream and pop culture media, some things, such as wearing natural hair, can become purely symbolic: a political image devoid of any political substance. In her book on the ambivalent relation between feminism and pop culture, Andi Zeisler, a great proponent of pop culture as a tool for change, warns her reader about this dangerous pitfall. As an example, she recounts an anecdote about Angela Davis, during which the civil rights and feminist activist met a man who

identified her iconic status solely with her afro hairstyle, without knowing anything of her political engagement (68).

I would argue that, while Adichie and Miano fully embrace the transformative potential of pop culture and the many forms it can take such as the blog, vernacular music, and romance, they remain cautious about the possibility of merchandising it generates. By utilizing it within their texts, they channel its energy and ability to reach a broader audience, but they also interrogate the pitfalls that emerge when social and political movements like feminism become trendy items up for grabs and economic profit. Vergès comments on the fact that identity politics, in this case racial and gender identities, can “be integrated into society as long as they are marketable” (109). In *We Were Feminists Once*, Zeisler studies how feminism has evolved across the years into a popular symbol and multiple catch-phrases that are consumer-oriented and dissociated from any real-life experience and collective action: something that Vergès and Zeisler refers to as “marketplace feminism” (80, 4).

Ifemelu is confronted with such a phenomenon when she becomes an Internet sensation thanks to her blog, so much so that she is invited to give diversity talks and to attend roundtables at different companies. Unfortunately, she quickly discovers that she is invited based on her reputation as a “‘leading blogger’ about race” and not because they want to listen to her engaged point of view or be truly challenged in any meaningful way: “They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence” (377). In her article “Journeys of Becoming: Hair, the Blogosphere and Theopoetics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*,” Fiona Darroch cautions that

for all its liberatory power, “the space of the internet is constructed and managed by capitalist and Eurocentric agendas” (143). I suggest that Ifemelu’s blog trajectory actually acts as the ideal example of the risks of the commodification radical and critical thinking can incur within informal cyberspaces. Indeed, Ifemelu first starts writing the blog because she aspires to share her experience in the United States and she is eager to connect with others about it and to hear their own stories. As her blog receives more and more exposure, it naturally becomes a means for her to earn money and she soon faces a variety of financial and ethical decisions.

The monetary component of the blog in turn influences her own approach about blogging and writing. What started as a way to break the silence around race and gender, to give a voice to people like her, soon turned into a trendy trademark, a website where you can at once read an unapologetic post entitled “Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes” and click on an advertisement that will redirect you to an online shopping store. Soon enough, Ifemelu feels like she has now been subsumed under a brand, “The Blogger,” and she accepts to give diversity talks and to take part in other events in which she changes her speech in order to say “what they wanted to hear” (378). Just like marketplace feminism, also known as “feel-good feminism,” Ifemelu edits her posts and discourse to give a non-threatening, complacent image of alterity, offering to the people who come to listen to her the opportunity to feel good about themselves for having conversations about race without ever having to change or to assume any responsibility for racial inequalities.

These marketable talks that she gives contrast more and more with her blog posts in which she tries to regain some of her radical energy, at the risk of writing something mainly for the polemic it can create rather than for her own belief:

Readers like Sapphic-Derrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like “reify” in their comments made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. (5-6)

Beyond the prerogatives of money and visibility, she also has to deal with the reality of relevance, number of views, and credibility. Ifemelu’s insecurities about people like Sapphic-Derrida demonstrates that in addition to the financial dimension of her blog, she also has to worry about keeping with an expected standard of cultural capital. While at the beginning she wanted her blog to take on an informal, oral quality heavily influenced by pop culture, she later decides to follow Blaine’s advice and to give to her posts a more academic tone.

The dilemma that Ifemelu faces regarding her blog perfectly illustrates the impasse to which fixed categorization and hierarchization of genres can lead: on one hand, the lightness of her style can be easily manipulated to be depoliticized and merchandised; on the other hand, adopting a more serious and academic perspective more in line with legitimate culture distorts her thoughts as well as her voice while betraying her goal of interpersonal immediacy. It is only after settling back in Nigeria that she starts a new collaborative blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, finding her subjective

expression again via a poetic writing that weaves the personal and the collective, the political and the mundane.

Ifemelu's trajectory, while she was in the US, looks impressive as she arrived with no money to study at a small state school, and within ten years, she gained financial and social success. While her achievements are admirable, her success story fits pretty well what Vergès calls "*girl's power*" narratives (65). According to Vergès, these stories belong to a strategy of "pacification" of the revolutionary approach of decolonial feminism. The girl power of many series, films, and articles focuses mainly on "individual stories that perpetuate the illusion that every woman can accomplish her dreams if she is not afraid to challenge some norms" (65). If it were not for the blog in which Ifemelu addresses the commonalities of her individual experiences and calls out some of the underlying mechanisms and structures that sustain racial disparities, and for the ongoing love story with Obinze that brings a greater ethical dimension to the novel, Ifemelu's path could only be another girl power iteration.⁷⁹ As we have seen, Ifemelu is depicted as an exception compared to the other women of the novel and her interactions with other black women in the United States, apart from the blog, are scarce.

⁷⁹ Vergès' argument resonates with hook's criticism of "the personal is political." While acknowledging the positive dimension of the slogan, bell hooks also underscores another danger it represented in practice when failing to turn personal awareness into collective, radical politics: "Popularly, the important quest was not to radically change our relationships to self and identity, to educate for critical consciousness, to become politically engaged and committed, but to explore one's identity, to affirm and assert the primacy of the self as it already existed. Such a focus was strengthened by an emphasis within feminist movement on lifestyle, on being politically correct in one's representation of self rather than being political." (*Talking back* 114)

The character of Ifemelu provides a positive representation of success, but it is a success that is equated with being integrated within capitalism—making good money, buying a condominium—and legitimate culture—teaching at Princeton, dating a Yale professor. It is only once she has made up her mind about going back to Nigeria, when she sits in a hair salon in New Jersey, that Ifemelu’s mindset shifts and she grasps the meaning of her newly acquired privilege. At first, she views the African hairdressers with contempt and refuses the claim of familiarity they lay upon her because of their mutual Africanity. Towards the end, she realizes that she has a green card and will be able to come and go to the United States as she pleases while her hairdresser works here illegally and is desperate to marry in order to get her paperwork. In the hair salon, as well as in Nigeria on some occasions of which she is ashamed, Ifemelu judges other African women based on a “westernized interpretation of women’s rights,” an interpretation that, as Vergès condemns, fails to take into consideration the complex forces of capitalism and imperialism on women’s behaviors, not just patriarchy (79).

Miano also interrogates marketplace feminism and the manufacturing of identity politics for profit in *BPE*. The presence of capitalism as a necessary means of existence and expression takes a compelling turn because the many references to brands and other product placements of some sort that punctuate the novel consist almost exclusively of Afro-descendant names. The reader recognizes, or is introduced, to a series of Afro-diasporic products that never appear as exotic because they are fully part of the everyday lives of the protagonists in France: Christian de Montaguère’s Caribbean rum, the fashion designers Duro Olowu and Xuly Bët, the restaurant Waly Fay, the jeweler DiviNéa, etc.

This perspective aligns with Miano's proclaimed desire to write a book in which black characters are living plain, regular lives and are integrated within French society—a society dominated by the market, that is. It is essential to offer a model of optimistic and independent individuals who are not just victims of or outsiders to the market economy, but active participants. In embracing new genres that belong to mainstream pop culture, one cannot avoid its ambiguous relation to merchandising and its creeping equation of freedom with freedom to consume. After all, reading *BPE* leads us to wonder: why would black women be left out of this narrative? Why would they always have to take on the role of social and political activists?

In parallel, Miano inserts many elements and passages that question the ultimate end and result of such an initiative, interrogating the efficiency of replacing referential branding names only with African ones or of displaying feminism only on a t-shirt. As demonstrated by the examples of hip-hop and rap music, black culture can be incorporated within mainstream pop culture and sold to the masses. So can feminist thought. Similarly to Adichie's in *Americanah*, and despite the contagious enthusiasm of her characters, it seems that Miano cautions against the power of pop culture to instigate change if it is not supported by a more concrete and organized action. For instance, when Akasha is getting ready for a night of speed-dating where she hopes to meet her future white boyfriend, she is convinced that “tonight, she was going to seduce a horde of *bobos* with her new wild and postmodern femininity” (25). The turn of phrase is particularly enjoyable coming from Miano because it could really be the slogan for a perfume or any other woman-oriented product. Looking at the expression closely, it does not really mean

anything: the term postmodern, in this context, sounds like a cliché, a meaningless decoration that supposedly should elevate the understanding of femininity, while the qualifying adjective “wild” maintains the assigned sexual otherness of black femininity. Finally, the advertising mantra proves to be useless as Akasha ends up staying at home, alone and crying, because her pain and insecurities come from deep rooted, structural issues that cannot be fixed with a diet or a Xuly Bët dress.

The last section, the “bonus,” is the part in which Miano reveals most explicitly what I interpret as her own reservations about the “pop culturalization” of certain concepts, movements, and politics. As mentioned earlier, in this section, Michel’s voice comes to mitigate the incredible optimism that the 2008 election of Barack Obama created within the group of friends. Michel’s concerns stem mainly from his fear of emasculation and his belief that Obama represents only a specific part of black people: the highly educated, middle to upper class ones. I agree with Hitchcott’s reading that “the cynicism of Michel in the closing pages also suggests the limitations of the African American model for black people in Europe” (134). In her analysis of *BPE*, she emphasizes the influence of black America on the protagonists while highlighting the “relatively privileged status” they enjoy in France compared to Afropeans (131). I would argue that Michel’s opinion is informed by the “privileged status” of black Americans in France and also by the symbolic and economic capital they hold transnationally. Returning to Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s video clip discussed in the introduction, it is certain that their stardom opened them the doors of the Louvre. One cannot help but wonder if

their financial and cultural success could have any real beneficial impact on the daily life of someone like Michel.

Furthermore, his exasperation when his friend Gaétan, Shale's boyfriend, arrives wearing a t-shirt with the face of Obama in purple crowned with glitters demonstrates that Michel remains suspicious of the capitalist packaging of black American culture and lifestyle in France and at large. The scene brings to mind the "feminist fashion" Zeisler analyzes in her book as one of its emblematic products is a t-shirt representing Obama "pulling open the tip of his button-up shirt [...] to reveal a Photoshopped 'This is What a Feminist Looks Like' t-shirt underneath (67).

The scene reckons with the possibility that Barack's election could as well become a decontextualized event, transformed into a name and a face that one can buy and wear juxtaposed with an assigned meaning that is detached of any use value or any political resonance. It would be enough to wear an Obama t-shirt and to claim that it is political just as it would be enough to say that something is feminist for it to be considered good or radical. The novel ends with the friends celebrating Amahoro's and Michel's new apartment and toasting to Obama with the cheer "*Let's Barack our lives!*" (156)—a hopeful chant that leaves the protagonists, and the readers, at a crossroad: will anything change? Is change possible? In any case, the future is wide open.

Conclusion

The connection between different genres and media enables the multiplication of representations without hierarchizing or legitimizing them in a systematic manner.

Nevertheless, both authors are fully aware that these new dynamics, if they modify the power structures in place, contribute at the same time to creating new ones. The multiplicity of representations and expressions favored by social media and the porosity of cultural mediums reconfigure the logic of reception and consumption in the market without entirely escaping it (Knox 114). These are the stakes that confront Adichie and Miano as writers and to which they respond each in their own way in *Americanah* and in *BPE*. As writers and public figures, they take part in the creation of other images within the collective imaginary, literary and digital, to which a new generation of readers will easily have access and that they will be able to enrich in return.

The most compelling component of these two novels lies in the fact that the questions that Adichie and Miano raise via their fictive characters are challenges that they experience firsthand as authors and public figures. It is nothing new that writers, just like any other artist, have to elect a specific genre or style to which they belong in order for them to be visible and marketable accordingly to reader-consumers. The reality of the publishing world does not escape the necessity of associating a delimited brand or image to authors in order for them to be recognizable and successful. Many readers have come to expect particular themes or a particular tone from their favorite writers, an expectation that is entirely understandable but that is also linked to the value they attach to these works and what they want their literary choices to say about them.

With *Americanah* and *BPE*, the two writers offer something different from their usual literary production. These works stand out because of the fluidity of genres and mediums for which they advocate and, above all, the playfulness they irradiate.

Conscious that they are violating their own categorization as authors, Miano and Adichie investigate the consequences of the global market and pop culture on the literary world as a thread in both texts. Ifemelu's trajectory to fame, for instance, resembles Adichie's in many aspects, especially how their success is being translated and mediated for the public realm: the associated advertising on her blog, the meticulously staged photographs, the many invitations to give talks as an expert on [race] (insert here for Adichie, on Africa, on literature, on feminism...), the featuring on rankings such as *Baltimore Living's* "Ten People to Watch" (376), etc. It is safe to assume that Adichie went through similar doubts and fears as Ifemelu especially when it comes to worrying about maintaining the integrity of her intellectual and literary work and navigating the porous boundaries between public and private selves. Indeed, Adichie's global fame and hyper-visibility goes beyond the literary scope, something for which she is both loved and criticized.

BPE and *Americanah* partly explore the popular inclination to merchandise everything, from a blog on race to Obama's election by way of feminism and blackness; the public persona of Adichie, on many levels, concentrates all of these matters. Much as Gaétan's glittery Obama t-shirt, it is possible to purchase a t-shirt and other items bearing Adichie's TED Talk title "We Should All Be Feminists."⁸⁰ Thanks to the impact of her talks on feminism, Adichie's name has come to be seen as a stamp of validation for anything to be labeled feminist, or forward thinking. When Adichie appeared in an ad for Boots no7 make-up, the main argument of the brand was that one could wear make-up

⁸⁰ The luxury fashion brand Dior sells a "We Should All Be Feminists" t-shirt for a starting price of \$620.

and identify as a feminist, insisting on the fact that the two are not contradictory because “make-up is simply make-up” and does not imply the lack of political or social beliefs. This ad is particularly representative of Adichie’s approach to her fame as, just as in *Americanah*, she refuses the popular binary oppositions between femininity and feminism, between mainstream popular recognition and intellectual academic affiliation, as well as between social and political claims and financial success and commercial byproducts.

Miano plays with similar ideas in *BPE* in which she explores the open-ended possibilities that genres such as chick-lit and TV sitcoms offer, especially in terms of “representationality.” However, she seems to be a little more skeptical about the power of these narratives to transform the social order in any real way. This is an attitude we can observe within her public persona as well. In interviews and talks, Miano and Adichie both carry themselves in a serious manner: they inspire respect with their intellectual brightness and wit and they are known for being very direct and uncompromising. At the same time, they also have a good sense of humor that is often dry. Unlike Adichie, though, Miano does not use other platforms where she would present a more “popular” facet of herself such as TED Talks or the fashion industry. People invite Adichie to talk on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from race and feminism to style and music, while Miano mainly expresses herself on literary, political, and social matters. In that respect, Adichie’s status has a lot in common with Michelle Obama’s one, who is both regarded as a political figure and a popular celebrity (as evidenced by the documentary that

follows her during the book tour for her memoir *Becoming*, and her upcoming cooking show for kids, *Waffles + Mochi*, both available on Netflix).

It is unclear whether or not Miano's stricter self-presentation can explain the fact that *BPE* was largely disregarded by "legitimate" critical sources, although it did find its audience, whereas *Americanah* became both a commercial and academic success. Miano believes that this is due to the fact that she focuses on black French people, a population that tends to be absent from Francophone literature, a topic that people would rather ignore. It could also be that the Western-led literary market seems to be able to showcase only one visible African writer at a time and that since the publication of *Americanah*, Adichie is fulfilling this role via different avenues, genres, and mediums. Certainly, the different reception of both novels could be explained by the fact that authors writing in English are more easily distributed and read globally. Funding for translation of Francophone texts is limited, and *Blues pour Élise* is to this day available only in French. That being said, Anglophone African and Afro-descendant writers, and especially Adichie, radiate a special aura in France, sometimes to the detriment of their Francophone peers. Either way, since the publication of *BPE*, Miano has deleted her blog and, to this day, she has not written the sequels to what was initially supposed to be an "Afropean segments" trilogy.

While, on the other hand, Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira, the stars of the blockbuster *Black Panther*, were set to produce and adapt *Americanah* as a TV miniseries for HBO, the project was cancelled in 2020 because of the delays caused by the Covid-19. It was an exciting prospect that two black women would oversee the direction of the

adaptation and its streaming on the popular HBO platform (host of the *Sex and the City* series), which definitely confirmed that, in the words of Gurira, “through *Americanah*, Chimamanda brought the African female voice into mainstream consciousness in an unprecedented way” (*Variety*). This adaptation would have surely strengthened Adichie’s symbolic capital. At the same time, the fact that what was originally designed to be a film adaptation first became a miniseries (that took about six years to come to fruition) and was then canceled, raises a lot of questions regarding women’s, and specifically black women’s access to the financial means and support to break through the mainstream popular scene such as the cinema industry.

CHAPTER 4: BETWEEN (AF)FILIACTION AND SELF-DEFINITION: THE COLLECTIVE HERITAGE OF JAMES BALDWIN.

The presence of African American artists in France during the first half of the 20th century continues to be the source of much awe and romanticization. The reflections on and nature of the works that stemmed from this stay offer much insight into the political and social environment of the US at the time, and many books document the reason(s) why they decided to settle there, mainly in Paris. Whether we consider this phenomenon an exile, an emigration, or experiment, this period marks a decisive event in the Black Atlantic history and, as such, forms an integral part of this dissertation study. Because there is already a rich scholarship about “Black Paris,” I give only a concise, but nonetheless necessary, overview of it to frame the main research questions of the present chapter. This overview relies on two seminal works that have chronicled and studied the presence of African Americans in France, namely Michel Fabre’s *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (1991) and Tyler Stovall’s *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (1996).

Overview of Black Literary Paris

In his comprehensive study, Michel Fabre dates the ties between black Americans and France back to the 18th century when a group of free people of color established in New Orleans, influenced by French culture, travelled to, and sent their sons, to study in France (9). Within the next century, famous political figures such as Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, as well as the activist W. E. B. Du Bois came to

Paris motivated by various reasons, ranging from international events (the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, the first Pan-African Conference in 1919), an admiration for French and European culture, and/or the representation of France as a more democratic space—compared to the United States— where they could enjoy more freedom (Fabre 2). It is precisely this ideal of democracy and freedom that prompted many African Americans to join the American military and fight during World War I. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans were stationed in France during that time, which allowed them to meet French people and to realize that they could generally develop better relations with them than with their countrymen. Despite France’s violent colonial empire during that time, the French population considered African Americans as Americans, more than Blacks, and enjoyed their military support and the culture they brought with them—most notably, jazz. After the Armistice, many African American entertainers and artists decided to stay in or return to France in 1919, influencing some of their peers back home to do the same (Stovall 21-4).

Furthermore, Stovall notes that their presence coincides with the rise in France of the influence of African art and the birth of the primitivism art movement championed by surrealists. And in 1921, the Martinican René Maran, received the prestigious Prix Goncourt for his book *Batouala* (30-1). Therefore, in the 1920s, Paris was not only “the literary capital of America,” as Samuel Putnam called it (qtd. in Stovall 24), but a place where black artists could gain official recognition. Paris became a fertile site of meeting between African Americans and other Blacks from the diaspora, a “gateway to Africa” (Stovall 132; Fabre 3) where they could foster creative exchanges and organize around

the common goal to “revalorize black culture” (Stovall 104). The Négritude movement is a prime example of this, as are the many literary salons and the bilingual reviews that flourished at that period and favored translations of writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In comparison to the first flow of migration of the 1920s, Stovall explains that the motivations that animated African Americans to move to Paris after World War II were seen as a more explicit political commentary on the US racial attitudes towards African Americans (131-2). If many soldiers stayed to study at French universities thanks to the G.I. Bill, writers such as Richard Wright (in 1946), James Baldwin (in 1948), and Chester Himes (in 1953) acquired the status of “exiles,” leaving the US in protest against their country, considering that “even after the victory over fascism, the US was unwilling to create any change and to grant African Americans more equal rights” (Stovall 181). While Wright immersed himself in the life in Paris, acting as a sponsor for the review *Présence Africaine* and taking part in the 1956 International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, others, like Himes and Baldwin, remained at a relative distance, casting themselves as “outsiders” (Stovall 202).

It is meaningful to situate and understand Baldwin in light of this historical and social context to apprehend fully the lasting influence he has had on the black diaspora, more specifically on French-speaking black writers. When Baldwin arrived in France in 1948 following in the footsteps of his mentor Richard Wright and soon to be joined by his friend Beauford Delaney, he had not yet achieved any real literary recognition in the United States. It is in Paris that he wrote his first published novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and his collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, which led to his infamous

feud with Wright and to his success in the United States. In contrast with other famous writers who have lived in France, and even though he remained involved in the political situation of the United States, a great amount of Baldwin's work dealt with France and his experience in this foreign place. Despite the ambivalences of his views on Paris, the city gave him the possibility to be "just" a writer, and to work in the needed "isolation ('invisibility') that his own celebration and success had destroyed" (Stovall 215). This sense of isolation stemmed from his awareness, made clear in France, of his Americanness and of the heightened feeling of the double consciousness of the black American that such a revelation entailed. In the essays "Encounters on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" (1950) and "Princes and Powers" (1951), Baldwin examines the relationship that exists between black Americans and other members of the African diaspora, namely, the Africans and Caribbeans he meets in France:

The African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. [...] They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years—an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's good-will, too heavy and too double-edged to be trapped in speech. ("Notes of a Native Son" 124)

He reiterates such an impression in his account of the 1956 International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, which he attended, but was not an official participant as it is often stated, with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. Although Baldwin is overall intrigued and, at times even taken away, by some of the ideas expressed during the meeting—and in particular their delivery—he is explicitly wary of the cultural argument the speakers make. Baldwin questions the very idea that people from the African diaspora

could be united via a common black culture, no matter how diverse it may be, and instead comes to the conclusion that:

And yet, it became clear as the debate wore on, that there *was* something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience. What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. [...] What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be. (“Princes and Powers” 49-50)

When reading this account of the Congress and other texts Baldwin produced about his time in France, we are confronted with Baldwin’s clear and loud doubts about a Pan-African unity that would be founded on anything else but a common experience of oppression. And even experience has its limit for him, as he develops this idea in “A Question of Identity” about the military experience: “That experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair is the principal truth” (127). His stance rings true in practice as well, because judging from his descriptions of both Césaire’s and Senghor’s speeches at the Congress, it is apparent that in addition to not being familiar with their prose, he disagrees with a number of their arguments.⁸¹ However, when approaching Baldwin’s reservations about Négritude and the existence of a Pan-African community in general, scholars such as Michel Fabre, Christopher Winks, and John E. Drabinski

⁸¹ On the subject, see the analysis of Christopher Winks in the article “Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin’s Quarrel With Negritude” and Akin Adesokan’s critique of Baldwin’s essay in his article “Baldwin, Paris, and ‘the Conundrum of Africa.’”

suggest, and rightly so, that Baldwin was irremediably part of this movement, whose ideas shaped and influenced him and his work. Reciprocally, Baldwin left an everlasting mark within the Francophone literary tradition and he later became an emblematic figure of the global black diaspora, after he himself embraced a more radical, internationalist outlook on race and politics in the 1970s.

It is striking that someone as reticent as Baldwin to the very idea of a writers' community, let alone a black writers' community, became the cornerstone of such a concept in the present, with many authors of the black diaspora claiming his legacy and his influence. His thought and his corpus can be said to work as a constitutive cultural fellowship that brings black writers with different nationalities, trajectories, languages, and identities together: a meeting point of sorts. Through their reading of his work, and the connections they create with it, authors and artists from the black Atlantic engage in a communal dialogue, whether directly or indirectly. Although I acknowledge that Baldwin's significance as a writer is not exclusive to black artists, as his words have impacted people beyond the color line, what interests me for the purpose of this study is the specific status Baldwin occupies in the (con)figuration of the black intellectual. Indeed, the Francophone and Anglophone African writers of the previous chapters, along with the new ones who will be discussed in this present one, all engage deeply with the existence of an African diaspora community and their position within it as its representative and/or spokesperson. What links them to Baldwin, and ultimately together, also lies in their resistance to, and yet consequent involvement with, the question of a black community.

The writer and *New Yorker* contributor Hilton Als summarizes this unique ambivalence most eloquently in his article “The Enemy Within” (1998):

I have never been comfortable being identified as a black writer, particularly when that description comes from a white audience, which knows nothing of the limitations imposed by the term. Nor have I ever been comfortable with the presumed fraternity of black writers, academics, and intellectuals [...]. Baldwin, at one point in his life, felt the same. In 1959, [...] he wrote from his self-imposed exile in Europe that he had left America because he wanted to prevent himself from becoming merely “a Negro writer.” He went on to become exactly that: the greatest Negro writer of his generation. Perhaps none of us escape the whipping post we’ve carved our names on. But Baldwin’s career became a cautionary tale for me, a warning as well as an inspiration.

Mabanckou raises a similar point, a sentiment that echoes in most of his non-fiction works. For him, the label of “black writer” comes with a set of restrictions, imposed by other black writers and sanctioned by white critics, that limit the creative independence of the artist. Therefore, Mabanckou is wary of any black literary movement or categorization that would expect of him “to put the ‘black issue’ at the center of his work” (*Letter to Jimmy* 66), an imperative that the scholars Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier have called “the burden of commitment.”⁸² In many ways, Baldwin crystallizes most, if not all, of the reflections that this dissertation set itself to explore: the existence of a black literary canon, the place of the black writer in popular culture and academic institutions, the (sub)categorization of literature, the foundations of a contemporary

⁸² See: Cazenave, Odile, and Célérier, Patricia. *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment*. University of Virginia Press, 2011.

African diaspora, and the influence of black American culture on the Francophone racial imaginary. Baldwin's influence on his own generation of writers and the following one is an undisputable fact, but his shared legacy, the reading of his texts, and the interpretation of his position as a famous "black writer" remain divisive.

This chapter analyzes how the French and Francophone writers of this dissertation corpus, along with some of their Anglophone African contemporaries, grapple with Baldwin's image, and how his work plays an integral part within the crafting of their literary and diasporic identities. Throughout this synchronic process of identification/differentiation, affiliation/rupture, they carefully position themselves as writers, thinkers, and members within the African diaspora. What does their ongoing engagement with his work mean? How are they portraying and/or continuing his thought? How has Baldwin as a literary figure helped them shape their voice and/or style? Are Alain Mabanckou and Raoul Peck, for instance, pursuing a similar goal in their reflections on Baldwin? What tensions arise from the constituting of Baldwin as a major black literary figure, a title towards which he felt ambivalent?

To address these questions, I will follow Kim D. Butler's guidance, as noted in her seminal article "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," which aimed to lay the foundations for an epistemology of Diaspora studies, to consider diaspora not as an "ethnic label," but as a "framework [of analysis] for the study of a specific process of community formation" (194). Indeed, I shall explore how the positioning of their literary identity, in relation to Baldwin and to a broader, global black literature, is bound to their understanding of community and their place within it as members of the African

diaspora. This chapter focuses mainly on the Francophone and Anglophone African and Caribbean writers of the dissertation because Baldwin's (af)filiation with other African American authors, such as Maya Angelou, reads as more straightforward given that they share a common nationality, culture, and history. The first section addresses the role Baldwin played in the conception of the literary and artistic identity of the African and Afro-descendant writers studied in this dissertation, leading us to examine more in depth how affiliations are deployed across gender identities in the second section. The third section turns its attention to the evolution of the discourse on the existence of an Afro-diasporic community that the works and interrogations of Baldwin have prompted.

Affiliations and Literary Identity

Baldwin's trajectory as a writer reveals many of the issues raised by the denominations of black writer and African literature (including African American, Francophone, Caribbean, etc.). A "cautionary tale" for some, in the words of Hilton Als, Baldwin's struggle between his thirst for creative independence and the sense of responsibility that prompted his political activism is a source of inspiration and fascination. In turns considered as the "great white hope," the eternal outsider, the official spokesperson of the civil rights movement, or the prophet of modern times, he embodies many of the different labels that most black writers have still to confront. Comparing other writers with him, or examining their interaction with his work, thus enables us to gain a better understanding of their own posture regarding the status of the (black) writer in and outside of the African diaspora. Mabanckou, in his 2007 *Letter to Jimmy*, an

homage to Baldwin's life and work, addresses Baldwin's unease at incarnating the "negro writer" and identifies this resistance to the "'herd-mentality literature'" (*Letter 67*) as a key commonality between the two of them. Mabanckou mentions the article "Everybody's Protest Novel," in which Baldwin criticizes protest novels that he considers too sentimental (Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), detached from reality, and reinforcing stereotypes (Richard Wright's *Native Son*). In this essay, Baldwin establishes a link between Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright, separating his work from a literary lineage that he perceives as promoting moral values at the expense of literary creativity and excellence.

"Everybody's Protest Novel" is at the origin of the well-known conflict between Baldwin and his mentor Richard Wright in France, as Baldwin included attacks against Wright's seminal work *Native Son* to further his point that protest novels remain profoundly embedded in society's system of categorization. In recounting Baldwin's arguments presented in that article, wholeheartedly agreeing with him, Mabanckou establishes a connection with his own defiance of African writers that have designated themselves as gatekeepers of "authenticity." Here, Mabanckou denounces a certain aspect of the Négritude movement, whose "literature appears to be a vast campaign against the colonial system, counterbalanced by praise of African roots" (66). According to him, this type of literature reads as tired clichés, lacking imagination and any real sense of agency and responsibility for Africans. This is not to cast Mabanckou as a detractor of Négritude, as he quickly follows up by quoting Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* as the example of a "timeless, creative act" (69).

Like Baldwin, Mabanckou rebels against any prescriptive essentialism and sentimentalism of black life and its limited portrayal of victimhood, praising as a counter-example Camara Laye's much criticized *African Child* which depicts a personal and happy childhood in Africa. Mabanckou favors a literature that is less preoccupied with political engagement and more focused on elaborating on its characters' humanity and depth in a powerful and inventive prose. Baldwin also offers a great model of this literature, notably with his novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) that takes place in Europe and features no black protagonists. It was quite a transgression at the time as the black writer's realm was circumscribed to the depiction of the black condition, so much so that when his friend and contemporary Toni Morrison tried to write her novel *Home*, more than fifty years later, practicing what she called "racial erasure," that is, a work that "does not codify the race or ethnicity of its characters," she was faced with the concern of her publisher and had to incorporate a few racial hints about the main protagonist (Boisseron 115).

Mabanckou reckons that "beyond the [Baldwin/Wright] controversy, reduced more often than not to a mere rivalry between two prominent writers, *the writer's status* is at the heart of these two critical texts ["Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands gone"]" (emphasis mine, 64). Similarly, the writer's status lies at the center of *Letter to Jimmy*. In fact, Mabanckou investigates the figure of the writer in most of his work, fiction and non-fiction alike. As we have seen in chapter 2, his most prominent texts such as *Broken Glass* or *Black Bazar* revolve around the character of a budding writer struggling to find his own voice while he candidly dissects the clichés and

injunctions associated with authorship and the contours of a literary identity marked by expectations of Africanity. In asserting the commonality of their goals as writers, Mabanckou distances himself from some of his African counterparts, such as the Cameroonian Mongo Beti, with whom he tends to be grouped because they come from the same continent, electing instead a literary peer of his own choosing: Baldwin. In this sense, *Letter to Jimmy* can be better understood if we apprehend it via the frame of Edward Said's filiation/affiliation dynamic that he laid out in "Secular Criticism."⁸³

For Said, filiation is what ties an artist (or critic) to her or his natal culture "by birth, nationality, profession" and the system of order it produces (240). Culture, then, is not neutral in Said's conceptualization. It founds the notion of belonging to and "being at home in a place" just as much as it binds people to a hegemonic set of values and methodologies that draws a clear line between inside/outside, acceptable/unacceptable, etc (227). Contrary to filiation that stems from a more "natural" transmission, the handing down of culture from one generation to the next (237), affiliation results in a conscious choice, when one adopts "a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship, [...] which is also a new system" (234). While filiation is more traditional and conservative, it refers to the collective set of cultural norms and values that have been instilled in an individual over time through her or his social

⁸³ Monika Gehlawat's article "Strangers in the Village: James Baldwin, Teju Cole, and Glenn Ligon" in *James Baldwin Review*, Volume 5, offers a thorough analysis of Cole's essay and his affiliative ties with Baldwin using Said's criticism. For that reason, and because little has been said about Mabanckou's affiliation with Baldwin, I decided to concentrate attention on him rather than on Cole in the present study.

environment and her or his national identity, affiliation is an individual and private chosen preference that Said describes as “transcendental” and “transpersonal” (234).

Baldwin’s journey to Paris, away from home, enabled him to publish “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and to claim his independence as a writer from both his filiation with Wright and with the role of the black writer. Mabanckou quotes the following reflection of Baldwin about his riff with Wright:

His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself. [...] Richard was hurt because I had not given him credit for any human feelings or failings. And indeed I had not, he had never really been a human being for me, he had been an idol. And idols are created in order to be destroyed.
(qtd. in *Letter* 49)

In addition to freeing himself from the imperatives of the protest novel, Baldwin also aimed at symbolically “killing” the father of black literature. As Paul Gilroy reminds us in his chapter on Wright in *The Black Atlantic*, at the time, Wright was regarded as the most eminent black writer in the US and in the world whose “work enjoyed a global reading public of an unprecedented size for a black author” (156). “Everybody’s Protest Novel” marked a significant change in Baldwin’s literary life and career, as it put him on the public and literary map. It is important to note that Wright himself continuously tried to find a new system of order but that his oeuvre, especially the works produced while in

France that have been mainly ignored or dismissed by critics, remains bound by a system of filiations and political affiliations that he could not escape.⁸⁴

Mabanckou's affiliation with Baldwin allows him to embrace another status as a black writer than the one that has been prescribed to him. Can we accept at face value Mabanckou's equivalency of the kind of protest novels Baldwin was denouncing with the political agenda of the African literature of the early 2000s? Even Baldwin's argument against *Native Son* remains polemical to this day. For that matter, Mabanckou does little more than paraphrase Baldwin on the matter and does not offer his own reading of Wright's seminal work. It is clear that besides their agreement on what is good literature, Mabanckou identifies with Baldwin's act of independence: a gesture that was then considered a treason, a breaking up, at a time when the necessity for unity and solidarity were the sole basis for black literature/community. When stating something similar today, what are the implications for Mabanckou? Or, to put it differently, are there any implications?

Mabanckou also shares with Baldwin a trajectory, three spaces, the three contact points of the Black Atlantic triangle: Africa, US, Europe. Just like Baldwin before him, although under different historical circumstances, Mabanckou's migration was in part motivated by his writing process and had a lasting impact on it. "I did not become a writer because I migrated," he explained in *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, but "migration contributed to the reinforcement of an anxiety in me that lies [...] at the foundation of all

⁸⁴ For more on the subject, see Paul Gilroy's chapter "'Without the Consolation of Tears': Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community" in *The Black Atlantic* (pp. 146-186).

creative endeavor” (131). Baldwin before him felt that he could dissect America and his own Americanness more sharply from afar, in France, and this outlook opened up another realm of possibilities for him as it supported him in honing his distinctive voice as a writer.

Moreover, *Letter to Jimmy* establishes Mabanckou, like “Everybody’s Protest Novel” did for Baldwin, as a literary critic in his own right, one that possesses the legitimacy and authority to participate in the academic discourse that shapes the reception of literature, and black literature more particularly. He wrote the French original edition of *Letter to Jimmy* in 2007 (translated and published in English in 2014) when he was a professor at the prestigious University of Michigan. In a way, Mabanckou took part in the process of rehabilitation of Baldwin, who enjoyed great success at the end of his life, then faded from the public eye only to be “rediscovered” in the early 2000s, his popularity reaching its height in the past decade and even more so since the Black Lives Matter movement gained international attention. In so doing, Mabanckou incorporates himself within the fabric of a cultural and literary history in which he is the object of study, the critic, the heir, and the dissident. At the same time, some reviewers have noticed some imprecisions and/or inexactitudes in Mabanckou’s account of Baldwin’s life.⁸⁵ It is because Mabanckou, in this letter to Baldwin, does not so much preoccupy himself with accuracies. Rather, he seeks to tell the story of Baldwin through the influence the writer

⁸⁵ See the reviews of Flota, Brian. "Mabanckou, Alain. *Letter to Jimmy*." *Library Journal*, vol. 139, no. 19, 15 Nov. 2014, p. 85; Levine, Mark. "Letter to Jimmy." *Booklist*, vol. 111, no. 4, 15 Oct. 2014, p. 10.

has had on his life, retaining the details and the writings that are most relevant to his own formation as a writer. Telling Baldwin's story functions as a way to also tell his own story, in part, and the text has been fittingly cataloged as "biography & autobiography" by the publishing house.

Unlike Baldwin's dissociation from Wright, however, Mabanckou uses his affiliative sensibility to inscribe himself within the literary tradition of another father: "He had the face of the brother I would have liked to have had, and of the biological father I had never known" (159). As a writer, Baldwin seems to entice a kind of affiliative response that goes beyond his work to take on a very intimate and personal dimension. And it is true that the nature of his work, especially the epistolary form addressed to a family member of *The Fire Next Time* taken up by Mabanckou in *Le sanglot de l'homme noir* or Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*, is intimate. *Letter to Jimmy* (2007), as its title indicates, espouses the epistolary form as well and Mabanckou speaks directly to the late Baldwin using the second-person personal pronoun "you" throughout the text. Even Raoul Peck, the director of *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), who clearly stated that he wanted to keep only Baldwin's words in his documentary, expresses the closeness of his relationship with him in interviews in similar terms as Mabanckou, describing him as "a man who has accompanied me from very early on, every day of my life, as a brother, father, mentor, accomplice, comrade-in-arms—an eternal witness to my own wanderings" ("He Gave Me the Words" 205).

Peck's documentary exemplifies yet another instance of the specific force of attraction that draws members of the African diaspora to Baldwin. With the Trinidad-

born British filmmaker Horace Ové's *Baldwin's Nigger* (1968), it represents one of the only—and most successful—attempts to craft a movie about Baldwin, the persona. At the meta level of its genesis, conception, and production/distribution, *I Am Not Your Negro* concentrates many of the structures and issues Baldwin had to navigate as a black writer. First, Peck, like Mabanckou and Baldwin, inhabits several spaces. Born in Haiti, his family had to flee the Duvalier regime when he was eight and they settled in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Peck then studied in the US, in France, and in Germany. He now lives between Haiti, the US, and France where he operates his transnational production company Velvet Film. Even though the movie focuses solely on Baldwin's time in the US, its outlook is informed by the experience of displacement and belonging that the director and its subject matter have in common. Under the lineage of Baldwin, Peck and Mabanckou inscribe themselves within a tradition of writers that is transgenerational and transnational. They are, to employ the terminology of Todd Steven Burroughs, "Long-term Trans-Atlantic commuters" ("James Baldwin scholars confront France.")

Secondly, Peck had to negotiate between his commitment to an aesthetic and ethic that would not betray Baldwin and the necessity to make the movie appealing to financial investors as well as to a large audience (something he was successful at doing insofar as the movie now streams on Netflix). This particular struggle to juggle the imperatives of faithfulness and integrity with the demands of visibility and popularity echoes Baldwin's complex relation to fame. While Baldwin decided to go back to the US to play a role in the fight for civil rights, a call he could not refuse, his rise to celebrity brought its share of

obstacles to his writerly self. Even though the documentary focuses on the unfinished and unpublished manuscript *Remember this House* that Baldwin wrote in memory of his friends and civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, Peck's editing choices follow a connecting thread: Baldwin's ambivalent relation to his public role and image.

Baldwin's duties as a "spokesperson" during the civil rights movement had a profound impact on his writing as well as the reception of his work. He was, and still is, most known as an essayist. Whether his prose is more powerful in the essay form, as many journalists and scholars claim, or he has been categorized and promoted as an essayist to fit his political stances, the consequence is that his novels have been eclipsed among a general audience. In *Rumeurs d'Amérique*, Mabanckou contends that *Giovanni's Room*, for instance, became a classic in France while it flopped in the United States because at that time, if you were a black writer in the United States you had to talk about racial justice (85). On one hand, his visibility and success as an essayist gave him the opportunity to shape the discourse about the place of the black intellectual in the United States and in the world. On the other hand, it deprived him from enjoying this newfound freedom as a novelist.

In their readings of Baldwin, Mabanckou and Peck trace a black literary history in which Baldwin paved the way for artists like them to be able to wear both caps: as creative individuals and public figures. And Peck did succeed in creating a financially successful movie—a 7.7-million-dollar gross, a record for an independent documentary—without compromising his cinematic aesthetic. It can be said that his

presence in the movie is less palpable than in *Lumumba, Death of a Prophet* (1990) that opens with personal photographs of him and his family, explicitly tying his personal narrative to the historical event carried by the title of the movie. On the other hand though, in many ways, Baldwin's writing informs Peck's artistic approach. As Robert J. Corber notes, Peck's films "[stretched] the form's boundaries and opened up its possibilities," just as Baldwin did with the essay form, "blending autobiography, cultural critique, and historical analysis" (162). Because Baldwin had such a profound impact on Peck's thought, *I Am Not Your Negro* does function as a reflection on Peck's life and intellectual journey as well. Peck's "voice" transcribes itself through the piecing together of archived footage of Baldwin and the civil rights era to more recent images of Ferguson. The choices made during the editing process and the combining of voice over with images articulate a personal understanding of Baldwin's words and their resonance in the present moment.

In interviews he gave during the promotion of the film, Peck explains the intimate dimension of the documentary, describing the movie as being: "the result of my long gestation of Baldwin," or "the convergence of my own experiences, structured through and by Baldwin" ("He Gave Me the Words" 208-9). At the same time, he stresses that one of the most difficult parts of the process was to deal with all the people who reached out to him because they wanted him to feature their vision of Baldwin in the movie. Peck uses the word "authority" to characterize what is at stake within these kinds of interventions from scholars, "heirs," or peers of Baldwin. Whether it has to do with who knew him the most, who understands him the most, or who can rightly claim his legacy,

the figure of Baldwin draws a wide range of narratives.⁸⁶ Of course, Baldwin was always a significant author for the people who read him and the scholars dedicated to the study of his works, even when he was on the verge of being forgotten. This is a testament to the potency of Baldwin's writing and to the intimacy it invites. Now that Baldwin has risen to prominence again both in the academic and public spheres, the way his work is being interpreted or casted holds much cultural power.

As an artist, Peck disapproves of people who, according to him, use Baldwin to serve their own agenda—a phenomenon he observed was also happening with other black thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Lumumba (207). Mabanckou seems to support a similar point of view when he concludes, toward the end of *Letter to Jimmy*, that “instead of seeking out the definition of one's status, one is better served by interpreting and untangling the meaning of words, what they convey, what they imply, for the destiny of the person of color” (150). And inevitably, despite its generally positive reviews, some have criticized the movie for its representation of Baldwin that fails to account for the complexity of the artist. One of the main criticisms leveled against it, to which the present study adheres, questions its focus on Baldwin's racial identity, at the expense of his sexual identity. Peck's argument relies on the fact that he did not want to make a biographical film per se, but to feature only Baldwin's words. However, as Robert J. Corber observes, in the two books from which Peck borrows, *The Devil Finds Work* and *No Name in the Street*, “the writer's queerness figures prominently” (163).

⁸⁶ Mabanckou experienced something similar when he found and bought a picture of Baldwin from a bookseller in Paris who insisted that he knew him.

Furthermore, in excluding Baldwin's sexual identity from the documentary, Peck dismisses "his fraught position in the civil-rights movement as a queer black man" (Woubshet, "The Imperfect Power of *I Am Not Your Negro*.".) Indeed, Baldwin's role during the civil-rights movement was often undermined by other black leaders, such as the Black Panther's leader Eldridge Cleaver, because he did not fit into some of the black liberation movement's patriarchal inclinations.⁸⁷

Such considerations force us to reconsider with a critical eye the statements Peck makes about the documentary, in peritexts such as interviews as well as in the pedagogical/promotional packet. Even though his voice does not appear in the film, is he not himself laying authoritative claims upon Baldwin? The confidence with which Peck talks about what Baldwin would have been comfortable sharing with the public and his criticism of what he deems to be "humiliating" displays of the author's life cast him as his legitimate "messenger" (209). The fact that the Baldwin estate, which his sister manages, entrusted him with the rights to the unpublished manuscript and gave him access to personal letters reinforces such a sense of legitimacy.

Peck explicitly identifies as an artist as well as an activist with a specific political agenda in the interview "'He Gave Me the Words': An Interview with Raoul Peck." Both his aesthetic and political affiliations with Baldwin inform his reading and portraying of Baldwin. Unfortunately, if the complexity of the message Baldwin articulated during the

⁸⁷ The problematic consequences of a fixed categorization system go both ways, as Mabanckou recalls in *Rumeurs d'Amérique* his surprise at finding his book *Letter to Jimmy* in the "gay literature" section of a famous LA bookstore. The bookseller explained to him that all books about Baldwin were placed there (83), even as it obscures the topic of Mabanckou's text.

civil rights movement remains vivid throughout the movie, it showcases only a limited representation of the writer in the spokesperson's role about which he felt so ambivalent. Moreover, Peck is conscious that the popularity and wide distribution of the documentary is shaping a renewed public interest in Baldwin: "I must say, through my numerous discussions with audiences, that a new generation is discovering Baldwin, as well as a previous generation who are incredulous that they did not know his work" (216). It is Baldwin the essayist and activist who is being (re)-discovered, a categorization Baldwin was at odds with and from which he was trying to reclaim his artistic license and personal identity.

In response to this tendency to "[celebrate Baldwin] as a writer-prophet of racial injustice [but to overlook him] as an artist and human being" ("Hilton Als on Giving James Baldwin Back His Body"), Hilton Als curated at the NYC David Zwirner Gallery a 2019 exhibition called "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin." Rather than zooming in on one aspect of Baldwin, the exhibition aims at giving him back his complexity by deploying the many facets of his personality and looking at the influence Baldwin had on artists who work with diverse mediums. Als shares an equal sense of intimacy with Baldwin as Peck does, but he takes a different route to express it. The show displays, among other things, personal letters, family photos, and a video of Baldwin singing. In so doing, Als distinguishes between the public persona's voice of the essays and Baldwin's voice as an individual, privileging the latter.

Peck's self-professed affiliative ties to Baldwin risk reproducing the strict system of order and authority comprised in the structure of filiation, as modeled on the national,

traditional, and familial order and continuity (Said 237). Said reminds us that this slip from the desire to invent a new means of connections and of knowing (affiliation) to the solidification of it as an order of “restored authority” (234) is a common phenomenon. If we look closely at the genesis of the documentary, we can see that: 1. Peck is one of the few privileged people who had access to Baldwin’s archive. He could read some of his personal letters, which gave him an unprecedented insight into Baldwin’s life and work (Peck has authority), but he did not have the right to share these letters nor did he think it would be appropriate. The access to the archive coupled with the “possession” of a certain knowledge, shared only by a few, delineates a clear hierarchy of who knows (hear “owns”) Baldwin. 2. In his ability as an insider (his access to Baldwin’s estate and family), Peck then made a series of choices about what is “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” to what I call a Baldwin cultural system. Peck presents these decisions as objective and legitimate as they are directly stemming from Baldwin’s words. 3. His representation of Baldwin is then passed down to “a new cohort of young activists” (“He Gave Me” 216) and students, “a group of younger affiliates” (Said 235), as Peck works to integrate Baldwin’s works into schools (“He Gave Me” 215).

My intent is not to criticize Peck’s choices but to show that they are not neutral and that they do, in fact, demonstrate a particular reading of Baldwin. The affiliation Peck claims with Baldwin does, to some extent, follow Said’s definition of affiliation as the possibility to “produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships” (231), as it establishes connections that “transcend national boundaries” (225). It does also perpetuate a practice of legitimacy, one that institutes Peck as an authentic heir of

Baldwin's words and truth, a position of power that echoes the filial order. In contrast, I see Mabanckou's *Letter to Jimmy* as a contemplation on the very possibility of "possessing," claiming, an artist who "speaks" to us. A close reading of the text reveals that Mabanckou, while writing about his affiliative ties to Baldwin, cautions about the pitfalls of reifying this kind of relationship. Towards the end of the book, Mabanckou comments on his desire to make Baldwin his father and/or brother:

Alas, I would discover that he would make David, his main character in *Giovanni's Room*, say: "People can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, any more than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life." These words echo through my thoughts still today. The destruction they inflicted on my imaginary world was similar to that endured by a kid to whom it has been suddenly revealed that Santa Claus does not exist. (160)

The investment Mabanckou shows in Baldwin the writer as well as the human being—and the text does not shy away from dipping into his personal life—asserts, concurrently, a pledge to creativity over any claim of knowing Baldwin or possessing the truth about him. In using quotation marks when he talks about "my" picture of Baldwin in recounting that he found the same picture he bought in Paris at a bookstore in the United States, Mabanckou indicates that he is aware that many others might have "their" picture of Baldwin. Baldwin does not belong to him; his work and his words gave him a sense of belonging. Nowhere else in the text is Mabanckou's attitude more cogent than when he reminisces about his process of writing the book, when he "had the feeling that Baldwin was reading the manuscript over my shoulder [...] smiling when I lost myself in

my theories, or when I surrendered to the notions I had formed while reading his work” (158).

As in most of Mabanckou’s works, in which he humorously plays with the boundaries between (auto)biography and fiction, he reaffirms in *Letter to Jimmy* an affiliation with the forces of creativity and imagination. As Kristen Stern outlines in her article “Disidentifying African Authors at a French Literary Festival,” “the authorial role itself is [Mabanckou’s] chosen raw material for creation” (57). Mabanckou’s aesthetic exploration of the authorial persona shines a different light on the nature of his affiliation with Baldwin. Indeed, Baldwin’s authorial identity was inextricably intertwined with his role as a public performer. During TV appearances, as shown in *I Am Not Your Negro*, and public events, Baldwin summoned the performative skills, his ability to incarnate his speech physically and orally to captivate an audience, he honed as a young preacher. For many, Baldwin’s work remains inseparable from his image: his gestures, his mannerisms, his “big eyes” (*Letter* 161).

Mabanckou knows how to embrace strategically the performative dimension of the writer, one that is incumbent upon contemporary literature in general but that holds a whole distinctive set of expectations for “Francophone” or “African” authors in particular (Stern 64). In *Rumeurs d’Amérique*, he dives into his love for clothing, particularly for *la sape* and wearing colorful outfits, carefully chosen by his favorite French-based Congolese designer Jocelyn Le Bachelor so that “he does not fit the stereotypical image of the writer or professor” (*Rumeurs* 130). Through his public performances and his writings on the authorial posture of the African writer, Mabanckou seems both more

comfortable with and more in charge of the assumptions this categorization and position entail. At the same time, the fact that he felt as though Baldwin were “begging [him] to save him from his public display” (*Letter* 159) when he came upon his picture in Paris, shows that he is wary of the perils of being consumed as a public persona. His “love letter” (*Letter* 158) to Baldwin enables him to thread a connection with this famous author figure, while commenting on Baldwin’s legacy of creativity, in order to gesture towards new possibilities for black writers. A legacy of creativity that the scholar Monika Gehlawat terms, borrowing Bergson’s process, “*Creative Evolution*” (68).

In his variation on Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village,” entitled “Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s ‘Stranger in the Village’” (2014), Teju Cole comes to a similar conclusion about his affiliation with the emblematic writer. A nod to Baldwin’s legacy, Cole’s article also highlights a significant shift in thought from the ancestor to the heir, as Cole, unlike Baldwin, claims both black/African culture and Western/European culture as his own. Cole’s article is a powerful contemporary returning to and rereading of Baldwin. As he retraces, 60 years later, on Baldwin’s birthday, the famous writer’s trip in the small Swiss village of Leukerbad, Cole meditates on what has changed, and what has not: “The news of the day (old news, but raw as a fresh wound) is that black American life is disposable from the point of view of policing, sentencing, economic policy, and countless terrifying forms of disregard.”

Despite the filiative inclinations of Peck’s affiliation with Baldwin, he does also enact a new kind of position for black artists. Unlike Baldwin, Peck wears with ease the caps of activist and artist. In interviews, he explains that he is careful about negotiating

these two missions, but he presents himself as being less conflicted than Baldwin in this role. Therefore, Peck appears to belong to a new “Baldwin generation” of black writers who enjoy more freedom than the generation’s predecessors in terms of spatial trajectories as well as in their creative endeavors/license. Peck doesn’t feel burdened by the need for representation and/or to address racial inequalities: he frames his political engagement as a creative and personal choice; nor does he envision his political agenda as interfering with his creativity.

Furthermore, Peck’s filiation in *I Am Not Your Negro* is with Baldwin, the man, the artist, as well as with a movement, the civil rights and the fight for racial equity. By choosing *Remember This House* as the main support of his documentary, a work Baldwin started writing in homage to Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, Peck expanded the realm of his (af)filiation to them as well. Throughout his efforts to have Baldwin’s works integrated more thoroughly into school curriculum in the United States, Peck inscribes himself within this political history that he claims as rightfully his. In comparison, Mabanckou identifies strictly with Baldwin, the man and writer, on personal and aesthetic grounds. *Letter To Jimmy* pays considerable tribute to Baldwin’s works of fiction and how they have influenced Mabanckou’s creativity. For that matter, Mabanckou ends his text with the message of radical love that Baldwin so eloquently formulated in *The Fire Next Time*. For if this essay propelled Baldwin to the status of the main figure of the civil rights, it bears the legacy of Baldwin’s religious upbringing and it closes with a call for brotherly love and hope:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the other—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (*The Fire Next Time* 105)

The Baldwin of *The Fire Next Time* is not the same Baldwin as the *Remember This House*, a work he started twenty years later to reckon with the assassinations of his three friends, at a time when Baldwin had grown disillusioned about any possibility for change and improvement in race relations in the United States.

It would be reductive to consider Mabanckou as the heir of Baldwin-the-fiction-writer and creative persona while Peck would embody his political and engaged dimensions. Both have been deeply influenced by Baldwin's style that mixes the personal and the historical, the intimate and the collective. Both, it would seem, are adamant about transcending these labels and constraints, and they definitely enjoy more wiggle room to do so.⁸⁸ Yet, their reflections on Baldwin's legacy show that they still have to contend with some of these questions and categorizations. In the polemical *What Was African American literature?* written by Kenneth Warren, and more recently in the 2020 issue of the *Black Scholar*, "What Was Black Studies?" Afro-diasporic scholars look back on the history and legacy of certain classifications and institutions/movements to interrogate

⁸⁸ My analysis of the (af)iliative ties that Mabanckou and Peck have generated with Baldwin led me, despite the striking differences among this new generation of black artists/writers, to a somewhat similar conclusion as Monika Gehlawat's concerning Cole's (and the artist Glenn Ligon's) relation with the iconic author: "these artists testify to the urgency of his lessons for current politics, even as they advance with new formal experiments that reflect periodization and contemporary art practices. Baldwin's original creative impulse thus gets replenished through both revisitation and new production" (68).

their relevance in the present time. In a similar vein, this chapter aims to give an overview of how the writers featured in the present chapter, through their (af)filiaions with Baldwin as a “canon” of black literary and intellectual history, attempt to reframe the questions raised in Baldwin’s work to address a system that is different from the one Baldwin left when he died in 1987.

Gender and Affiliations

An intriguing manifestation/occurrence of Baldwin’s legacy lies in the distinct posture black men writers and black women writers hold towards him and his work. Although many black women writers have acknowledged their appreciation for Baldwin’s work and the influence it had on them, not many have “claimed” affiliation with him or have explicitly situated themselves in his tradition. To my knowledge, other than the collection of essays *The Fire This Time* directed by Jesmyn Ward which features black men and women writers, no black women have published a work of fiction or an essay that explicitly and directly grapples with Baldwin as an authorial figure—at least, not to the extent of *Letter to Jimmy, I Am Not Your Negro*, or Cole’s article. If they exist, these pieces might simply not be as celebrated as the ones by Mabanckou, Peck, and Cole.

Broaching the subject of affiliation, with regard to gender dynamics, through the figure of Baldwin is particularly compelling because Baldwin has been criticized for failing to include black women in his writings (Wright 138). In this section, I focus on Ward’s motivations for compiling *The Fire This Time*, along with Léonora Miano’s and

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's ties to Baldwin's work, in order to call attention to the parameters of affiliation through the lens of gender.

Published in 2016, the same year *I Am Not Your Negro* was released, *The Fire This Time* emanates from the similar need to make Baldwin's words ring out "in response to recent tragedies and widespread protests across the nation" (back cover). Ward gathered a generation of writers who live and work in the United States (only two out of eighteen contributors were not born in the United States: The Haitian Edwidge Danticat who emigrated to NYC as a teen, and the Jamaican Garnette Cadogan) to share their thoughts on the past, current, and future state of race in America. Some of the pieces are directly related to Baldwin and his work, such as Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's "The Weight," while others rather focus on themes that were dear to Baldwin: being black in America (Cadogan), fathers and father figures (Mitchell S. Jackson), and the myth of white innocence (Carol Anderson). In the introduction, Ward employs a personal tone that is reminiscent of Peck's and Mabanckou's. When she was looking for "words" (6) to find a sense of solidarity, strength, and support in the aftermath of the death of Trayvon Martin, she naturally turned to Baldwin: "It was as if I sat on my porch steps with a wiser father, a kind, present uncle, who said this to me. Told me I was worthy of love. Told me I was worth something in the world. Told me I was a human being. I saw Trayvon's face, and all the words blurred on the page" (7).

However, from this need for Baldwin's words quickly follows the desire to create a book that will serve a similar purpose for the upcoming generation of black kids and young adults growing up in the Trayvon Martin era. Ward envisions "a girl in rural

Missouri” encountering in this essay “a wise aunt, a more present mother, who saw her terror and despair threading their fingers through her hair and would comfort her. We want to tell her this: *You matter. I love you. Please don’t forget it*” (8). Although Ward also mentions that “a black boy who lives in the hilly deserts of California” would also need such a book, the gender shift is particularly revealing. As is her choice to feature women writers prominently in the collection (eleven out of eighteen) and to end it with Edwidge Danticat “drafting [her own] ‘My Dungeon Shook’ letter to [her] daughters” (213).⁸⁹ The collection does not promote itself as a gendered rereading of Baldwin, nor should it be read as such. It does, nonetheless, offer a much-needed feminine outlook onto Baldwin’s intellectual legacy that complements a trend of Baldwinian heirs that have traditionally centered their work on black masculine experiences.⁹⁰

When it comes to literary traditions, gender is an important component because, as we have seen before, access to Baldwin’s legacy and his estate translates into cultural authority and visibility. What does the authority struggle for the rightful representation and interpretation of Baldwin tell us about the gendered power dynamics that exist within black intellectual history? Could it be that black women writers establish affiliations through different ways and avenues that are less “vertical,” and more “horizontal” (Wright 113)? Ward and the selected contributors of *The Fire This Time* certainly

⁸⁹ “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” is the first section of Baldwin’s seminal essay *The Fire Next Time*.

⁹⁰ For more on the subject, see Tressie McMillan Cottom’s review of *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates: “*Between the World and Me* Book Club: The Stories Untold.” *The Atlantic*, 27 July 2015, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/between-the-world-and-me-book-club-the-story-not-told/399605/. Accessed 10 October 2018.

demonstrate a will to create “new and different ways of conceiving human relationships” (Said 231), a continuation of “the new type of belonging” that Ward’s ancestors, with their many heritages, discovered upon their settlement in America (95).

This difference in the conception of affiliative ties dates back to the first developments of a Pan-Africanist consciousness. In his comprehensive study, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Hayes Edwards explains how a movement such as Négritude, which Baldwin witnessed in Paris, was mostly represented by men and “[overlooked] the direct contributions of women like [Paulette] Nardal to the movement’s emergence” (121). More specifically, Edwards demonstrates the masculinist narrative of the movement’s genesis through the focus of many scholars and members on establishing who “the father of Négritude” is. The filiative order that lies in such a need for hierarchy and authority similarly looms over the order we currently find reproduced in the instituting of Baldwin as a father literary figure. Edwards goes on to analyze the role Paulette Nardal and her sister played in the creation of Black internationalist connections in which race and gender were interwoven. He concludes that the Nardal sisters’ intellectual circle, *cercle d’amis*, and its female-led American corollaries in the United States, were not simple “salons,” but a space “characterized above all by a concerted effort to establish new and independent intellectual institutions” (155).

“The creation of open, informal spaces designed to allow certain kinds of transnational, translinguistic dialogue rather than to voice any particular social doxology” (156), characteristic of black women’s intellectual traditions and affiliations, is also at

work in the way they approach literary lineage and canon formation. Considering these initial impulses by Afro-diasporic women writers and artists to create an innovative transnational literary tradition helps us contextualize and understand contemporary African and Afro-descendant women writers' expression of affiliation(s), such as Miano and Adichie.

If we look at Léonora Miano's relation to Baldwin, we find yet another kind of affiliation, one that situates itself between Ward's enterprise of community-building and Mabanckou's quest for self (literary) definition. In the first conference recorded in *Habiter la frontière*, "Écrire le Blues," Miano describes the influence African American writers had on her culturally, literarily, and personally in her discovery of "l'être noir" (blackness). Baldwin played a significant role in this awakening as she recalls that reading *The Fire Next Time* had been a "literary shock," the second after encountering Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in school (13). In words strikingly analogous to Peck's, Mabanckou's, and Ward's, Miano recalls: "I was fourteen, and the feeling that every sentence was directed at me" (13). She does not use the word "father" to characterize her relation to Baldwin. Instead, she implicitly places him as a substitute literary (father) figure in her cultural journey, one that opens up the frame of the "parental library" composed exclusively of white European authors (12).

The discovery, first of Césaire, then of Baldwin, symbolizes for Miano a sort of resistance, the transgression of a twofold authority: the parental one, and the colonial one. It goes without saying that the relation between these two authorities is in itself complex

and that the two are not equivalent.⁹¹ Miano states that her father knew Césaire's prose well and mourned his death, yet he did not think of including it as an essential read, and form of representation, for his children. Therefore, Miano had to pursue her self-education about race and cultural identity outside of the house to find African writers, and outside of the classroom, to study African American ones.

In this respect, Baldwin belongs to a black literary canon, whose delineations have not been clearly outlined yet, but which forms the staple of one's understanding of racial identity on a transnational scale. The place of Baldwin within that alternative library wherein to explore and conceive of "being black" (Miano 15) can also be found in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. When Ifemelu, the main protagonist of the novel, first arrives in the United States and starts her college journey there, she attempts to understand American racial politics and the experience of black Americans, as compared to non-American Blacks like her. This education does not happen in the classroom, it takes place at the library where she reads a book her boyfriend back in Nigeria recommended: *The Fire Next Time*. Ifemelu,

stood by the library shelf and skimmed the opening chapter, braced for boredom, but slowly she moved to a couch and sat down and kept reading until three-quarters of the book was gone, then she stopped and took down every James Baldwin title on the shelf.

(166)

⁹¹ Paradoxically, Miano had to turn to the French Cultural Center to have access to Black American and Caribbean writers because she could not find them anywhere else in Douala (13-4).

Baldwin is the only writer cited by name in this passage in which she discovers American authors that help her make sense of the society wherein she was now evolving:

“America’s tribalisms—race, ideology, and religion—became clear. And she was consoled by her knowledge” (167). For Peck, Mabanckou, Ward, Miano, and Adichie (by way of her character Ifemelu, but also as mentioned in several interviews), reading Baldwin symbolizes a cornerstone in the comprehension and articulation of their racial identities. For all of them—both women and men writers—Baldwin’s words work as a passageway through which they can imagine solidarities and affinities, participate in moving and changing forms of African diaspora communities.⁹²

In opposition to Peck and Mabanckou, however, Miano’s and Adichie’s affiliations with Baldwin remain more oblique in their expression. It is often the case that women writers interact with literary lineages in creating connections and conversations, and less via the means of prescriptive paratextual strategies. Concerning Baldwin, some of these would include writing the preface for one of his translations or reeditions, writing a book or producing a movie that deals specifically with him as an influential figure, or being favorably compared to him in the media and on the promotional book sleeves of their works. For women writers, and Miano in particular, affiliations are less about being recognized as belonging to a tradition, reinforced by the recognition of major

⁹² In the memorial service for James Baldwin at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, whom some consider as the precursor of Adichie, describes his first encounter with Baldwin’s works as a “re-education” (279). He grew up at a time when American writers were overlooked and barely featured in the educational system of colonial Nigeria. Therefore, his discovery of Baldwin was a revelation: “He brought a new sharpness of vision, a new energy of passion, a new perfection of language to battle the incubus of race” (279).

figures, and more about deploying transversal connections that are less hierarchical. Despite Baldwin being singled out in both *Americanah* and “Écrire le Blues,” they are animated by the forms of expression and currents of thought that he brought to the forefront rather than the individual in and of himself.⁹³

The tacit commonalities between Miano and Baldwin entail a love for music and the impact blues and jazz specifically had on their writing styles. Baldwin in his essay “The Uses of Blues” and Miano in her conference “Écrire le blues” shares the same definition of what blues means to them, highlighting that:

And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. [...] Consider some of the things the blues are about. They’re about work, love, death, floods, lynchings; in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the arbitrary heading “Facts of Life.” (Baldwin, *The Cross...*, 70-1)

It talks about everyday life, in its most miserable aspects as much as its happiest ones. [...] It’s in the ability to produce beauty from what generates suffering that one can find the promise for better tomorrows. (Miano, *Habiter la frontière* 22-3)

Both consider the blues as an “atmosphere” (*Habiter la frontière* 20) and a mission, one that guides them as writers to “face all the realities, including the darkest ones” (*Habiter la frontière* 22). And assuredly, Baldwin and Miano have not hesitated to face demanding truths in their writings, from the flaws of protest novels and the call for love to change

⁹³ In this respect, Miano specifies in “Écrire le blues,” that “People repeatedly ask me if I have models in literature. The answer is no, not really. What I have learned from the great writers I have read is the exhortation to trace your own path” (16). A Baldwinian call, if any.

racial dynamics (Baldwin) to the role Africans played in the slave trade and the status of French blacks (Miano). In their own way, they respond to the need to put words to experiences, to name things (Miano's "Afropea" and Baldwin's "white innocence"), and to tackle these challenging issues head on. If the blues provides the intention, instilling its chiaroscuro-like energy in the texts, jazz is the inspiration for tonality and rhythm. As we have seen in chapter 3 when analyzing Miano's *Blues pour Élise* (a nod to Baldwin's "Sonny's blues"?), music plays an eminent role as a diegetic and extradiegetic device in several of her publications. In "Écrire le blues," she explains her literary process in relation to musical composition:

Regarding the form, my long texts are structured around ideas adopted from music. *L'intérieur de la nuit* is based on an AABA structure, standard in jazz. [...] *Contours du jour qui vient* was conceived as a musical composition with several movements. [...] *Les Aubes écarlates* [...] uses [...] elements borrowed from jazz. First of all, the characters came into existence as musical instruments, each of them possessing their own tonality, sensitivity, and breath. (19)

Besides framing the structure and form of the texts, Miano is interested in employing a polyphony of voices and languages, an investigation of sound and orality as opening possibilities for representation and relation in literature that culminated in her one-of-a-kind play *Écrits pour la parole*. Baldwin expressed a similar intention in his essays, referring to himself, as the writer Clifford Thompson notes in his article "Jimmy's Blues," as a blues singer in the last two decades of his life. Thompson indicates that after acknowledging his allegiance to the purpose of the blues, facing the truths of human life, the life of a racialized person in particular, Baldwin set himself to reproduce the beat and

rhythm of blues and jazz within the writing form.⁹⁴ Citing the 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* as an illustration of this aesthetic endeavor, Thompson demonstrates how “his sentences took on an improvisatory freedom, with shorter sentences and fewer commas holding the various clauses in place; as a result the rhythm was faster, much like up-tempo jazz solos” (“Jimmy’s Blues”). Miano does not aim to write as a blues singer per se, however, her phrasing, especially in *Écrits pour la parole*, uses repetitions and rhythm characteristics of the genre (the absence of punctuation in the section “In-Tranquille”), albeit resulting more in a crossroad between blues/jazz, slam poetry, song, and theater.

The performative dimensions of Baldwin and Miano, one as a former preacher and theater enthusiast and the other as a trained singer, act as markers of their literary identities. Miano confesses in “Écrire le blues” that it is while taking jazz singing lessons that: “I found my aesthetic as an author, what was missing in my text, my true specificity. *Jazz gave me my author’s voice*” (emphasis mine 17). The appeal of music to find one’s voice as an author surely resonates with Baldwin’s own search, one that led him to the same conclusion in the short essay “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” considering: “my black ancestors, who evolved the sorrow songs, the blues, and jazz, and created an entirely new idiom in an overwhelmingly hostile place” (67). It is through the impulse of black music that Baldwin was able to follow his own voice and path as a writer, in English.

⁹⁴ In the essay “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” Baldwin elaborates on his fraught relation to the English language and how music was instrumental in reappropriating it: “I was listening pretty hard to jazz and hoping, one day, to translate it into language” (68).

Beyond the influence of black American culture and music on her writerly identity, Miano demonstrates an exponential ambition to participate in and shape the theoretical framework that scrutinizes the figure of the African/black writer and her and his literary production. In hailing Baldwin as a peer, she defies what Wright calls “heteropatriarchal linear interpellations” (89), thus paving the way for a more inclusive cultural tradition. Finally, in the wake of Baldwin and Mabanckou, she published several essays, monographs (*Habiter la frontière, L’impératif transgressif, Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste*) and collective works (*Marianne et le garçon noir*), most of them in the past five years. In so doing, Miano forges a literary identity as an essayist as well as a fiction writer, increasingly positioning herself as a non-academic but nonetheless expert voice on a range of subject matters. In her essayistic conceptualization of Afropean identities and meditations on Francophone African literature, she also offers new grounds for thinking Afro-diasporic identities and affiliations.

Affiliation and Diasporic Identity

Baldwin’s influence and the multiplicity of discursive practices of filiation and affiliation it constellates lead us to an examination of contemporary modes of, borrowing Alexander G. Weheliye’s term, “diasporic citizenship and membership” (147). Indeed, as we have seen in the introduction, during his stay in France Baldwin dedicated a lot of his time and writing to reflect on Pan-Africanism and the existence of a transnational black community. It is hardly possible to address Baldwin’s work, especially from a non-American perspective, without dealing with the questions of exile, national identity, and

the (im)possibility of solidarity that preoccupied him for most of his life. Peck, Mabanckou, and Adichie are non-American Blacks that all have strong ties to the United States—Miano to a lesser extent—and as such, through their affiliations with Baldwin and North America, their trajectory provides a perspective that is the reverse of Baldwin’s as they examine race relations in the United States from an African and Caribbean perspective, while reconsidering their homeland (Haiti, Congo, Nigeria) and former host countries (France, Germany) from a renewed American and/or global position. Reading their thoughts on the intricate relations that people from distinctive geographic, linguistic, and cultural parts of the African diaspora entertain, as a continuation of or at least alongside Baldwin’s works, we can grapple with key discussions in diaspora studies such as identity, culture, and migration.

In “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” Kim D. Butler notes that diasporas are multi-generational and that they “experience multiple waves of out-migration of different demographic character and reasons for departing” (204). Not only do Peck’s, Mabanckou’s, Miano’s, and Adichie’s relationships to the “Homeland”—a key element in establishing the existence of a diaspora according to Butler—differ from Baldwin’s, the last three having been born and raised in Africa, but their trajectories also took distinct forms. Like Baldwin in France, Peck is the only one who has experienced exile, whereas the others have voluntarily migrated to France and/or the United States for a non-definitive time (Butler 202). Indeed, more than half a century after Baldwin moved to France for the first time, a lot has changed on the political and social landscape. In

2005, *The New York Times* published an article reporting that “for the first time, more blacks are coming to the United States than during the slave trade,” clarifying that:

Since 1990, according to immigration figures, more have arrived voluntarily than the total who disembarked in chains before the United States outlawed international slave trafficking in 1807. More have been coming here annually—about 50,000 legal immigrants—than in any of the peak years of the middle passage across the Atlantic, and more have migrated here from Africa since 1990 than in nearly the entire preceding two centuries. (“More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery”)

At the time, Baldwin most likely did not conceive of himself as being part of a diaspora, a term that was then primarily used to characterize the dispersal of the Jewish community. On the other hand, he did meet the three dimensions that define a diasporic group: “relationship with the [imagined] homeland [a recurring figure in his writing], relationship with host lands, and interrelationships within communities of the diaspora” (Butler 195). As we have seen in the first section of this chapter, although he was skeptical of the true links that connected members of a supposed Pan-Africanist community, this very community remained a subject of inquiry in his texts. Unlike Baldwin, the other writers that I am studying in this dissertation do not question their belonging to an African diaspora, but I argue that through their affiliation with Baldwin and their exploration of the relations between members of this diaspora, they resist any easy, monolithic representation of it and define their own diasporic identity. Because of the comparative frame of this dissertation, and of this chapter in particular, I focus principally on the featured authors’ depictions of interactions of Africans and Caribbeans with black Americans, as well as between non-American Blacks within the United States.

Let's start with the writings of Maryse Condé on the subject. Because she mentioned Baldwin's name in an interview with the scholar Vèvè A. Clark, "'Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île': Une Interview De Maryse Condé," we know that she read him. However, she has not explicitly claimed any affiliative ties with him, as have the other writers of this chapter. Rather, it is with Richard Wright, for instance, that she expressed sympathy in *La vie sans fards*, stressing their common experience of alienation. Condé's relation to Baldwin's thought and writing operates in a more oblique way, at least, at first sight. While she might not have felt especially close to Baldwin's production, or at least *admittedly* influenced by him, in practice, in her writing, we can find many commonalities between them.⁹⁵ Only thirteen years apart in age, they belong to the same generation of black intellectuals and share many similarities in their trajectories (France, United States, Ghana, and Guinea), albeit in a different temporal form. Much like Baldwin, Condé has continuously dissected the premises for the existence of a transnational black community and her preoccupation with the interrelations between members of the African diaspora recurs in almost all her production.

In the first chapter, I looked at how Condé reflects on the troubled interactions she had with Africans and African Americans during her trip back to "mother" Africa. The conclusions she draws about the impossibility of the return resonate with Baldwin's thoughts on the "gulf of three hundred years" ("Notes of a Native Son" 124) that separated him from the Africans he met in Paris. With regard to the African Americans

⁹⁵ This is especially characteristic of Condé's position as a "free" writer to reject any claims of influence or inspiration, other than, maybe, Césaire and Fanon.

she encountered during her trip, she recalls feelings of longing for this shared sense of community that she was lacking. For Condé also grapples with the strained relationships she entertains with her own Guadeloupean compatriots due to the fact that she was raised outside of the Antillean cultural identity. This is a major difference between Baldwin and Condé because, despite his reserves about other writers' claims of a black American community in Paris, Baldwin was well integrated within the community in the United States and developed many iconic friendships with some of its important artistic members (Maya Angelou, Beaufort Delaney, Richard Wright, to name but a few). But they do share a common sentiment of isolation, feeling they are perpetual outsiders, which can be attributed both to their doubtful attitude towards the possibility for a community and to their vivid refusal to be subsumed by said community and to compromise their sense of individuality and independence.

It is important to note that in an era when many members of the African diaspora dreamed of returning to the original homeland, Africa, Baldwin decided to go to France. He said that his choosing France had no underlying meaning, and that he needed to get out of the United States, but it seems difficult to dismiss the fact that he elected to go to a country that had an established black-American artist community. In many ways, Baldwin and Condé were searching to create affiliative ties with a community of intellectuals that would not limit them to a school or a system of order of a filiative nature. Bénédicte Boisseron, in a 2018 article, proposes an African American perspective on Condé's work, investigating the relations between Condé and African American writers/intellectuals as well as the status of Condé within North American academic

institutions. In “‘L’Amérique, je veux l’avoir et je l’aurai’ Un regard afro-américain sur *Mets et merveilles*,” Boisseron revisits Condé’s “failed love with the African American community” (111). Indeed, Condé, who was a great admirer of African American civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., and black American writers, especially women writers like Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison, never felt integrated during the years she spent teaching in the United States. Apart from *Moi, Tituba sorcière...Noire de Salem* (1986), which was translated into English only four years after its publication and popularized in the United States thanks to the introduction by Angela Davis, Condé’s texts have a difficult time finding their place outside of French and Francophone Studies departments (Boisseron 119-120).

There seems to be a double-bind issue of legibility at stake in the relations between Africans, Caribbean, and African Americans, as exemplified by Baldwin and Condé. Both contend with an experience of cultural displacement that they believe has turned them into hybrids that cannot be understood by any group. This gap or gulf of displacement can reproduce itself within their literature. A telling example of one of these (mis)-readings appears in the report Baldwin wrote about the Congress of Black Writers and Artists of 1956, “Princes and Powers.” As explained earlier, Baldwin struggled with some of the Négritude’s leaders attempting to grasp a cultural unity among black people across the world. During the conference, Baldwin became particularly agitated when Léopold Sédar Senghor presented Wright’s *Black Boy* as a “black classic” of “African heritage,” an “African autobiography” (50-1). For him, *Black Boy* is characteristic of the alienation African Americans feel because of their particular history and their social

condition in the United States. His view reinforces his reservations about imagining the links between Africans and African Americans as being anything more than a solidarity born of shared oppression. Condé's example, as recounted by Boisseron, reflects the other side of the mirror:

Maryse Condé says that she did not recognize her book in Davis' tone that she believed to be too militant. *Tituba* was conceived as a book that plays with anachronisms and irony and it was never its intention, by no means, to set itself as the voice of a wronged community. And yet, Davis read in *Tituba* the voice of oppressed black women rising from the ashes. (112)

Even though Boisseron goes on to show that Condé would finally come to understand Davis' reading of her work, the discrepancy is well-established. *La femme cannibale*, a text in which Condé tackles the subject of an interracial relationship between a Caribbean woman and a white British man, also considers the strained interactions between her main protagonist and some of the black Americans she meets in New York:

[Rosélie] equipped this stranger with the traits of the African American women she spent time with in New York, shivering at their memory and realizing that they had, better than anyone else, convinced her of her deficiencies by subtly measuring her to an ideal impossible for her to reach: the matriarchs, poto mitan, from the diaspora civilizations. What had *she* accomplished that the Race could exult in? (145)

Boisseron argues that this incomprehension stems from the different objectives that Négritude and American Pan-Africanism set for themselves, the former having "mainly poetic and philosophical aspirations," while the latter was "principally economic and political" (114). If Condé immersed herself with activist friends during her time in

Africa, and she is vocal about her desire for Guadeloupe to become independent, she would probably subscribe to Baldwin's arguments in "Everybody's Protest Novel." The main commonality between these two writers lies in their ambivalent, and at times contradictory, takes on the dynamic between political engagement and creative commitment. These stands are informed by their relations with the African diaspora community at large and it shapes the conception of their diasporic identity in return. Naturally, this is also the result of the historical and political circumstances of the time. Baldwin and Condé describe the experience of not feeling at home anywhere, which drove them to travel and seek other means of belonging and being in the world. However, many interpreted the decision of Baldwin to go to France in the mid-20th century and Condé to go to the United States in the 1970s, in the midst of much political turmoil in their respective home countries, as a sort of desertion. In her contribution to the collection of essays *The Fire This Time*, the writer Rachel Kaadzi Ghansa recalls that: "Baldwin, as he was taught to me, had escaped to France and avoided his birth-righted fate whereas millions of black men his age had not. It seemed easy enough to fly in from France to protest, whereas it seemed straight hellish to live in it with no ticket out" (22). Condé does the chastising herself when she addresses the topic of the independence of Guadeloupe in an interview with *Le Point*, stating that "I did not fight enough [...]. I chose to go and teach in well-known American Universities: Columbia, Harvard, Virginia, instead of staying in my country to collaborate with the people who had the same aspirations" ("Littérature – Nobel alternatif: Maryse Condé consacrée à Stockholm").

While some of these expectations persist—and someone like Mabanckou, for instance, denounces the fallacy that consists of accusing African writers who do not live in Africa of not being African enough—the African diaspora’s patterns of mobility have broadened. The clichéd image of clandestine African migrant crossing oceans on a makeshift boat now coexists with the representation of the Afropolitan, a generation of educated and worldly Africans and Caribbean emigrants who are in control of their dispersion. The writer Taiye Selasi is most famous for her articulation of the figure of the Afropolitan, defining herself and her peers as:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. [...] We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (“Bye-Bye Babar”)

The term “Afropolitan” and its definition has been the subject of much controversy and criticism, notably Teju Cole’s iteration of an Afropolitan character in *Open City*. And yet it is a legitimate attempt to distinguish a new generation of the African diaspora. Thirty years after Condé left France to go teach in the United States, it has become more common for an Afro-diasporic intellectual to hold a successful academic status outside of her or his homeland. Mabanckou is one of them, although he might not subscribe to the label of Afropolitan. At the time of his most recent publication,

Rumeurs d'Amérique, the first of his texts to address exclusively his experience in the United States, he had lived about 22 years in Congo, 17 years in France, and 17 years in the United States. Because he finds himself at the crossroad of a lifetime divided almost equally between three countries, Mabanckou explicitly states that he considers Pointe-Noire, Paris, and Los Angeles (more specifically Santa Monica) home. In contrast to Baldwin and Condé, he is not torn between these places, and the sets of affiliations and identifications they presuppose, which create what he calls his “transhumance:” “each of these territories goes their own way during the day, but inescapably pairs up at nightfall to engender this *identité du mouvement* that I use as laissez-passer whenever I encounter the Other” (4). Mabanckou’s “rearticulation of the national and the transnational” concurs with the terminology of “diasporic citizenship” deployed by Alexander G. Weheliye, arguing for a fusion of the two seemingly antithetical terms because “both revolve around the problematic of belonging: where do subjects locate their political and cultural affiliations and how are these circumscribed by various political, economic, and cultural constraints?” (147).

Mabanckou is highly aware of the diasporic element of his multidimensional identity: he enjoys it, he contributes to its manufacturing, and he writes extensively about it. In *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, he questioned the commonalities that tied black people living in France to one another, unfavorably comparing their attempts (or lack thereof) at community building to the solid historical and social solidarity that black Americans share. In this respect, Mabanckou continues Baldwin’s thought on the (im)possibilities of Pan-Africanism, adopting a corresponding distance and attention to nuances. He is closer,

however, to the late Baldwin who, after his stay in Turkey and during his return to France was less confined by what he envisioned as being the national particularisms of black Americans during the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists, and therefore adopted a more intersectional and international outlook on social justice.

If he starts by acknowledging the influence black American writers had on African literature and himself, citing a list of writers and activists to whom he feels indebted (6), Mabanckou also examines the points of tension that remain between Africans and African Americans, echoing a constitutive episode of *Le sanglot de l'homme noir* in which one of his African American friends, in a state of inebriation, verbally attacked him and accused him, and Africans in general, of having participated in the Atlantic slave trade. In *Rumeurs d'Amérique* Mabanckou implies that he had multiple interactions similar to this one and that it remains an ongoing grievance that contributes to the disconnection between members of the African diaspora in the United States. Just as Baldwin understood that he was favorably perceived as American in comparison to other Blacks and people of color, such as Moroccan and Algerian, from the French colonies, Mabanckou highlights the fact that his being seen as African (with all the connotations that it entails) gives him a more advantageous status in relation to the African American one.

This interrelation of racial legibility is a relatively new subject of inquiry in Black Studies, one largely influenced by Baldwin's writings. The scholar Dagmawi Woubshet wrote a variation of Baldwin's "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," entitled "Black Meets Black: Encounters in America" that addresses this question in a way that

compels striking comparisons with Mabanckou. Starting with the premise that “Americanness is predicated on race” and that “one needs to be legible as a raced person in order to be legally and culturally legible as an American,” Woubshet asks the following question: “how do we theorize the discursive and affective processes by which a Nigerian, or a Somali becomes categorically “black” in America? (65). Woubshet concludes with the ethical necessity, which informed his own choice, to identify as “black” even though it means identifying with “a category of people who are negatively marked” (65).

Mabanckou’s reflection differs from Woubshet’s in that he is particularly interested in these distinctions from an aesthetic and creative standpoint. Not only are these interactions the very body of his texts, they also fuel his crafting of an iconoclast literary and diasporic identity. He describes that African Americans apprehend him, on one hand, as a sell-out, a “bourgeois negro,” while on the other hand, he appears to be a reassuring black representation for the white population he encounters in Santa Monica as in his quality of university professor he was “the best alibi, the winning argument to shove in the face of anyone who would accuse Santa Monica of not being a racially diverse town” (16-7). The argument is reminiscent of Baldwin who knew that his favorable image in France was mostly due to the fact that the French did not carry the guilt of a long American history of slavery and segregation. This is the same lack of guilty feelings that allow Mabanckou, at least as he interprets it, to enjoy a positive position as a non-American black in the United States. Always wary of labels, Mabanckou plays on these claims, be they from black Americans or white Americans,

performing for both audiences the role they project on him while unveiling the contradictory moments of these systems of identification:

There, I was aware of being a *faire-valoir*, and I played the part all the way whenever I was going to one of these posh restaurants where everything was refined, opulent, and white. With my Stetson cap always on my head, I could not go unnoticed and the waitresses never missed a chance to let me know through their cheerful comments that they loved my outfit. (17)

The waitresses call him “the Parisian” because of his style and his French accent (which he playfully denotes would be considered an African accent in French), which makes him smile internally because his stylist is Congolese, like him. His Africanness can thus readily transfer to being read as French as soon as he fits cliché portrayals of a Parisian, obscuring the violent colonial history that created someone like Mabanckou. On the other side of the spectrum, Mabanckou often explains that he has to justify his use of the French language in his writings to detractors who understand this violent history but fail to grasp the complex lived realities of former colonial subjects.

In addition to playing out such (mis)-representations for his readership (in life and in his books), Mabanckou is a sharp observer of the dualistic character of the people he meets. For instance, when he recounts his romantic relationship with an African American woman in Michigan, his description of the trip they took together in Paris reveals the complexity of her own diasporic identity. First, Mabanckou recalls, she expressed the kind of prejudice about Paris that was the product of her American cultural identity: “She complained that there was no fast-food and that restaurants served small portions. [Hotels] were unaffordable for tiny rooms” (168). On the other hand, she was

most surprised by the fact that black French did not nod to each other when they saw each other, an expectation that came from her experience as a member of an African American community in the United States. Perhaps the most telling of these contradictory tensions appears when she expressed her disapproval about Mabanckou's Congolese designer, Jocelyn Le Bachelor, not using African fabrics while she spent her trip consuming "brands that rappers have popularized in African American culture" such as Hermès, Gucci, and Versace (169).

Mabanckou confesses that it is after this trip that he realized their relationship would not work. While his account of her experience in Paris is definitely gendered, his perception of the cultural multiplicity that informed her seemingly conflicted reactions is more nuanced. As we have seen, he too knows firsthand these moments of tension that are the fruit of a rich, plural diasporic identity. Through an approach that contrasts with Woubshet's, Mabanckou embraces a decentered, diasporic outlook when it comes to understanding the meanings of the category "black." He stands in solidarity with the plight of black Americans in the United States, and he participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Yet this does not prevent him from addressing the relative position of power they hold in relation to other non-American Blacks residing outside of the United States. Whether it is cultural capital, and Mabanckou features several phone conversations with his son Boris that revolved mainly around black American rappers, or symbolic and economic capital, as demonstrated by his ex-girlfriend's attitude in France or via his exchanges with Blacks living in France for whom black success is a synonym of African American, as in the following conversation:

You lived in the United States then?

No, but I have a cousin who lives in Chicago and who told me that over there Blacks are bank directors even when they have dreadlocks like Yannick Noah and wear earrings like Bernard Lavilliers!⁹⁶ You would never see that in France! I would rather be black there than here. It's a no brainer! Our brothers from America, *they* have taken a giant step forward! (*Le sanglot de l'homme noir* 22)

Mabanckou does not buy into the “illusion of the *black American dream*,” an expression that Boisseron uses to qualify Condé’s skepticism regarding a certain “black American model of capitalist success” promoted through pop culture (119). Like Condé, only thirty years later, “he always has the feeling that he will never be integrated within the black American community” (“Lettre à mon ‘frère’ d’Amérique” 11) and he feels closer to foreign writers established in the United States, such as Adichie.

The examination of this open wound constitutes, along with the staging of the writer’s condition, one of Mabanckou’s main literary tropes. Beyond his own doubts about the very existence of a transnational black community, Mabanckou demonstrates an ongoing interest in examining the processes of “diasporization” and community building. Through his constant questioning of the relationships between Blacks, he pursues a literary tradition started at the beginning of the 20th century and enters a larger dialogue with other black intellectuals who share his interest, albeit ambivalent, for the subject matter. The preface he wrote to introduce Ta-Nehisi Coates’s French translation

⁹⁶ The comical effect is reinforced here by the fact that Bernard Lavilliers is a white singer songwriter, even though his non-conformism places him under the same category as “other.”

of *Between the World and Me*, aptly title “Lettre à mon frère d’Amérique” in echo to *Letter to Jimmy*, is a telling illustration of his involvement within this bilateral dialogue. Edwards, in his own “Variations on a preface,” in *The Practice of Diaspora*, emphasizes that “the practice of translation is indispensable to the pursuit of any project of internationalism, any “correspondence” that would connect intellectuals or populations of African descent around the world” (20). Faithful to his conceiving of race as a social construct that cannot found any de facto commonalities, Mabanckou is eager to base this Afro-diasporic conversation on the tenets of a practice that is a relentless engagement in the politics of “creation and freedom of thought” (“Lettre à mon frère d’Amérique” 14), beyond racial belonging.

I now turn our attention to Miano and Adichie. *Americanah* is undeniably one of the most popular contemporary interrogation of the relationships between black Americans and non-American Blacks. In her blog, Ifemelu reflects on the racial awakening she undergoes during her stay in the United States, the place where she became marked as “black.” Like Miano, reading African American writers helps Ifemelu come to grips with the American process of racialization that challenges her self-identity and self-identification. Like Condé, however, she feels constrained by the political ramifications attached to this new racial identity, as enforced by her African American boyfriend Blaine who criticizes her blog for not being serious enough, for lacking political and theoretical depth.

Although she is marked as black in the United States, Baldwin’s description of a metaphorical gulf between Africans and African Americans seems still to exist, as she

feels far away from Blaine and his friends, a permanent outsider. In contrast, whenever she meets another African, even if she or he comes from a Francophone country such as Boubacar, a professor at Yale from Senegal, she is easily drawn to them “as though to a person who spoke the same silent language,” with whom she shares “a familiar laugh,” and a “mutuality” that looked almost impossible to achieve with Blaine (421). Her fight with Blaine, which marked the beginning of the end of their relationship, provides the strongest example of the discrepancies that lie at the heart of this disconnection. Instead of going to a protest that Blaine organized to support a black American guard at Yale who had been victim of a racial prejudice, Ifemelu chose to attend a going-away event with Boubacar. When Blaine learns about it, it brings up to the surface the latent resentment that, because she is African, she has the “privilege” to analyze race, a concept that so profoundly determined and alienated African Americans like him, as a foreign object: “She recognized, in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American” (428).

Before moving to the United States, Ifemelu knew black America only through popular music and shows that heavily influenced her peers in High School, perpetuating a certain idea of the United States, the black American dream, that prompted them to want to continue their higher education there. At first Ifemelu describes herself as different, as she is not a consumer of black American cultural production, but she learns to appreciate it through her then boyfriend, Obinze, and his admiration for all things American. Therefore, the images she had of black Americans before her departure were shaped by

the popular representations of an idealistic lifestyle, such as the big, close-knit family living in a nice house in *The Cosby Show*. When she lived in Nigeria, Ifemelu thought of herself only as Nigerian, and as readers, we never get the impression that she harbors any Pan-African or diasporic sensitivities. Of course, Ifemelu is a narrative creation and we cannot fully equate her experience with Adichie's, however the fictive character bears many resemblances with the writer in addition to embodying some of the beliefs that Adichie has expressed numerous times in interviews and non-fiction works. For this reason, I find that putting both Adichie's and Ifemelu's experiences side by side with Miano's can lead to fruitful interpretations.

Indeed Miano, who is only four years older than Adichie, was also brought up during a period of time when black American culture enjoyed great influence in her native Cameroon. In *Habiter la frontière*, she explains how through music (hip-hop, funk), TV shows such as *The Cosby Show*, sport, literature and popular magazines, black America offered positive, modern models of identification (10). These figures of success fulfilled two functions: they presented people of Miano's generation with black personalities that were lacking in the French context and they acted as countermodels to oppose to the older generation of Cameroonians and their admiration of the traditional French aesthetic.

As a result, Miano developed affiliative ties with African American culture during her teenage years in Cameroon, vicariously through the arts of Black Atlantic cross-cultural fertilizations. In contrast to Ifemelu's experience, the young Miano grappled with an understanding of her black, racialized identity while she was in Africa:

It is through the readings of Caribbean and black American writers that I understood that I was also likewise of these populations to which a position in the world had been assigned depending on their skin color. It is by reading them that I had been able to consider the people I was evolving amongst in a different manner, comprehending how similar the traumas born from the encounter with the other, the White, were. (*Habiter la frontière* 14)

Miano could then discern what she had in common with other members of the African diaspora beyond their specific historical and social differences. Although race was not as ostensibly problematic in her development as an individual because she was living in a country where people were predominantly black, she “felt immediately close to [African Americans’] cultural hybridity and its related wounds” (*Habiter la frontière* 14). Miano’s hybridity, as she deploys it, is double: it is the result of the legacies of the French colonization in Cameroon (imposed) and of the wealth of affinities she entertains with Afro-diasporic artifacts, and more specifically with black American culture (chosen). The topic of hybridity is central to Miano’s literary production, fiction and non-fiction alike. She set out not only to comprehend her own hybridity, which she lends to some of her characters in *Tels des astres éteints* for instance, but also the hybridity of other members of the African diaspora who live outside of the continent.

One of her most enduring projects regarding this purpose can be found in her desire to define a space for and give a voice to black people of African descent who were born and raised in France. Miano started investigating the contours of the specificities of the Afropeans, who are African and European, early on in her novels *Afropean Soul et autres nouvelles* (2008) and *Blues pour Élise* (2010), as well as in her essays *Habiter la*

frontière (2012), *L'impératif transgressif* (2016), and more recently, *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (2020). In so doing, Miano aims to help Afropeans, such as her own daughter, envisioning an identity that could encompass their “multiple belongings” (*Habiter la frontière* 84), an identity that would prevent them from living their hybridity only as a form of internal division, or as a binary inclusion/exclusion paradigm.

It is not the focus of this chapter to analyze in depth the concept of Afropeanity, as Miano has been successful in her goal to give more visibility to it, and there are exhaustive scholarly works on the subject. I want to establish that Miano has inscribed herself within an Afro-diasporic literary and intellectual tradition and scope and did so explicitly since the very beginning. In her 2011 talk at the University of California Los Angeles, “les noires réalités de la France,” she states: “Since the very beginning, my wish is to produce an Afro-diasporic literature that will embrace black populations, not in an undifferentiated manner but, I must confess, as a sorority that I hope they will recognize and value” (*Habiter la frontière* 73-4).

In this regard, Miano diverges from Baldwin’s early stance during his first stay in Paris. He believed that the hybrid identity he was describing was particular to the plight of African Americans as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. He perceived this hybridity, this “alienation” from his past and the Africans that have stayed home in the motherland, as predominantly negative and as the empirical distinction between African Americans and their African counterparts (“Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown” 124-5). Baldwin concludes that this internal duality precisely founds the American

identity. In contrast, Miano thinks that this very hybridity operates as a communal experience between Africans and African Americans. She examines with empathy the pain that such a hybridity can engender in the day-to-day life of black populations, as exemplified, for instance, in the personal and collective struggles of the protagonists in *Blues pour Élise*. Nevertheless, she constantly predicates her hope that this hybridity can become a strength once named (Afropea) and directed towards the future, as she explains in an interview with the magazine *Jeune Afrique* conducted for the publication of *Afropea*:

I am looking into ways to inhabit history and to make peace with it within oneself. When you are tied to two spaces that have collided badly, it is difficult to maintain a serene relation with your inner self. *Afropea* is above all a human network constituted of European individuals from Sub-Saharan descent that have no desire to dismiss their African filiation. [...] They are capable of becoming a transformative force for societies that are, I believe, lacking projects. (“Léonora Miano: ‘Je crois en la puissance du lobbying afropéen.’”)

As for Adichie, she appears to be more wary of the notion of hybridity, especially in the way it has been projected onto her. Through the character of Ifemelu, whose self-identity has been transformed by her American cultural and political experience, Adichie portrays the trajectory of a young woman who belongs to the migratory generation of Afropolitans but does not quite fit the idealized description promoted by Taiye Selasi. In the United States, Ifemelu feels as though she has compromised her integrity, in the sense of being whole and true to oneself, which shows particularly through the commercial turn her blog writing has taken and through her conforming to Blaine’s righteousness and

principles. When she returns to Nigeria, on the other hand, she is forced to reckon with the fact that she has acquired some of the traits of the infamous “Americanah,” an Americanized version of the Nigerian. In interviews, Adichie firmly refutes the label of Afropolitan and any claims related to her supposed hybridity. She admits to being a “sentimental Pan-Africanist,” but she presents herself first and foremost as Nigerian, clarifying that in Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities are the most important signifiers of belonging (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Comes to Term with Global Fame,” *New Yorker*). Similarly, although she lives in the United States a majority of the year because her husband works here, home is unequivocally in Nigeria for her. Her relationship to her host country, then, differs significantly from Miano’s.

Needless to say Miano refers to herself as a Sub-Saharan and an African writer, and makes it a point to specify that she is not, by any means, an Afropean. She has lived in France for about thirty years and holds French citizenship in addition to her Cameroonian one; she recently moved to Togo. If Adichie rejects the term “hybridity” because she perceives it as being the latent form of an accusation that one is not authentic enough as an African (“Nigeria’s Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks Colonialism, Politics, and Pop Culture,” *The Africa Report*), Miano embraces it and its dark corners as a creative force for self-definition that the African diaspora needs to seize. Miano’s diasporic inclinations shine through her literary aesthetic, characterized by strong intertextuality with African and African American texts and by the influence of globalized black thought(s), including womanism.

The historian Sylvie Laurent appropriately defines this “literary imaginary” as a “Third Space that links through the invisible thread of words and their musicality the African literary territories of the three continents,” Africa, Europe, America (2). Laurent borrows the term “Third Space” from the cultural Studies precursor Homi Bhabha who conceived of hybridity as a way to break away from binary thinking patterns and essentialisms inherited by imperialism and colonialism. For Bhabha, hybridity is not merely the point of encounter of two separate entities, but a “‘Third Space,’ which enables other positions to emerge” (211). Bhabha’s delineation of hybridity as this Third Space is readily recognizable in Miano’s definition of the frontier and frontier identities. Therefore, it can be said, along with Laurent, that Miano reinterprets the legacy of the Négritude and other Pan-Africanist movements, in articulating a Third Space—where populations across the African diaspora connect culturally and artistically—that supersedes “‘sacred Afrocentrism’ that essentializes the black identity [and the African continent] and turns it into an ideology” (26). Adichie certainly rejects essentialist claims as well, but her mapping of her diasporic identity remains, as I have shown earlier, firmly rooted within the African referent. All things considered, Adichie’s diasporic affiliations seem to rest more on political alliances (as she experiences like her character Ifemelu and the scholar Woubshet the moral imperative of becoming “black” in the United States) than on cultural or aesthetic grounds.

Peck’s case occupies a slightly different position because, amongst the authors studied in this dissertation and in the present chapter in particular, he is the only one who had to leave his country for strictly political reasons. Baldwin employed the term “exile”

to depict his move to Paris to underline the contrast with other, white American expatriates. By framing his leaving the United States as an exile, Baldwin meant to highlight that he had no other choice, that indeed, black Americans had no choice in the United States, if he wanted to live and write freely. While Baldwin's exile was "voluntary", Peck's was forced. The circumstances of Peck's family's exile are compelling because when they were forced to flee the Duvalier regime, they did not immigrate to the United States but to Africa. Peck's parents were part of a fraction of bourgeois and educated Haitians who participated in the institutional and administrative implementations of the newly independent Democratic Republic of Congo.

The experiences of exile, displacement, and political unrest feature eminently in Peck's movies. So much so that the scholar Sophie Saint-Just contends, in her chapter "Framing the Dispersal in Diaspora: Raoul Peck, Transnational Filmmaker," that "Peck's trajectory as a filmmaker is [...] inextricably linked to the construction of (Haitian) diasporic narratives circum the Duvalier regimes" (88). His early movies, indeed, from *Haitian Corner* to *The Man by the Shore* recount the stories and history of Haitians in and outside Haiti during the mid-to-late twentieth Century. In addition to the creation of "a cinematic space, or memorial, in front of which Haitians within and without the nation can gather" (Saint-Just 95), Peck has demonstrated a sustained interest in other African nations' narratives that are often overlooked such as the assassination of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in *Lumumba* and the Rwandan genocide in *Sometime in April*.

Although Peck still maintains strong ties to his home country Haiti, where he was Minister of Culture from 1996 to 1997, he fully embraces his Afro-diasporic identity as

the root of his creative energy. First, his movies explore the intersecting trajectories and memories among the diverse African diaspora populations. For example, in *Lumumba: Death of the Prophet*, Peck's personal family history is intertwined with the Democratic of Congo's national narrative. In *Haitian Corner*, the main protagonist, a Haitian immigrant who fled the Duvalier regime, crosses path with other diasporic groups in the international hub that is NYC (Saint-Just 101). Second, Peck envisions his own story of dispersal as a driving force:

When you grow up in so many different places, you tend to take the good part of it, which is, again, this possibility to have different perspectives, and it gives a sort of lightness to the way you look at things. My whole life I tried not to have a heavy burden on me, you know, ... [not] to have this sort of weight that forbids you to take risk, you know? ... When you know that you can leave next year or leave in the middle of the year and be somewhere else, because you have gone through that experience, it's very liberating. At the same time, in order to understand what's going on in your country or in another country, the fact that you are far away helps you to see what is important and not important, because you can compare. ("Director Raoul Peck: James Baldwin Was 'Speaking Directly To Me'")

Peck's relation to dispersal, then, echoes Baldwin's who recognized that living in France enabled him to observe America from a different perspective. At the same time, Peck does not express the same feelings of guilt and internal turmoil that plagued Baldwin during his time abroad. In this regard, Peck fits more closely the figure of the Afropolitan, dividing his time among several countries and negotiating multiple cultural affiliations. However, contrary to the criticism that is often leveled against

Afropolitanism, Peck's Afro-diasporic Being-in-the-World encompasses more than a cosmopolitan cultural aestheticism. As noted earlier about the artistic choices and the committed lens of *I Am Not Your Negro*, Peck's Pan-Africanist sensitivity is eminently political.

The fact that the topic of "diasporization" that lies at the heart of his older works does not appear as readily in the documentary on Baldwin may be attributed to several factors. First of all, it translates Peck's affiliations with African Americans, not only culturally, through the use of black American music and the tribute to Baldwin's literary heritage, but politically. As an Afro-descendant partly living and working in the United States, Peck is marked as "black" and thus he shares their indignation about the rampant racial inequalities and police violence that continue to affect black lives in the United States. In line with his transnational position and vision, Peck claims his right to comment on the black American experience within the United States, through Baldwin, while making it legible and accessible to an African audience across the Black Atlantic. It demonstrates that, for Peck, racial oppression is not a national concern, but a shared history and struggle that connect members of the African diaspora to one another.

Conclusion

Akin Adesokan offers an instructive critique of Baldwin's report on the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris. Adesokan reads Baldwin's interpretation of the conference, and at times his misreading or what Adesokan calls "misrepresentations" of some arguments that the presenters made, as a "political

posture,” “the powerful practice of self-positioning that *diasporic* black intellectuals adopt when they are confronted with issues of wide ontological ramifications” (73). Although I do not necessarily agree with all the findings Adesokan presents about the tenor of Baldwin’s position, I concur with his argument that what was primarily at stake in this essay was Baldwin’s drive to carve a place for himself within this nascent attempt to create a Pan-Africanist intellectual movement. As I have mentioned in the introduction, when Baldwin first arrived in Paris he was still an aspiring writer and his stay in the capital, along with his interactions with other black writers, such as his conflict with Wright, was to be a defining moment in this trajectory as a literary figure.

In examining the writers of the present corpus through the different modalities of their affiliations with James Baldwin, now considered a major figure of the (black) literary canon, and with the African diaspora at large, I aim at drawing insights about their own self-positioning within the realm of black intellectuals. Indeed, their reading of Baldwin and the level at which the affinities they express in their artistic practices disclose their individual mapping of the black intellectual tradition and where they situate themselves, if they do at all, within it. Beyond the disparities in their conception of a diasporic literary lineage, especially cogent in the ways women writers and men writers deal with literary influence and symbolic capital, their writings display the intention to be part of this dialogue. Some of them might disagree as to whether or not this dialogue can constitute a diasporic community, an anchor point based on cultural belonging rather than racial identification, but I propose that it does, actually, suggest a black diasporic intellectual history and tradition—a common, yet not homogeneous, diasporic imaginary.

This conception of a diasporic community conversation that would be the product and continuation of black writers' engagement with central questions regarding the very existence of this group and its identity heads in the same direction as Butler's conclusion that "another phase is entered when relationships develop between diverse communities of the diaspora to forge a diasporic identity distinct from an identification exclusively as members of a homeland" (210). Africa, as a lived and/or imagined homeland still figures in the productions of Condé, Mabanckou, Peck, Miano, Adichie, and Cole. But just as important is their focus on the conversations, networks, and institutions that link the members of the African diaspora together, as well as the representation of the latter. If we envision diaspora as the weaving of multiple, conscious affiliations, which complement relations of a more filiative nature such as national and ethnic labels, we can conceive of Baldwin and his legacy as one of these institutions that "forge diasporian identity" (Butler 210).

For that matter, I contend that Baldwin and his work function as a home—a transnational, dematerialized iteration of the homeland, which connects artists, writers, directors, and readers of the African diaspora around a shared corpus and the inheritance of key interrogations centered on identity, belonging, and representation. Let me return here to the notion explicated by Said of culture as being the site in which "we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to* or *in* a place, being *at home in* a place" (227). In fact, Baldwin's home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence has been the subject of much inquiry and writing for black intellectuals, motivating several accounts of pilgrimage (among others: Thomas Chatterton Williams, Stephen Casmier,

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah) and an ongoing discussion about the status of such a celebrated writer's material legacy. Unfortunately, the house had been abandoned for several years and was demolished and replaced with new luxurious condos in 2018. The scholar Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s most recent publication on Baldwin, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020), strikingly starts in France, with the desolating image the destroyed of the Saint-Paul-de-Vence house.

In 2016, Thomas Chatterton Williams, an African American writer who resides in France, wrote an opinion page advocating that "France must save James Baldwin's house." He deplored the fact that France has not done anything to preserve the last home of Baldwin, a space that he believes "could become a place of gathering, a residence for writers," and he questions the reasons for this lack of interest when many other writers' houses have become museums in France (Balzac, Hugo, etc.). In light of the institutional failure to save Baldwin's home, the work of affiliation and commemoration in which black intellectuals are engaged to carry Baldwin's legacy and homeliness remains more crucial than ever.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Looking at the transnational outreach of the Black Lives Matter movement helps to contextualize the key questions that underlie this dissertation. The significance of this movement outside of the United States has expanded during the past few years, leading to the widespread 2020 demonstrations across the globe to protest the killing of George Floyd. In France, it sparked many conversations about race relations and social justice, contributing to returning Assa Traoré's fight for justice for her brother Adama Traoré to the forefront of the political and social scene. In 2016, Adama Traoré died in police custody after a violent arrest in the Parisian suburbs. It is not the first time that events and discourses that originated in the United States make their way to France as a means to address issues related to racial inequalities. American critical race theory and the works of black American scholars have long functioned as a framework for discussions on the subject in France.

However, as many Francophone intellectuals have observed, most recently Maboula Soumahoro in *Le Triangle et l'Hexagone* (2020) and Raoul Peck in his short text *J'étouffe* (2020), France's interest in the racial question in the United States rarely translates into an introspection of its own shortcomings in the matter. On the contrary, observing what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic too often consists of supporting France's blind spots. As Maboula Soumahoro explains, it is as if there were, "on one side, the United States, where race deployed itself largely, and on the other, France, where race means nothing" (93). Peck echoes this analysis in *J'étouffe*, whose

title, while bringing to mind Floyd's last words, "I can't breathe," actually transcribes his feeling of suffocation in a country that is in "denial" of its racial discriminations (8).

It is not surprising, then, that the United States occupies such an important place in this debate, as writers and activists attempt to capitalize on France's passion for America's racial politics and African American figures to address the issue of racism in France. Furthermore, as we have seen in chapter 4 and as Soumahoro's trajectory reiterates, the encounter with the United States and black American thought(s) frequently played a determining role in Francophone African, Caribbean, and Afro-descendant thinkers' racial consciousness. Recently, the everlasting French anxiety over the alleged Americanization of France has reached new heights on the social scene. This time, the concerns target the academic field. The government perceives the growing scholarly interest in postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and gender studies in social sciences as a "threat" imported from North American campuses, which could harm France's unity and "national identity."⁹⁷

Without diving too much into the complicated details of this controversy, one of the most salient aspects of this pushback is the suggestion that these ideas not only have no grounds in France, but also that they are in fact completely foreign to French society. This negates an entire history of French and Francophone intellectuals, including but not limited to Léopold Sédar Senghor, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Genet, Aimé Césaire, and Edouard Glissant, who have engaged with these theories and enriched them. While the

⁹⁷ Onishi, Norimitsu. "Will American Ideas Tear France Apart? Some of Its Leaders Think So." *The New York Times*, 9 February 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/world/europe/france-threat-american-universities.html.

influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Négritude has been well documented, “Francophone” intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Hélène Cixous, and Achille Mbembe, have also made substantial contributions to the critical frameworks that are now used at American institutions.

Therefore, the Francophone label seems to exert a double marginalization on African and Afro-descendant authors writing in French, which Miano aptly encapsulates in *L’Impératif transgressif* (2016):

[...] on the one hand, the consideration we enjoy in France does not place us on an equal footing with white French writers. On the other hand, our belonging to the Francophone world limits our audience outside of this sphere. Needless to mention here the contemporary Sub-Saharan writers that are more respected than us thanks to their success in the United States. (130)

Given their classification as a subcategory, literarily and linguistically, in the Parisian-centered publishing world and on the transnational scale, the question of legibility is central to the Francophone, as well as Anglophone, writers in this dissertation that have a strong diasporic aura. How can they be read more broadly and substantially? Does their presence in, or their reference to, the United States make them more legible at large? This question of legibility emerges throughout the four chapters, in which I put in dialogue Francophone and Anglophone African and Afro-descendant writers from different generations, from the mid-20th century to the present (2021). While the issue of legibility as the common thread that binds these texts together prompted the initial inquiries of my research, I had not foreseen then all the intricacies of this theme. I first understood legibility in the strict meaning of reading, wondering: (1) if the authors I selected for my

study read each other's texts and their peers' from the African diaspora, and how these literary intimacy/familiarities were transposed in their writings, (2) how the writers, or their protagonists, read and are being read by (in the sense of perceiving and interpreting) other members of the African diaspora they encounter in the texts (in terms of their physical appearance, cultural identities, and behavior among other things).

However, I soon realized that within the context of my transgenerational comparative study, the question of legibility also led me to examine its corollaries: writing, knowledge formation, and visibility. Indeed, within each chapter, I have underscored that the narrators'/protagonists' concerns about their legibility as racialized, gendered, and diasporic subjects act as a catalyst for their meditation on literature itself, directly or indirectly calling attention to its underlying system of classifications. The visual intertwines with the written when the narrators/protagonists are (mis)read as texts, their bodies and their demeanors interpreted as signs of their interiority and personal identity. Such is the case when, for instance, Maryse Condé is judged non-African because she cannot dance in *La vie sans fards*, Fessologue is accused of hating himself because he straightens his hair in *Black Bazar*, and Akasha is sexualized and harassed because of her physical attributes in *Blues pour Élise*. In each of these examples, the characters confront different gazes: the white gaze, the male gaze, but also inter and intra diasporic gazes.

Of course, the written also informs the visual inasmuch as texts have long functioned as the repository of knowledge, shaping the values and collective imaginary of groups of people. The identities of the narrators/protagonists in this dissertation have

been pre-set before they even encountered other characters, and the gaze of the other people they meet then writes them again, fixing them in preconceived positions. One must bear in mind that they are also agents of this gaze/(mis)reading. The image of the palimpsest is useful here as it expresses the idea of the superimposition of these diverse external perceptions, along with the characters' own mixed and changing sense of self-identity.

In this dissertation, I showed that the very structure of the texts duplicates these concerns about legibility. Indeed these works are not entirely approached as singular objects, but as belonging to a specific tradition, movement or aesthetic, and genre. Other texts influence their reception, according to criteria established by institutionalized literary history and criticism. I see this reading grid as particularly problematic in the context of Francophone and non-American Anglophone African literatures as they are both approached through the realm of French and British national literary canons while remaining considered as subcategories. Furthermore, their creators' authorial identities also impact the way their production is (mis)read: their public persona—their reputation, their visibility, as well as their social identities—which includes their gender and their ethnicity. What this analysis makes clear is that the negotiation of these various systems of classification produces narratives that aim to challenge readers' responses.

In the first chapter, I demonstrated that Maya Angelou's and Maryse Condé's return to Africa, to learn if they are still legible as "Africans," becomes closely tied to their (self)-conception as women (in relation to their status as mothers). Reading these two personal writings together allowed me first to account for the differences of their

experiences, shaped in part by their positions as African American and Afro-Caribbean on the continent, and secondly to identify a common preoccupation with the issues of belonging and kinship at the macro level (Afro-diasporic community) and the micro level (the local and the familial). I contended that the unclassifiable nature of both texts stems from Angelou's and Condé's direct and indirect commentary on their multiple identities as writers, women, mothers, and racialized persons. They let the readers in on their reflections on the changes and contradictions in the ways they present themselves and the ways they have been viewed and interpreted over time, compelling us to meditate on our conventions of truth and on our own expectations as readers of works labelled "autobiographies."

In the second chapter, I examined how the central questions raised by these works, which revolve around (in)authenticity, integrity of the self and of others, were being revisited in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* and Teju Cole's *Open City*. As we have seen, the two protagonists live very different lives, Fessologue as a Congolese undocumented immigrant in Paris and the Nigerian Julius as an educated mixed-race medical resident in NYC. However, both of them showcase the desire to control their story and how they are perceived as Africans and immigrants: Fessologue in his self-fashioning as a Francophone writer, and Julius in his self-presentation as the "good" African and immigrant. Through the use of film and photography theory, I analyzed the visual strategies, rooted in the arts and the (self)-portrait, that each character deploys to propose alternative narratives to official archives and to resist external gazes. While their visual grammar sheds light on events and realities that remain too often out of the public

eye, it conversely serves as a cloak of opacity that fights back against the overexposure and surveillance of migrants and black bodies in media and public spaces. This act of “countervisuality” (to borrow Nicholas Mirzoeff’s phrasing) is highly potent in the narrative configuration of the novels, since their meta-textual strategies (we are reading the book Fessologue is writing; Julius lectures us on how to decipher works of art and people) derail any final interpretation by the reader.

Léonora Miano and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also strive to foster new kinds of relations with their readers in their novels *Blues pour Élise* and *Americanah*. In chapter 3, I tended to their use of modes of communication that have traditionally been perceived as low-brow and non-literary: Miano’s sitcom structure with its musical playlist and Adichie’s incorporation of blog entries. I proposed that their experimentation with materials and structures influenced by pop-culture enables a more direct, participatory interaction with the readers, because the form of the texts model the non-hierarchical connections their protagonists crave. It is especially true of the gender dynamics between the characters, but it also calls attention to the characters’ racial and cultural identification. The issue of legibility turns into a question of translatability and transferability as Ifemelu deals with becoming “black” in the United States and “American” in Nigeria, and the Afropeans of *Blues pour Élise* weigh in on the post-racial promises of Obama’s election.

Chapter 4 functions as a pre-conclusion in which I offered an example of the benefits of an Afro-diasporic literary analysis. Taking James Baldwin as the quintessential black intellectual figure, I established that reading the authors of this

dissertation in light of their (af)filations with Baldwin's work and legacy yields compelling insights into their Afro-diasporic trajectories. The choice of Baldwin is obvious, not only because of his iconic status, but also because of his long-lasting relevance in attempts to make sense of contemporary events. In addition to stressing the importance of "diasporic literacy" (VèVè A. Clark), I concluded that reading/watching/engaging with other members of the African diaspora plays a constitutive role for the authors of my corpus when it comes to their self-determination as intellectuals and as racialized individuals, on both the local and global scales.

Finally, Baldwin brings us back to the discussion that opens this conclusion as he has been summoned so often in the United States and in France to address the wave of protests for social justice. He is most present in Peck's *J'étouffe* and in Abdourahman Waberi's tribune in *L'Obs*, for instance, wherein the title of his most famous essay, *The Fire Next Time*, appears several times. Moreover, Baldwin crystalizes in many ways the issues of visibility, categorization, and (mis)reading that lie at the core of this dissertation. I view his present contemporary moment and his legacy, which gather African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American intellectuals beyond national and linguistic borders, in and outside the United States (in France notably), as an invitation to reimagine the way we approach the editorial and academic compartmentalization of the literature of authors of African descent.

What does it mean to read the authors of this dissertation as Afro-diasporic intellectuals? Did their transnational trajectories make them more legible and visible? How can we recognize and facilitate the circulation of a *global* African diasporic cultural

productions in French and Francophone Studies, but also in Black Studies and English departments? This dissertation attempts to broach these questions in mapping an Afro-diasporic intellectual tradition and lineage that calls for comparative readings that do not erase differences or center one voice over the other. On the contrary, these works highlight each other on so many levels, enabling us to envision their writers as readers as well as creators, and point to more complex reading and transnational practices that still need to be fully accounted for in academia.

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