Cultures in Motion:
The Negotiation of Identity in Francophone West African fiction

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Synopsis

This thesis examines the representation of cultural identity in francophone West African novels. The first two chapters examine the cultural alienation expressed in novels of the 1950s and 1960s and the way in which both negritude and political nationalism attempt to heal this rupture by promoting an 'authentic' African identity. The third chapter draws upon recent critical theory and upon both theoretical and practical anthropology to argue that West African cultures have always been produced through the historical interaction of diverse influences. Distinctions such as that between tradition and modernity are ultimately untenable as neither term corresponds to any discrete reality. Discourses of 'authenticity' are thus, inevitably, inadequate to describe the complex reality of contemporary culture.

The remaining four chapters of the thesis comprise close readings of the following West African authors: Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma, Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, Sony Labou Tansi, Werewere Liking. It is demonstrated that their texts position themselves self-consciously in a culturally interstitial location. Thematically and aesthetically they amalgamate a variety of different cultural elements to produce a new culturally hybrid form. These texts thus mediate between local and global to produce progressive models of culture which operate through inclusion rather than exclusion of the 'foreign'.

Although terms such as hybridity, creolization and syncretism are increasingly popular modes of analysis in contemporary literary studies, they have rarely been thoroughly applied to African literature. This thesis addresses this gap and advances the theoretical debate around these terms. It is also unique in basing this analysis both in contemporary theory, and also in the specific nature of West African cultures.
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Introduction

This work originated as, perhaps, all work does from a convergence of interests. The first and most obvious was a growing, though vague, fascination with the novels of francophone Africa, developed while I was studying for my masters degree. The second was an increasing preoccupation with questions of culture and identity, inspired both by reading of literary and theoretical texts and by broader experiences of the world. During the writing of this thesis I was living in London, a city that is home to a variety of different ethnic groups and myriad languages. Surrounded by the manifestations of this diversity, to live in such a city is, of necessity, to take a position in relation to what is commonly referred to as ‘multiculturalism’. For some people this experience is one of pleasure, variety and enrichment.

At the same time, however, I am aware that as a middle-class white male it is easy to enjoy the trappings of cultural diversity from a relatively secure position of hegemonic privilege. Events in Britain and abroad warn against complacency. The 1990s saw ethnic conflict and genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans and in Britain the racist murders of Stephen Lawrence and Michael Manson (and their bungled investigations) and bombings in Brixton, Brick Lane and Soho. The events of September 11 2001 and their ongoing fallout also suggest that the fault-lines in a post-cold war world order are increasingly perceived as a question of culture rather than political ideology. So, for many people, the interaction of cultures remains a fraught process of exclusion, differentiation and violence.

Gradually, I began to realize that these issues of cultural diversity and its effects were exactly what I found fascinating in the West African francophone literature I was reading. For reasons that I shall explain later, African authors were forced by the experience of colonialism to write from a position of enforced culture clash and to find new and innovative discursive strategies to express their increasingly complex cultural identities. This thesis examines these processes, arguing that West African francophone writers create in and
through their works a vision of cultural identity that is plural and mobile, that attempts to give voice to a variety of cultural elements and to articulate the dialogue between them through which it is created.

In the first chapter I examine the contested origins of francophone African and Caribbean literature in the negritude movement. This movement sees Africa as the source of an essentialized 'black' cultural identity. A diversion to the Caribbean reveals how responses to negritude there have focused upon the experience of displacement and rootlessness to formulate ideas about cultural identity which privilege notions of hybridity or creolization. Despite an emphasis on Africa as a point of origin, I argue that the assimilationist project of French colonialism in West Africa creates a form of internal displacement and cultural alienation. I describe this through the works of two novelists of the late colonial period: Camara Laye and Cheikh Hamidou Kane. In their novels and those of other writers of the period we see how colonized subjects are seduced by the assimilationist rhetoric of French colonialism, but discover eventually that this promise is unfulfilled and that they are stranded in a form of cultural non-belonging. Neither French, nor African in the way they once were, they express a profound crisis of identity.

As the West African French colonies moved towards independence in the late 1950s political nationalism came to dominate political and cultural discourse. The idea of belonging to a nation, of being Senegalese, Guinean or Cameroonian was proposed as a solution to the cultural 'splitting' engendered by colonialism. Chapter two examines this process and the way in which literary texts may be read as part of this project. It argues that, even where nationalism is not explicitly promoted in the anti-colonial novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s, it is inevitably present as the political project that underpins them. This argument is illustrated through a close reading of Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*. In the independent era nationalism can be detected, somewhat paradoxically, in the proliferating critiques of the new nation-states and in a growing critical emphasis on national literatures.
Having looked at these apparent solutions to the cultural alienation inaugurated by colonialism, the third chapter discusses why such 'monolithic' discourses as negritude and nationalism inevitably fail to account for the complex reality of cultural identity in West Africa. It begins by drawing on discussions of nationalism in postcolonial theory to argue that the concept is inevitably indebted to its western origins and that its discursive ambivalence means that it is always in the process of generating alternative identities that contest it. I go on to examine how this process is reinforced by the concrete political and economic weaknesses of postcolonial West African nations. These weaknesses mean that alternative forms of identification such as ethnicity and religion are always operating as attractive alternatives that disrupt the unity of nationalist rhetoric. By looking at recent ethnographic and sociological work on the region, however, we are able to see that these identities too are constantly emergent and variable. Anthropological theorists like James Clifford and George Marcus argue that it is a feature of cultures as a whole that they emerge through a process of dialogue and representation. In this scenario we need to find a way of formulating and representing the cultural identity that takes account of the interactivity of the various elements through which it is constituted, which is neither monolithically 'African' nor a simple assimilation of 'western' values, but which hybridizes the two to produce something distinctive and new. The chapter concludes by suggesting that similarities between the ways in which cultures and texts are produced mean that literary texts are a privileged location for the negotiation of these identities.

The remaining four chapters of the thesis comprise close readings of the following West African authors: Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma, Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, Sony Labou Tansi and Werewere Liking.

Ouologuem and Kourouma are generally seen as producing nihilistic deconstructions of, respectively, African history and postcolonial politics. Ouologuem provides a thoroughgoing literary critique of ideas of origin which
supplements the theoretical problems identified in chapter three. While
Kourouma to some degree privileges ethnic identity over the vagaries of
postcolonial nationalism, he also begins to construct a distinctive hybrid
aesthetic that mediates not only between French and malinké languages but
also between different cultural identities. Both Ouologuem and Kourouma are
concerned primarily with the construction of collective social or cultural
identities. In chapter five we see how the emergence of women’s writing in the
late 1970s tends to reveal an examination of these issues from the perspective of
an individual subject. The reconciliation of ideas drawn from western feminism
with ‘local’ values provides a fertile example of how identity may be
(re)formulated in the interstices of different cultural traditions. Chapter five
goes on to show how these problems are posed in well-known novels by
Mariama Bâ and Ken Bugul. In chapter six this analysis is extended through a
detailed consideration of the work of Calixthe Beyala in which we find a
comprehensive exploration of the links between power, discourse and culture
in which female sexuality becomes a crucial point from which identity may be
constructed and interrogated. Many of these themes are brought together in the
works of Sony Labou Tansi and Werewere Liking, discussed in chapter seven.
Both writers describe versions of cultural identity which mediate between local
and global influences and both pursue a literary practice which is similarly
hybrid, amalgamating European languages and genres with those of the
African societies from which they come.

In all these writers, we find that their texts position themselves self-consciously
in a culturally interstitial location. Thematically and aesthetically they
amalgamate a variety of different cultural elements to produce a new culturally
hybrid form. These texts thus mediate between local and global to produce
progressive models of culture which operate through inclusion rather than
exclusion of the ‘foreign’. In the conclusion of the thesis I interrogate the
political and ethical consequences of this sort of reading, suggesting some of the
problems entailed by it, but arguing, finally, that the performative creolization
of these texts surpasses the present capacity of cultural theory to address
problems of cultural identity in the contemporary world.
This, then, is the general shape of the thesis. Before proceeding it might, however, be wise to clarify a few methodological issues. Firstly, there are several questions concerning the parameters of this study. I make no claim that this work is a representative history of francophone West African literature. The basic literary history proposed here is that negritude offered an essentialized version of African cultural identity that was critiqued in the novels of the 1950s as unable to account for the cultural alienation of colonialism. In the 1960s this alienation was addressed through the promotion of nationalist identities. These discourses also proved inadequate to account of the complexities of identity as experienced and West African novelists have increasingly privileged textual and thematic figures of hybridity and creolization. This sort of historical schema, while broadly accurate, is inevitably simplistic. Paradigmatic shifts are complex movements with blurred boundaries. There will always be texts which do not fit into the pattern or which disrupt its linearity. I have sought to see how certain themes can be pursued through literary texts from the region. Although I believe my analysis to be true of West African literature in general, I have selected for particular attention those texts which best illustrate my argument and which, frankly, I have most enjoyed reading and writing about. To the extent that this procedure appears to be placing the theoretical cart before the textual horse, I am unapologetic. The trends I have identified are clearly discernible in the texts I analyse and, as I have tried to indicate, in other texts from the region which space has not permitted me to comment extensively upon. Besides which, one of the things this reading demonstrates is the extent to which ‘theoretical’ and ‘literary’ concerns are intermingled in the literature of this region. This is also why I have felt it permissible, indeed necessary, to move between discourses from a number of different disciplines, principally literary theory, postcolonial studies and anthropology.

A more serious concern to be addressed is my own status as a member of the western academy writing about Africa, a continent of which I have limited personal experience. The crises of identity suffered by the protagonists of the novels I have studied are, as I have indicated above, largely unknowable for
me. Some critics have argued that in this position the western reader can only really engage with African literature through a detailed understanding of the relevant anthropological data (Miller 1990), although we should note that most modern anthropologists are themselves concerned about the issue of how far they can really understand or represent a 'foreign' culture. I am not African, nor am I a trained anthropologist, and I make no pretence to the kind of understanding that either would bring to this subject. Again, however, my inclination is to be unapologetic and allow my analysis to speak for itself. In as far as I can offer a theoretical justification for my position, it is that the texts I am concerned with mediate between the local and the universal, the African and the global. Given this construction of a culturally interstitial location, it would seem perverse to argue that it cannot fruitfully be approached from western as well as African perspectives.

Finally, a word about vocabulary. Most ethnic groups and languages in West Africa have more than one name and are spelt differently in different European languages: peulh, fula, fulbe and fulani are all essentially the same, for example, as are malinké and mande. For the sake of consistency, I have adopted the standard French spelling as used in most of the texts I discuss (e.g. oulof, malinké). Some of the critics I cite use different spellings, but I hope that it is clear to what these refer and that I have clarified it where there is any risk of confusion.

This study is concerned with francophone West Africa. I have tried to be specific about this throughout, but when for reasons of economy I refer simply to Africa or Africans, this is what I mean. Francophone West Africa itself is a bewilderingly complex place ethnically, linguistically and culturally. Arguably, to perform a regional analysis is already an act of simplification which fails to give due weight to the cultural differences that exist on the ground. I believe, however, that the nature of French colonialism and the problems it bequeathed means that there are a set of concerns which are structurally similar and which, as I have shown, are addressed by literature from across the region. At the same time I have tried to remain mindful of the specificities of particular cultural
contexts. Whether the sort of analysis I perform can be extended to other parts of Africa remains an open question. My instinct is that it probably can, but sadly this must await another study.
Chapter One

Beginnings are notoriously difficult. One thing this thesis hopes to demonstrate is the way in which ideas of origin are persistently questioned and reformulated in the francophone African novel. It is perhaps ironic, then, that for many critics this has been a literature whose beginnings have proved unproblematic. In contrast to many other instances (where does French literature begin, or English?) and despite their evident differences, writing in French from both Africa and the Caribbean is assigned a definite point of common origin in the negritude movement that began in 1930s Paris. This is a view inaugurated in Lilyan Kesteloot’s *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d’une littérature* (1963), the first major study of francophone writing. Kesteloot’s highly influential book is primarily a history of the negritude movement which, as her subtitle implies, she sees as the birthplace of a new and distinct literature, what she and others have termed ‘littérature négro-africaine d’expression française’.

Kesteloot dates this birth to the 1930s, an era in which students from the French colonies began to re-evaluate and re-affirm the cultures of Africa and the African diaspora. The three most significant journals of this period were *La Revue du monde noir* (published from 20th November 1931 to 20th April 1932), *Légitime défense* (1932) and *L’Étudiant noir* (1935). It was in these publications that the themes which would characterize negritude began to form. They also allowed the emergence of writers such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sedar Senghor and Léon Damas, whose ideas were to influence the development of African and Caribbean writing for many years. These journals display a variety of influences. Senghor cites the Negro Renaissance in the U.S.A as being of primary importance: ‘la Négritude [...] est née aux États Unis d’Amérique’ (Senghor 1971, 10), but we might also include the ethnology of Leo Frobenius which re-valORIZED pre-colonial African culture and the Haitian poetry of the nineteenth century. The disparity of these influences hints at the difficulty of beginnings. In recent years negritude’s originary status and its coherence as a ‘movement’ have begun to be questioned. Christopher L. Miller has argued convincingly that an earlier generation of black writers promoted equally radical and significant positions and Belinda Jack has analysed how the term
negritude has been used in relation to a broad range of theoretical positions and how each of these usages feeds back into the ongoing definition of the term (Miller 1998; Jack 1996). Even in the journals of the 1930s we find different conceptions of negritude, most notably a tension between its political and aesthetic aspects.

As we shall see, these and other tensions persisted within the negritude ‘movement’, challenging the unitary conception of its history and influence proposed by Kesteloot and other critics. While its discrete identity may be deconstructed, however, it remains uncontroversial to state that negritude was, and was seen to be, highly influential. Furthermore some key features of it may be identified. It soon becomes clear that negritude was above all based upon the apprehension of a racial consciousness. Thus Senghor can claim that ‘la négritude, c’est donc la personnalité collective négro-africaine’ (1964, 8), describing it as ‘la découverte des valeurs noires et la prise de conscience par le Nègre de sa situation’ (1971, 10), and citing Césaire, for whom negritude is simply ‘la conscience d’être noir’ (1971, 6). For both men, then, negritude is the essence of what it is to be a black man in the modern world. Senghor defines the term as follows:

Ces deux suffixes [...ité, ...itude], employés avec la même signification dès le bas latin, servent aujourd’hui, à former des mots abstraits tirés d’adjectifs...on pourrait aussi bien définir la négritude: ‘manière de s’exprimer du Nègre. Caractère nègre. Le monde nègre, la civilisation nègre.’ (1971, 5)

La négritude, c’est...l’ensemble des valeurs culturelles du monde noir, telle qu’elles s’expriment dans la vie. (1964, 9)

This seems to correspond with the first use of the term in Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal:

ma négritude n’est pas une pierre, sa surdité ruée contre la clameur du jour
ma négritude n’est pas une taie d’eau morte sur l’œil mort de la terre
ma négritude n’est ni un tour ni une cathédrale
elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol
elle plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel
elle trouve l'accablement opaque de sa droite patience.
(1939, 47)

Although the passage is semantically dense and potentially obscure, we can read in Césaire's obsessive returns to what negritude is or is not, his need to define himself in some essential way, to grasp the ontology of 'Qui et quels nous sommes?' (1939, 28). The passage also hints at the quasi-biological fusion with nature that was to form another recurrent theme of negritude. As Senghor explains: 'le Nègre est l'homme de la nature. Il vit traditionnellement, de la terre et avec la terre, dans et par le cosmos' (1964, 202). This participation in nature gives rise to a certain mode of understanding: 'le Nègre n’est pas dénué de raison [...]. Mais sa raison n’est pas discursive; elle est synthétique' (1964, 203). This in turn is explicitly contrasted with western reason: 'la raison européenne est analytique par utilisation, la raison nègre intuitive par participation' (1964, 203). In his attempt to discover authentic 'valeurs noires' Césaire also enthusiastically embraces specifically non-western values, hence his extollation of:

Ceux qui n’ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole
ceux qui n’ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni l’électricité
ceux qui n’ont exploré ni les mers ni le ciel
(1939, 44)

In the years immediately after the Second World War this conception of negritude became increasingly well known. We can identify four key events that contributed to this growing influence. 1947 saw the foundation of the journal Présence Africaine, the appearance in book form of Cahier d’un retour au pays natal with a preface by André Breton and the publication by Léon Damas of Poètes d’expression française 1900-1945, an anthology of poetry from throughout the French colonies. A year later Senghor published his seminal Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malagache de langue française (1948), a work whose impact was increased by the inclusion of Jean Paul Sartre’s influential introduction ‘Orphée noir’. Sartre gave his own slant to negritude, positioning it
as the negative term in the colonial dialectic, but he shared with Senghor and Césaire the idea that the ‘la poésie nègre’ served above all to ‘manifester l’âme noire’ (Sartre 1948, xv). So, despite differences in detail, there existed between these and other writers a consensus that negritude and the poetry it produced existed to explore and express ‘l’être-dans-le-monde du Nègre’ (Sartre 1948, xxix).

Moreover, the anthologizing gestures of Senghor and Damas implied that ‘la poésie nègre’, be it African, Caribbean or Malagasy in origin, could be treated as a distinct and unified body of work. However, an important difference begins to emerge between these different spheres of literary production. For Senghor negritude was ‘la patrimoine culturelle, les valeurs et surtout l’esprit de la civilisation négro-africaine’ (cited in Chevrier 1984, 46). The authentic source of this culture was of course, Africa itself. This view was shared by Sartre who argued that ‘il faudra bien un jour retourner en Afrique’ (1948, xvii), but for those writers of Caribbean extraction, who formed, in fact, the majority of Senghor’s anthology, the relationship to Africa was likely to be somewhat complicated. In ‘Orphée noir’ Sartre quotes in full ‘Trahison’ by the Haïtian poet Léon Laleau:

Ce cœur obsédant, qui ne correspond
Pas à mon langage ou à mes costumes,
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d’emprunt et des coutumes
D’Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D’apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce cœur qui m’est venu de Sénégal?
(1948, xix)

Sartre talks presciently about the cultural alienation deriving from the poet’s use of the French language, but he fails to remark upon the potential difficulty of a poet, born and bred in Haïti and who had never visited Africa, assuming an uncomplicated cultural descent from Senegal.

By 1971 Senghor recognizes this difficulty which he analyses in the following
les Négro-Américains et les Antillais, même francophones [...] ont été, pendant un, deux, trois siècles, physiquement et, plus grave, spirituellement coupés de la source qui, pendant quatre millions d’années, avait informé leur ancêtres: coupés de l’Afrique-Mère [...].

Pour nous, Négro-Africains, la situation était autre [...]. Nous avions en majeure partie, commencé par vivre à la campagne où le Blanc était rare, dans une civilisation qui ne s’était pas encore désagréée, qui conservait avec son fondement moral, son sens humain et son harmonie. (1971, 13)

So Senghor acknowledges that writers of Caribbean origin are isolated from ‘l’Afrique-Mère’, but he continues to posit Africa as the authentic source of their cultural identity. Although some Caribbean writers concurred with this position, for others it has proved more problematic. Even in Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, Césaire was worrying about the effects of this displacement:

Non, nous n’avons jamais été amazones du roi du Dahomey, ni princes de Ghana avec huit cent chameaux, ni docteurs à Tombouctou Askia le Grand étant roi, ni architectes de Djenné, ni Mahdis, ni guerriers. Nous ne nous sentons pas sous l’aisselle la démangeaison de ceux qui tinrent jadis la lance. (1939, 13)

This anxiety provides a point of bifurcation between the literatures of Africa and the Caribbean. James Clifford remarks that:

It is becoming common to distinguish two négritudes. Senghor’s looks back to tradition and eloquently gathers up a collective African essence. Césaire’s is more syncretic, modernist and parodic – Caribbean in its acceptance of fragments and in its appreciation of the mechanisms of collage in cultural life. (1988, 173)

One of the critics who make this point is René Ménil, a veteran of Légitime Défense and of Césaire’s journal Tropiques:

Dans différentes études universitaires sur la négritude les analystes conviennent de distinguer, à cette date, deux négritudes
These differences can be traced to the actual fabric of Césaire’s verse:

La parole poétique du ‘Cahier’ n’est pas simple puisque la même parole exprime trois voix.
Ces trois voix se font entendre dans un discours continu sans désignation explicite de l’identité de celui qui parle – Césaire utilisant le procédé littéraire du collage [...]. (Ménil 1981, 81)

Thus:

Le ‘Cahier’, qui taille dans l’imaginaire antillais, a voulu être le contemporain historique du nègre moderne.
La négritude senghorienne sera en définitive le contemporain mythologique du passé africain. (Ménil 1981, 85)

This distinction also forms the basis of subsequent Caribbean critiques of negritude.

The first of these is inaugurated by a former pupil of Césaire’s, Frantz Fanon. Disillusioned with the racial prejudice he encounters in France, Fanon is tempted by the liberating promise of Césaire’s negritude:

J’avais rationalisé le monde et le monde m’avait rejeté au nom du préjugé de couleur. Puisque, sur le plan de la raison, l’accord n’était pas possible, je me rejetais vers l’irrationalité. (1952, 99)

Et voici le nègre réhabilité [...] gouvernant le monde de son intuition [...]. (1952, 103)

However, this optimism is short lived and is soon replaced by a pluriform critique. Firstly, Fanon argues that negritude, with its emphasis on nature and its tendency towards primitivism, serves to reinforce white racist stereotypes.

Furthermore, it allows the white man to see the black as representative of an earlier, more rudimentary stage of human development:

Le Blanc [...] m’exposa que génétiquement, je représentais un stade: ‘Vos qualités ont été épuisées par nous. Nous avons eu des mystiques de la terre comme vous n’en connaîtrez jamais. Penchez-vous sur notre histoire, vous comprendrez jusqu’où est allée cette
fusion’ J’eus alors l’impression de répéter un cycle. Mon originalité m’était extorquée. (Fanon 1952, 104)

Fanon also criticizes Sartre’s coercion of negritude into a politicized dialectic:

le nègre [...] se crée un racisme antiraciste. Il ne souhaite nullement dominer le monde: il veut l’abolition des privilèges ethniques d’où qu’ils viennent; il affirme sa solidarité avec les opprimés de toute couleur. Du coup la notion subjective, existentielle, ethnique de négritude ‘passe’ [...] dans celle – objective, positive, exacte – de prolétariat. (1952, 107)

The effect of this amalgamation is that negritude loses it specificity and becomes subsumed in a broader political struggle: ‘Et voilà ce n’est pas moi qui me crée un sens, mais c’est le sens qui était là, pré-existant, m’attendant’ (Fanon 1952, 109).

At the root of all these criticisms is a dissatisfaction with the essentializing momentum of negritude, a feeling that it is insufficiently flexible to encompass the complexities of subjectivity: too reductive to express the specificity of identity. It is this outlook that informs the thinking of more recent Caribbean writers who pick up on the ‘modernist, syncretic’ elements of ‘Caribbean’ negritude to reconfigure identity as a more mobile hybrid phenomenon. Particularly notable in this respect are the Martinican writers Edouard Glissant (another pupil of Césaire’s) and Patrick Chamoiseau.

Over the course of a long career, Glissant has written poetry, drama and novels as well as theoretical works. Glissant comes to Fanon and Césaire both to praise and to bury them: ‘je veux dire […] que ni Césaire ni Fanon ne sont des abstracteurs. Les tracés de la Négritude et de la théorie révolutionnaire des Damnés sont pourtant généralisants’ (1981, 36). Chamoiseau is primarily a novelist but has also published an influential essay in conjunction with Raphael Confiant and Jean Bernabé entitled Éloge de la créolité (1993). Of course we must not conflate the diverse field of thought Caribbean thought into one unified theory. There are significant differences between these thinkers: most importantly where Glissant tends to talk of creolization as a process,
Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé talk of Créolité as a state. My approach here follows Glissant’s model as set out in *Le Discours antillais* (1981) and *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996). I believe this model to be more useful for reasons which will become apparent.

Despite their differences, all these writers would agree with Chamoiseau that such a culture results from ‘La mise en contact brutale [...] de populations culturellement différentes’ (1993, 30). Its strength, however, lies in the transformation of this enforced culture clash into ‘l’agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel’ (Chamoiseau 1993, 26) of different cultural elements. So creolization is the process by which diverse cultural elements interact to produce an entirely new, composite culture.

For Glissant, this is more than a simple hybridization or métissage, as its results cannot easily be predicted: ‘la créolisation est imprévisible alors que l’on pourrait calculer les effets d’un métissage’ (1996, 19). The enforced migrations of the slave trade triggered precisely this sort of process in the Caribbean:

> Ce qui se passe dans la Caraïbe pendant trois siècles est littéralement ceci: une rencontre d’éléments culturels venus d’horizons absolument divers et qui réellement se créolisent [...] pour donner quelque chose d’absolument imprévisibles, d’absolument nouveau et qui est la réalité créole. (Glissant 1996, 15)

The essential feature of this sort of culture is that its identity is generated not by a myth of origin, or legitimating historical genesis, but by its relational interaction with other cultures. Borrowing an image from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille plateaux* (1980), Glissant defines this distinction in terms of the difference between two root systems, the racine unique and the rhizome, explaining that ‘la racine unique est celle qui tue autour d’elle alors que la rhizome est la racine qui s’étend à la rencontre d’autres racines’ (1996, 59). In other words, identity that is rhizomatic is based on the interaction with and acceptance of a variety of cultural forms, not on a single imagined point of origin.
Expanding on this distinction, Glissant identifies two types of culture: cultures ataviques 'qui part du principe d’une Genèse' and cultures composites ‘dont la créolisation se fait pratiquement sous nos yeux’ (1996, 42). Each type of culture is characterized by a certain type of literature. Atavistic cultures are based upon ‘Mythes fondateurs’ which tend towards ‘cet accomplissement d’absolu que deviendront l’écriture, les écritures’ (Glissant 1996, 63). In other words, writing performs a functional role, supplying a racinated foundation for the culture in question, an ontologically absolute account of cultural genesis, that is legitimized through its concrete incarnation in the written word. L’histoire (story) becomes l’Histoire (history) with a capital H. By contrast, composite cultures: ‘commencent directement par le conte qui par paradoxe, est déjà une pratique du détour. Ce que le conte ainsi détourne, c’est la propension à se rattacher à une genèse’ (Glissant 1996, 63).

The story, thus conceived is an open ended, mobile structure which resists the hermeneutical closure of genesis. Even when the oral tale becomes a written form, it remains ‘une autre configuration de l’écrit, d’ou l’absolu ontologique sera évacué’ (Glissant 1996, 63). The task that faces us now is to write in such a way as to ‘concilier l’écriture du mythe avec l’écriture du conte, le souvenir de la Genèse et la prescience de la Relation’ (Glissant 1996, 65).

To schematize Glissant’s thought at this point, we can see how he has moved from a seemingly empirical account of Caribbean history to a theory of cultural identity, which in its turn generates a theory of literature.

The obvious objections at this point seem to be of a historical nature. We may ask whether Glissant’s account of cultural interaction in the Caribbean is accurate. In particular we might question whether such interaction really throws up an entirely new ‘imprévisible’ cultural identity, or whether it just generates routinely transformed versions of previous cultural modalities. A large part of Glissant’s argument for this seems to be based on the fact that slaves of particular linguistic or cultural groups were separated on being shipped to the West Indies, so that their African cultural identity survived only
in the form of traces – yet there is some evidence to suggest that this was not the case and that plantation owners were in fact keen to keep such groups together (Young 1994). Similarly, while we might in principle wish to accept Glissant’s distinction between composite and atavistic cultures, it is not clear how we would tell such cultures apart in practice. Indeed do not all cultures originate through a process of creolization?

It soon becomes clear, however, that such objections do not really apply. Glissant’s theory turns out to be more a prescription for the future than a description of the past, part of what he calls a ‘vision prophétique du passé’ (1996, 86). At the same time Glissant does engage with historical issues, admitting that composite cultures tend to become atavistic and vice versa and that nearly all cultures have a créole stage in their development. He argues, however, that

Si nous parlons de cultures métissées (comme l’antillaise par exemple), ce n’est pas pour définir une catégorie en-soi qui s’opposerait par là à d’autres catégories (de cultures ‘pures’), mais pour affirmer qu’aujourd’hui s’ouvre pour la mentalité humaine une approche infinie de la Relation, comme conscience et comme projet: comme théorie et comme réalité.

Le métissage en tant que proposition n’est pas d’abord l’exaltation de la formation d’un peuple: aucun peuple en effet n’a été préservé des croisements raciaux. Le métissage comme proposition souligne qu’il est désormais inopérant de glorifier une origine ‘unique’ dont la race serait gardienne et continuatrice. (1981, 250)

In the past the cultural interactions of creolization happened at such a slow pace that no-one was really aware of them, whereas in the information-laden modern world they happen so fast that we become conscious of them. This element of consciousness is crucial because it ensures that the process of creolization acquires an unstoppable momentum and a resistance to stasis that it had previously lacked. As Glissant puts it,

1 In this earlier work Glissant uses the term ‘métissage’ in much the same sense that he later uses ‘créolisation’. As we have seen above he later comes to prefer this term, as it implies a greater degree of ‘imprévisibilité’.
c’est la conscience qui réactive la processus et c’est la non-science, la non-connaissance, qui la stabilisera en une identité définie [...].

l’être humain commence d’accepter l’idée que lui-même est en perpétuel processus, qu’il n’est pas de l’être mais de l’étant, et que comme tout étant, il change. (1996, 27-28)

and ‘cette notion de conscience et de rapidité foudroyante fait que désormais on n’arrivera pas à une nouvelle stase’ (1996, 28). Once people become aware of the process of creolization it becomes a self-perpetuating, globalized phenomenon, ‘le monde se créolise’ (Glissant 1996, 15).

The end result of this process will be what Glissant terms the ‘chaos-monde [...] le choc [...] les oppositions [...] les conflits entre les cultures des peuples dans la totalité-monde contemporaine’ (1996, 82). This chaos is by no means negative, however: ‘ce chaos n’est pas le chaos apocalyptique des fins de monde. Le chaos est beau comme on en conçoit tous les éléments comme également nécessaires’ (1996, 71). To live in such a world is to inhabit ‘une condition temporelle du rapport des cultures’ (1996, 82). This rapport is characterized by inclusion and interaction: ‘Vivre la totalité-monde [...] c’est établir relation et non pas consacrer exclusion’ (1996, 67). This ‘poétique de la Relation’ has significant political and ethical repercussions: ‘nous ne changerons rien à la situation des peuples du monde si nous ne changeons pas l’idée que l’identité doit être une racine unique, fixe et intolérante’ (1996, 66). The political consequences of Glissant’s theories are something to which we shall return and which inform the following discussion in a variety of ways. For the moment I wish simply to note that although Caribbean writers from Césaire onwards have theorized identity in diverse ways, the literal geographic relocation generated by the slave trade is central to all these visions.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in West Africa, the degree of spatial displacement was more complex and, perhaps, less emphatic. Thus Senghor can, as we have seen, refer unproblematically to his unbroken African heritage:
Mère, sois bénie!
Reconnais ton fils à l’authenticité de son regard, qui est celle de son cœur et son lignage.
(1964b, 61)

This ‘authenticité’ is something which exists and can be appealed to and passed on: ‘une bonne éducation consistait à enracer L’Enfant dans sa terroir, dans les valeurs culturelles de son peuple sinon de son ethnie’ (Senghor 1988, 18-19).

I want to argue, however, that political colonialism led to a form of interior displacement that offered an equally radical challenge to the politics of identity. Despite its various detrimental effects, the slave trade had in many areas left the organizational structures of African life largely untouched. Colonialism, by contrast, established a dramatically new way of life. This was particularly true in those areas under French administration, which applied direct rule via colonial officials, rather than indirect rule through existing power structures, as favoured by the British. The French also applied a different conception of the colonial project to their European neighbours. In theory, if not in practice, Africans living in the French colonies were to become citizens of the indivisible Republic. Through a system of education and cultural promotion, the lucky few were to be elevated above the savagery of their primitive origins to share in the benefits of advanced European civilization. The term used to describe these educated Africans carries a chilling echo of the racial Darwinism so often invoked to justify the Colonial project: they were évolutés – evolved, changed, different.

The result of the erosion of traditional culture and its partial replacement with European outlooks and structures was a sense of profound cultural uncertainty. This process has been described by the philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe. He argues that ‘the colonists […] as well as the colonialists […] have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs’ (1988, 1). From this tendency,

three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of natives’ minds, and the
integration of local economic histories into the western perspective. (1981, 2)

This is what Mudimbe terms the 'colonizing structure' and it is, he believes, inevitably 'responsible for producing marginal societies, cultures and human beings' (1988, 3):

Because of the colonizing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of the current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. (1988, 4)

Colonialism envisages a movement from the former to the latter of these paired oppositions. For the colonized subject, however this transition may not be a smooth one, even when it is enthusiastically pursued:

Lifestyles and modes of thinking of the dominant nations impose themselves on the dominated nations. Moreover, they are accepted, even sought after. Models spring up, alienating factors for the people who sought them. (Mudimbe 1988, 5)

In texts of the colonial period we find this alienation expressed in terms of a fragmentation or discontinuity of identity. I would like to examine briefly how this anxiety is articulated in two early 'classics' of francophone African fiction, Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1962).

Laye's novel achieved resounding success on its publication in 1954, winning the Charles Veillon prize of that year. Christopher L. Miller has claimed that *L'Enfant noir* has probably been taught, read, and analyzed more than any other francophone African novel (1990, 125). Most of this attention has tended either to praise or to criticize *L'Enfant noir* as a pastoral idealization of an African childhood, which many African critics have considered too politically quiescent. However, the novel is also concerned with issues of cultural identity. These are heralded by a confusion over the author's name. On the book's cover
and in nearly all bibliographical references this is given as Camara Laye, but as several critics have pointed out – and as is made clear in the text of the novel – the author's name is actually Laye Camara. So entry into a system of published material already involves for Camara/Laye a misnaming, a distortion of identity. Whilst there is probably nothing sinister in this error, it does seem to symbolize the fact that for Laye the ability to represent himself in literary terms is predicated on the adoption of an identity that is not his own. This theme is addressed explicitly throughout the novel.

When Laye describes the row of fetishes in his father's hut, he tells us that 'chaque liquide, chaque gri-gri a sa propriété particulière; mais quel vertu précise? Je l'ignore; j'ai quitté mon père trop tôt' (1953, 11, emphasis mine). As Laye's French education progresses, taking him from the village school to technical college in Conakry and ultimately to France, he becomes increasingly distanced from the cultural practices and beliefs of his Mande background. This is epitomised by an incident towards the end of the novel. When his sick friend Check is visited by the local medicine men, Laye remarks:

Je ne sais pas si Check avait trop grande confiance dans les guérisseurs, je croirais plutôt qu'il en avait pas; nous avions maintenant passé trop d'années à l'école, pour avoir encore en eux une confiance excessive. (1953, 205)

As it happens, neither traditional nor western medicine can save Check, but the comment is indicative of Laye's growing estrangement from his cultural origins. He immediately qualifies this view of the guérisseurs, however, saying that: 'Pourtant, tous nos guérisseurs ne sont pas de simples charlatans: beaucoup détiennent des secrets et guérissent réellement' (1953, 206). So Laye does not wish to discount the potential efficacy of traditional healing, but he draws our attention to the fact that his education has disqualified him from having complete faith in it.

What is at stake here is an agonistic relation between two economies of knowledge. One, grounded in traditional values and institutions, is derived from years of experience and generations of collective wisdom. Its development
is thus organic which allows it to be seen as 'natural'. The acquisition of such knowledge is highly regulated by custom and is based upon initiation into 'secrets' like those of the guérisseurs. It is this model of knowledge that the negritude writers were so keen to valorize as 'authentically' African. The other model alluded to in *L'Enfant noir* is European, more specifically Cartesian, it is based (at least in theory) on clearly demonstrable principles of rationality. One might think that here too a form of initiation is required, in as far as one must learn to read and write before this system can be utilized. The difference, however, is that once these keys have been acquired, the European model is, in principle, fully open to the talented user, who can roam at will across an unregulated body of knowledge unhindered by the constraints of 'l'usage'. European knowledge thus appears more mobile and potentially seductive, whilst by the same token being less integrated into the life of its subject So *L'Enfant noir* contrasts *sapientia* with *scientia*, the experiential with the learnt. These contrasts are in turn projected onto a binary opposition between Africa and Europe.

Obviously this easy distinction between forms of knowledge is, in real terms, highly porous and open to deconstruction. Foucault has shown how no form of knowledge is completely open; discourse is always and everywhere subject to rules and circumscribing practices (1971). More specifically, a great deal of work has been done in recent years on the discursive conditions that govern both western knowledge of Africa and what Mudimbe describes as an African *gnosis*. Laye’s acceptance of this distinction is already an indication of the extent to which he has assimilated European ideas of Africa and of African knowledge. Nevertheless, this differentiation of 'African' and 'European' does carry some currency in *L'Enfant noir*, which is not in any case concerned with the status or value of either mode of knowledge – for Laye is keen to attribute potential value to them both – but with the reality of the lacunae between them. It is the process of loss, deriving from an incomplete movement between two paradigms that is dramatized by Laye’s novel.

This becomes apparent from the very beginning of the novel, which opens:
‘J’étais enfant et je jouais près de la case de mon père. Quel âge avais-je en ce temps-là? Je ne rappelle pas exactement’ (1953, 9). This passage clearly reveals to us the distinction between Laye as an adult narrator and as the child who experiences events in the past. A distinction that is signalled by the shift from imperfect to present tense. The child’s perception of the world is experiential and continuous ‘J’étais enfant.’ The adult narrator, however, is anxious to categorize this recollection with greater precision ‘Quel âge avais-je’. The European signifying practice he has adopted demands more than an unmediated engagement with the content of past experiences. Laye’s text is not only a childhood memoir; it is also a fundamentally ethnographic project, an attempt to explain Africa to a non-African audience. Both these genres require Laye’s childhood to be represented accurately through clearly comprehensible categories. The experiential continuity of the past, however, refuses the retrospective application of these categories: ‘Je ne me rappelle pas exactement.’ The representational structures of Laye’s present cannot encompass a childhood experienced on the basis of a different cultural and significatory praxis.

We do not need to evaluate the different forms of knowledge at play here to note that the passage represents an epistemological crisis between past and present. The negation of present knowledge about the past demonstrates the gap between them; the irreversibility of Laye’s cultural journey.

If this seems a somewhat tendentious conclusion to draw from so short a piece of text, then a longer example may perhaps make the case clearer.

When he is about twelve or thirteen years old Laye joins ‘l’association de non-initiés’: a mysterious society which contains all the young men of his age who have not yet been circumcised. This society represents an intermediate stage on the way to this full initiation into adulthood. Admittance is regulated by a series of rituals; central to these rites is the figure of a monster ‘Kondén Diara’, ‘ce terrible croquemitaine, ce “lion des enfants”’ (1953, 104). The boys spend the night in the bush, where they must remain steadfast whilst Kondén Diara and his troupes of lions howl around them. Having thus proved their courage, the
boys are considered worthy of entry into the society and are taught its rituals. On the way back to the village the next morning, they are surprised to observe long white threads stretched between the treetops and the roofs of the houses. Laye is told that these have been placed there by the chief of the non-initiés transformed into a swallow.

As Laye describes these events, we see several forms of knowledge in operation. The twelve year old boy who experiences the events, seems initially to take them at face value: ‘Pas une seconde je ne mets en doute la présence du monstre’ (1953, 112). He does display some scepticism about the white threads ‘Les hirondelles ne volent pas la nuit’ (1953, 116), but when the story is confirmed by one of the older boys, he accepts it: ‘Je ne dis plus mot: la nuit de Kondén Diara était une étrange nuit, une nuit terrible et merveilleuse, une nuit qui passait l’entendement’ (1953, 117). We see here two aspects of a ‘traditional’ economy of knowledge: the acceptance of mystery and of authority based on age. Later, when Laye is circumcised and fully initiated into adulthood, he learns that the howling was not really made by the lions of Kondén Diara, but by the elder boys. A third aspect of ‘traditional’ knowledge is demonstrated – revelation based on age and ritual. As in our previous example, however, the narrating Laye works according to a different knowledge system. He is anxious to explain the ceremony of Kondén Diara to his literate audience in ‘respectable’, rational terms:

> Je n’ignore pas qu’un tel comportement paraîtra étrange, mais il est parfaitement fondé. Si la cérémonie des lions a les caractères d’un jeu, si elle est pour une bonne part une mystification, elle est chose importante aussi: elle est une épreuve, un moyen d’aguerrir et un rite qui est la prélude à une rite de passage. (1953, 122)

Yet despite his confident repudiation of ignorance at the beginning of this passage, Laye’s narratorial position does not render this sequence of events completely transparent to him:

> si la grognement de Kondén Diara est facilement explicable, la présence des longs fils blancs qui relient l’immense fromager de la clairière aux plus grands arbres et aux cases principales de la ville,
l'est beaucoup moins. Je n'en ai, pour ma part, point obtenu une explication parfaite [...]. (1953, 120)

(Again, note the present tense compared with the imperfect of ‘une nuit qui passait l’entendement’.) Laye enumerates a number of theories as to how the threads might have been fixed, but is eventually forced to concede defeat. Once again the discursive procedures of Laye’s present are unable to fully account for the experiences of his past. ‘Traditional’ knowledge might have furnished him with such an account, but as we have seen such knowledge can only be acquired gradually, over time and, as Laye goes on to note, he left the village too early to do so:

Je n’en ai, pour ma part, point obtenu une explication parfaite: à l’époque où j’aurais pu l’obtenir, en prenant ma place parmi les aînés qui dirigeait la cérémonie, j’avais cessé d’habiter Kouroussa. (1953, 120)

Laye never gets to take his place amongst the elders. The transition to a European economy of knowledge deprives him of this birthright and, not for the first time, we see a certain wistfulness about these lost opportunities. As we saw in relation to his father’s fetishes, a sense of incompleteness pervades the book:

Tel était l’usage. Quant à dire pourquoi on en usait aussi […] je n’aurais pu le dire à l’époque; je savais seulement que c’était l’usage et je ne cherchais pas plus loin. Cet usage comme tous nos usages, devait avoir sa raison […] mais je n’avais pas l’âge alors ni la curiosité d’interroger les vieillards, et quand enfin j’ai atteint cet âge, je n’étais plus en Afrique. (1953, 56)

As this last example makes clear, what Laye has lost touch with is not simply a childhood consciousness, inevitably lost in the passage to adulthood, but a mode of knowledge that should have come to him with age and which he has lost in the geographical and intellectual transition to Europe.

This would not perhaps matter if he had simply exchanged one economy of knowledge – one culture – for another equally valuable one. As we have seen,
however, Laye’s current mode of understanding cannot encompass his past: cannot, in the fullest sense, account for who he is. The adult Laye, narrating the story, is well aware of this. Explaining his mother’s totemic identification with the crocodile, he notes that ‘le monde bouge, le monde change [...] à telle enseigne que mon propre totem – j’ai mon totem aussi – m’est inconnu’ (1953, 80). Once again the present tense is shown to be a locus of negated reflexive knowledge. Laye’s consciousness of this ensures that completion of this exchange is always deferred.

Yet if the process of education has led Laye to lose touch with his culture, the existence of this memoir, with its detailed and loving depictions of Mande life, demonstrates a desire to identify with these roots. But this identification is ultimately impossible. The paradox here is that the educational process that has enabled him to produce this text is also the process that distances him from its subject. So the textual space that is *L’Enfant noir* must of necessity be a space of absence, a *point de suspension*, between the two cultural positions it is predicated upon.

Similar concerns are addressed in *L’Aventure ambiguë*. Kane’s novel recounts the education of Samba, a young member of the Diallobé of Senegal. The question of whether to send their children to colonial schools is seen by the elders as a vital political decision. This is framed in more overtly spiritual terms than in *L’Enfant noir*, with the materialist culture of the west opposed to the Islamic traditions of the Diallobé; but here too we find the idea that learning the ways of another culture means forgetting the ways of your own. This is openly addressed by the chief of the Diallobé, who asks: ‘Ce qu’ils apprendront vaut-il ce qu’ils oublieront? [...] peut-on apprendre ceci sans oublier cela, et ce qu’on apprend vaut-il ce qu’on oublie?’ (Kane 1962, 44).

Eventually Samba is sent to French schools, initially in Africa and then in Paris. This education forms the ambiguous adventure of the novel’s title, a cultural transformation that Samba analyses in the following terms:
Il nous apparaît soudain que, tout au long de notre cheminement, nous n’avons pas cessé de nous métamorphoser, et que nous voilà devenus autres. Quelquefois la métamorphose ne s’achève pas, elle nous installe dans l’hybride et nous y laisse. Alors nous nous cachons, remplis de honte. (Kane 1962, 125)

Many of the themes from *L’Enfant noir* are made explicit in this passage, in which the use of the third person indicates that Samba intends his analysis to have an application beyond his personal situation. The use of the word ‘cheminement’ is instructive, with its dual connotations of physical and intellectual movement. Clearer still is his description of a metamorphosis, which turns him/them into someone different: ‘nous voilà devenus autres’. In Laye’s novel we had to infer the anguish of an incomplete trajectory between two cultures, here this is stated openly. ‘Quelquefois la métamorphose ne s’achève pas, elle nous installe dans l’hybride et nous y laisse. Alors nous nous cachons, remplis de honte.’ It is significant that his sense of being split between two cultures is described in terms of hybridity, an idea which has a long and complex history. The word hybrid comes to us from the Latin *hybrida*, which denoted both the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar and subsequently the child of a freeman and a slave, or of a Roman and a foreign woman. Even in the distant etymological past, then, the word seems to encompass both a scientific exactitude and a certain ideological weight. Connotations of sterility, unnaturalness, of something not quite right, even monstrous, continued to accrete around the hybrid object. Even today the OED cautions us that the term hybrid when applied to a person of mixed race or culture is ‘often offensive’ and Le Petit Robert defines it as describing ‘deux éléments de nature différente anormalement réunis’ (emphasis mine). As we hinted in our consideration of créole theorists, however, hybridity has in recent years been revalorized as a term in cultural theory. These positive applications of it, to which we shall return, are entirely lacking in Samba’s use of the term, in which it is seen only as a source of shame.

Later in the novel Samba expands on the idea of a split cultural consciousness:

Je ne suis pas un pays de Diallobé distinct, face à un Occident
distinct, et appréciant d’une tête froide ce que je puis lui prendre et ce qu’il faut que je lui laisse en contrepartie. Je suis devenu les deux. Il n’y a pas une tête lucide entre deux termes d’un choix. Il y a une nature étrange, en détresse de n’être pas deux. (Kane 1962, 164)

Like Laye, Samba recognizes that it is not a question of choosing between Africa and Europe. Such a choice is not possible. The reality is of being both and neither. Samba has not and cannot become European, but nor is he any longer African in the way that he was. Unable fully to identify with either culture, he becomes stranded in an indeterminate area of non-belonging from which there is no obvious escape. The impossible nature of this position is emphasized by Samba’s murder at the end of the novel. As he dies he hears a voice saying: ‘Tu entres où n’est pas l’ambiguïté’ (Kane, 1962, 190). Death, it is implied, is the only way for Samba to evade his dilemma. So the crisis of identity produced in the colonial subject by the process of becoming évoluté can only be resolved by the complete destruction of that subject.

What Kane and Laye share, then, along with so many authors of the period, is an internalization of difference, a sense of already being other to oneself. This is no accident. As Mudimbe argues, this marginalization is an essential product of the ‘colonizing structure’. Within the novel the problem is even more acute. The adoption of the French language and of European modes of representation marks a cultural displacement that has already occurred. The ability to speak in literate western terms is purchased at the price of this internalized difference, which becomes a precondition of the text’s existence. The use of the French language produces an alienation, which is inescapable for the writing subject. We can expect, then, to find these characteristics, not only in the two texts I have analysed, but in other texts produced in the same conditions. The near interchangeability of the following citations indicates that this is indeed the case:

Climbié, chaque jour un peu plus, oublie ses sources, sa rizière [...] ses devoirs, ses livres les ont supplantés. (Dadié 1954, 20)

Nous, écartelés entre l’Européen qui a ses traditions et les vieux appuyés sur la coutume qui fait leur force, que devenons nous?
Sans presque me rendre comte, je n’étais plus qu’un holocauste sur l’autel de progrès et de la civilisation. Envolée ma jeunesse [...] je payais un terrible rançon. (Beti 1957, 94)

Je ne savais rien; ni danse, ni chant de chez moi; je n’étais d’ailleurs pas le seul; presque tous ceux de mes camarades qui avaient fait l’école étaient dans ma situation. (Badian 1963, 144)

The idea that using the French language has an alienating effect is not, of course, a new one. It was something the negritude poets were well aware of, as we saw in the poem by Laleau cited earlier. It also forms one of the main themes of ‘Orphée noir’, in which Sartre claimed that ‘quand le nègre se déclare en français qu’il regrette la culture française, il prend d’une main ce qu’il repousse de l’autre’ (1948, xvii). Half a century earlier Du Bois had spoken of ‘this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ (1903, 3) and as early as 1912, Oruna Lara asked in La Guadeloupe littéraire: ‘How do we impose ourselves, affirm our personality, when we are forced to immerse ourselves in a French vision?’ (cited in Jack 1996, 38).

In the novels I have looked at, however, this problem is both centralized and taken to a new level. It is no longer a case of the French language hindering the expression of ‘l’âme nègre’,

[..] ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D’apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce cœur qui m’est venu de Sénégal?
(Senghor 1948, 108)

but of an immersion in French culture completely destroying any form of secure cultural identity:

Nous n’avons pas été élevés dans les valeurs de notre pays [...] Les Européens ont tous brisé en nous; oui, toutes les valeurs qui auraient pu faire de nous les continuateurs de nos pères et les pionniers d’une Afrique qui, sans se renier, s’assimilerait l’enseignement européen. L’école, avouons-le, nous a orientés vers le monde européen [...] On ne nous a rien dit sur notre monde,
In the light of this it comes as no surprise that in the aftermath of political independence (and probably as a conceptual pre-requisite for its attainment), African writing attempts to heal this *brisure* through the promulgation of an authentically African identity. In the following chapter, I shall turn to some of the forms taken by this quest for authenticity, before considering why such a project must be doomed to failure.
Chapter Two

In *L’Aventure ambiguë* the protagonist Samba remarks of negritude: ‘J’avoue que je n’aime pas ce mot et que je ne comprends pas toujours ce qu’il recouvre’ (Kane 1962, 155). As we have seen in chapter one, the sort of cultural *brisure* depicted in texts like *L’Aventure ambiguë* represents a fundamental contrast to the Senghorian emphasis on

\[\text{culture authentique […] cet } \textit{Esprit} \text{ de la Civilisation négro-africaine, qui enraciné dans la terre et les cœurs noirs, est tendu vers le monde – êtres et choses – pour les com-prendre, l’unifier et le manifester. (Senghor 1964, 400)}\]

The possibility of a synthetic comprehension of the world on the basis of cultural authenticity is precisely what is put into question by novels like *L’Aventure ambiguë*. So it is clear that if one wants to find a way of healing the *brisure* these novels describe, one must look beyond the cultural formulations of negritude.

In this chapter I will suggest that as the colonial era drew to an end in the late 1950s political nationalism assumed this unifying role. Across Africa liberation movements became national liberation movements allied to a nationalist political agenda. This was by no means an instantaneous process, however, as a brief survey of Senegalese history makes clear.²

In Senegal as elsewhere in French West Africa (*L’Afrique occidentale française*) deputies were elected to the French *Assemblée*. In the aftermath of the Second World War deputies such as Lamine Guèye worked within the French political system to ameliorate conditions for the inhabitants of France’s African colonies. Laws were passed in 1946 that abolished forced labour, extended suffrage and abolished the distinction between the ‘citizens’ of the four Dakar communes and the ‘subjects’ of rural Senegal. This increased political emancipation had

² The following account is drawn largely from Gellar (1982).
several consequences. Senghor's *Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais* capitalized on support from the countryside and from prominent Islamic leaders to become the pre-eminent political party. At the same time there was a decline in European involvement in Senegalese politics and an increase in the involvement of trade unionists, Marxist intellectuals and students, all of whom advocated more radical, nationalist politics. Over the course of the 1950s calls for independence became more strident and after establishing a degree of self-government with the *loi-cadre* of 1956, De Gaulle offered three options to France's African colonies when he returned to power in 1958. They could opt for complete integration with France, political autonomy within a French community in which France would maintain control of foreign affairs, defence, finance and higher education, or they could choose immediate independence. The second and third of these options were intensely debated throughout the AOF. In Senegal, independence was favoured by many on the left, but bitterly opposed by religious leaders who feared a reduction in their influence. Fearful of losing the support of the marabouts and of the termination of French economic aid, Senghor recommended autonomy within the French community rather than total independence. After a vigorous debate this was the point of view that triumphed in the referendum of September 1958. In fact, Guinea was the only one of the French colonies to vote for independence in 1958 and was indeed subject to immediate economic reprisals by France.

Once out of the bottle, however, the nationalist genie could not easily be replaced. In 1959 Senegal began negotiations to obtain independence with French Soudan as the Mali Federation. The idea of Federation between two or more colonial states was proposed across Africa. Long before Tanganyika became independent in 1961, its future president Julius Nyerere had proposed an East African Federation of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika and in 1958 the Pan African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa was founded with the aim of promoting federation after independence. Similarly the constitutions of Guinea and Ghana allowed for a degree of federation. Although, Tanganyika did unite with Zanzibar in 1964 to form Tanzania and economic and trade communities have been established in different parts of Africa, none of these
federations ever amounted to much. The Mali federation too was to prove short lived. Independence was declared on April 4th 1960, but disagreements between Soudanese and Senegalese politicians led to its dissolution on 22nd August and the founding of separate nation-states in September.

Obviously, many African countries had a much more violent and lengthy progress towards independence, but what the Senegalese example does show is the way in which anti-colonial politics generate an inexorable momentum towards nationalism. Of course this meant accepting not only the boundaries drawn up by the colonial powers, but also a conception of the nation-state that was largely European in origin and form. Historically the nation-state was not entirely without precedent in pre-colonial Africa, especially in the west of the continent. The mediaeval empires of the Songhay, the Malinke or the Soninke could not perhaps be described as nations in the modern sense. The Asante kingdom of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, possessed recognized territorial limits, a national language and a centralized government with police force and army. We will return shortly to the thorny issue of how one defines a nation-state, but there seems little reason why a polity such as the Asante could not be so described. Sadly, by the middle of the twentieth century, the power and prestige of such kingdoms had been thoroughly depleted by the successive despoliations of the slave trade and colonialism. More significantly, perhaps, European perspectives on Africa have tended to obscure systematically the historicity of African cultures and societies. Hegel famously said of Africa:

It has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture. From the earliest historical times Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world [...] removed from the light of self conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night. (Hegel 1830, 174)

This attitude persisted throughout the colonial period. Thus, as late as 1963, Hugh Trevor Roper, then Regius Professor of History at Oxford, could ape Hegel's sentiments in a BBC Television lecture in which he said of African
history, 'at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject of history.' History is defined as 'essentially a form of movement and purposive movement too'. Africa has no history of this sort, only:

the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe: tribes whose chief function on history, in my opinion, is to show to the present an image of the past from which, by history, it has escaped; or shall I seek to avoid the indignation of the medievalists by saying, from which it has changed? (Trevor Roper 1963, 871)

It is hard to know what is most astonishing about these comments. Certainly we might wish that Trevor Roper were as anxious to avoid offending the peoples of Africa and America as he is his medievalist colleagues. What is important, however, is that his denial of African history is not, or should not be, simply based on ignorance. There was plenty of evidence available in 1963 that Africa did have a history of 'purposive movement', indeed much of this evidence had been available for over 100 years. The history of the Asante or the Yoruba, at least versions of this history, had been well known in the nineteenth century. The discovery of Great Zimbabwe or the Benin Bronzes in the late 1800s indicated a far higher level of technological sophistication in Africa than had previously been assumed by Europeans. Whilst these artefacts were widely admired, their origins were often questioned. Many commentators found it hard to believe that they could really be African and attributed them to foreign sources or long vanished 'higher' civilizations. African history once inconveniently discovered was soon dismissed or forgotten.³

This is not to say that there was not a serious anthropological engagement with indigenous African societies during the late colonial period. Ethnologists like Leo Frobenius (1936) and, later, Marcel Griaule (1938) painstakingly constructed

³ For a discussion of the way in which the Benin Bronzes and other items of African material culture were received and discussed in Britain, see Coombes (1994).
visions of African culture and epistemology. Their work was highly influential for the negritude movement, but it shared negritude’s romanticism and was criticized by British social anthropologists for lacking ‘any sustained attention to daily existence or politics as lived’ (Clifford 1988, 58). Anthropology of the British school, however, was mainly oriented to describing the coherence and political logic of ‘segmentary’ societies and other forms of social organization that bore little relation to the European model of a nation and to examining how these forms related to more hierarchical exercises of power. It remains perhaps a moot point to what extent this project was designed simply to facilitate colonial administration and how far it was a genuinely liberal attempt to valorize social systems that had previously been dismissed as primitive and chaotic. Furthermore, these ethnographies tend to adopt a structural functionalist perspective which is striking precisely for its ahistoricity. When Evans-Pritchard talks about the Nuer, for example, he plays down the context of British punitive expeditions and bombing within which his fieldwork took place. There are several consequences of this. As Renato Rosaldo has argued, ‘the Nuer, in good measure correctly, identified him with the colonial regime, which at that time was conducting a campaign of military repression against them’, thus they may well have had ‘good reasons for resisting enquiry’ (1986, 91). This is not just significant in terms of ethnographic method. Rosaldo’s comments remind us both of the ways in which European knowledge of Africa is based upon differential power relations and of the ways in which it seeks to conceal these origins, ‘separating the context of colonial domination from the production of ethnographic knowledge’ (Rosaldo 1986, 93). Equally significant, however is the way in which Evans-Pritchard effaces the historical context of his encounter with the Nuer. This is typical of the way in which European discourses ‘flatten’ African history, systematically making the past unavailable as a basis for development and trapping African peoples within a permanent present, forced to turn towards Europe in order to construct a future. Although subsequent anthropologists have attempted to rectify this situation, it is still

4 See, for example, Meyer-Fortes & Evans-Pritchard (1940); Evans-Pritchard (1940); Gluckman (1965).
possible, as Bayart reminds us, ‘to write excellent monographs on African kingdoms which completely ignore the colonial or postcolonial states to which such kingdoms have belonged for more than a century’ (Bayart 1991, 4-5). It seems likely that this ‘flattening’ helped to limit the extent to which local historical models were sought for the development of postcolonial Africa, either by Europeans or by African elites.

Basil Davidson has argued that the leaders of the new nationalist movements formed part of a tradition of educated Africans dating back as far as the Sierra Leonian recaptives of the 1860s, who saw Africa’s progress into the modern world as dependent on European practices and structures:

The activists of the 1950s plunged into their chosen route of nationalism, seeing this as the only available guarantee of a route open to progress. They accepted the aim of building nation-states on the British model (or, later, on the French) because as it seemed to them and as they were strongly advised there could exist no other useful objective. (Davidson 1992, 162)

There may be some truth in this. Negritude, of course, had attempted to supply a historically grounded African identity, but, as we saw in chapter one, it was unable to prevent many Africans from feeling alienated from traditional African societies. Moreover, their European educations and their participation in political systems established by the colonial powers largely shaped the ways in which they thought about politics in general and their political understanding of African societies. At the same time, however, it is not true to say that the European conception of the nation was adopted entirely without debate. Many people still harboured a pan-Africanist agenda and the sort of federations proposed by Senghor or Nyerere transcended the boundaries of the European colonies, even if they did not fundamentally challenge the nationalist model. There was a gradual realisation amongst the anti-colonial leaders, however, that the co-operation of European powers, integration into a global political system and, perhaps not least, their own political ambitions would best be realized through the adoption of a nation-statist agenda. The die seemed to be definitively cast in 1963 when the Organization of African Unity decided to
respect the boundaries of the old colonial states as set out by the 1885 Conference of Berlin. While it is difficult to generalize across a whole continent some common features of these new nations can be described. Politically they tended to the left, espousing communitarian or Marxist discourses. Economically, however, most African states remained linked to and dominated by the economy of the ex-colonial power. The failure to develop sustainable, autonomous economies and the over-exploitation of rural resources by urban elites would eventually have serious repercussions. Nevertheless, the 1960s appeared to be a decade of relative prosperity and progress. 'Modernization' became a key feature of the new nations and was eagerly embraced. Health, transport and education infrastructures were expanded and European models replaced traditional systems of political authority, at least in theory. This process represents one aspect of the state's attempt to establish hegemony and a discrete identity in the face of potentially competitive political allegiances. 'Tribalism' was and is a dirty word in African politics, but its prevalence as an accusation indicates some of the particular features and anxieties of African nationalism.

When we talk of the nation-state, it is important to recognize that these two concepts, nation and state, are not always and everywhere the same thing. The state may be defined in institutional terms. Anthony Giddens usefully develops Weber's conception of the state as that which possesses the monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory, describing it as 'a set of collectivities concerned with the institutionalized organization of political power' (cited in Schatzberg 1988, 4-5). Such a description is entirely structural and makes no comment on the identities of the state's inhabitants. The nation is a much more elusive concept and the term is used in a variety of contexts, many of which are more charged with identity politics. At one extreme 'nation' simply signifies an ethnically or culturally homogenous group. Such a group does not necessarily stand in any direct relation to a state, thus one has nations without states (the Kurds, the Palestinians), at the same time one may have states that include a variety of nations. As we know, both these scenarios have the capacity to create conflict. At the other end of the spectrum the term is used
synonymously with ‘state’ to designate a political entity. Generally when we speak about nations and nationalism we elide these two perspectives. Ernest Gellner sums up a certain European tradition of thought when he describes nationalism as:

A theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state – a contingency already excluded by the principal in its general formulation – should not separate the power-holders from the rest. (1983, 1)

This definition (of which Gellner himself is highly critical) corresponds to the sort of nationalism seen in Italy or Germany in the nineteenth century, or in the Balkans following the break up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and again in the 1990s. Clearly the African nation-state, based as it was upon colonial borders that had little or no respect for ethnic or cultural identity, could never be based upon nationalism of this sort. Many of these ethnic identities were more flexible and situational than has often been thought and some were of relatively recent construction. Nevertheless, they provide a potent challenge to the nation as defined by Gellner. Benedict Anderson provides a more appropriate way of theorizing nationalism in the African context when he describes the nation as an imagined community (1983). The advantage of this formulation lies in its mobility; however culturally or ethnically homogenous a social group may be, it is only a nation in as far as it imagines itself as such; conversely, therefore, any heterogeneous group is equally free to imagine itself as a nation. This imagining appears unlimited and can be extended to cut across ethnic divisions. In theory, then, the nation as imagined community can be expanded to ‘fit’ the state. As in Gellner’s view of nationalism, state and nation are equated, but it is no longer a case of an elision, but of a deliberate coupling of the two concepts. The space of this conjunction may, of course, become a space of contestation, but it is also figured as the locus in which a new identity may be imagined to complement and give substance to this new imagined community. This is the sort of ideal projected by African nationalism as it sought to compensate for its disparate constitution by imagining the nation-state as the site of a new, authentic cultural identity. This identity would make
good the *brisures* of colonial alienation, just as the new nation replaced the inequities of the colonial state.

As we shall see, this project is open to critique on several levels. I do not for the moment wish to concentrate on either its discursive or political failings. Instead, I would like to look at the ways in which literature is posited as a place in which these imaginings take place: the ways in which national identity is played out in fiction and in the ways in which such fiction has been read (which may or may not be the same). Anderson explicitly connects the spread of nationalism with the growth of print capitalism. In this context, however, it may be more appropriate to begin by examining the work of Senghor and Fanon. Both men imagine the nation-state as the foundation for a new or revitalized cultural identity. Aside from their immense influence, both thinkers are important here, not only because of the ways in which they conceptualize the interaction of national and cultural identity, but because they both envisage art and particularly literature as a key arena in which these identities may be determined or contested.

It is a fairly standard critical practice to describe Senghor as a less political figure than Césaire. Jacques Chevrier states that:

> Alors que Césaire ne quitte jamais, ou presque, le terrain politique et sociologique [...] Senghor croit apercevoir dans la Négritude une forme spécifique fondée sur le rythme et le ton. (1984, 40)

As such critics are presumably aware that Senghor was president of Senegal for over twenty years, they presumably mean that his conception of negritude is less political than that of his Martiniquan counterpart. Yet a reading of Senghor's political writings does not seem to support this view. The essays collected in *Liberté II: Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* reveal this clearly (1971b). In many of the essays from the mid 1950s Senghor was still espousing a federation of semi-autonomous African states within the French republic as a prelude to the unification of Francophone West Africa, yet gradually the idea of the nation and its extension into the nation-state comes to dominate.
Je ne vois comment on pourrait instituer les États-Unis d’Afrique si on ne commence par désunir les États du continent, si on ne commence par respecter, avec leur frontières, leur intégrité. (1971b, 305)

Senghor concedes that ‘L’idée nationale est aujourd’hui la réalité la plus solide de XXème siècle’ (1971b, 304). His conception of the nation seems similar to Anderson’s imagined community when he claims that ‘ce qui fait la nation, c’est un commun vouloir de vie commune’ (1971b, 299). He goes on to argue that it is through the nation-state that this nation may best be given form: ‘l’État c’est l’expression de la nation, c’est surtout le moyen de réaliser la nation’ (1971b, 232). Such a state will allow for the progressive and emancipatory programme of African socialism: ‘Il nous faut […] transformer notre quasi nation en nation, notre pays sous-développé en pays développé’ (1971b, 283).

Whatever critics like Chevrier may claim, however, Senghor is keen to blur the distinction between this political thinking and his ideas about negritude. African socialism, he believes, is a direct development from the sort of African identity described by negritude:

Cette action politique, nous l’avons toujours fondée sur une certaine idée de l’homme et, d’abord sur l’homme négro-africain, historiquement situé. Bref, sur la culture, très précisément sur le concept de la négritude […]. (1971b, 7)

L’art et la littérature noire de l’Afrique noire restent notre plus précieux héritage. (1971b, 196)

This culture can, he believes, be integrated into the modern socialist state he advocates:

Pouvons nous intégrer, dans le socialisme, les valeurs culturelles négro-africaines, singulièrement les valeurs religieuses. C’est à quoi en définitive, nous devrons répondre par un oui sans équivoque. (1971b, 233)
As we saw in chapter one, it is precisely this integration of traditional values and modernity that many writers question. However, much of Senghor’s argument can be read ‘against the grain’ to indicate an essential interconnection of cultural and national identity, irrespective of exactly which form this cultural identity may take:

*l’indépendance culturelle, est le préable nécessaire aux autres indépendances […].* (1971b, 285)

*La culture n’est pas un appendice de la politique […]. La culture est la préable et la fin de toute politique digne de ce nom.* (1971b, 294)

Fanon provides an important development of this argument. His thinking is complementary to Senghor’s, but opposes it at some key junctures. In *Peau noire masques blancs* he had written movingly about a crisis of identity similar to that depicted in the novels described in chapter one. He realized that despite thinking of himself as ‘French’, ‘Je suis Français’ (1952, 164), he was in fact, ‘surdéterminé de l’extérieur’ (1952, 93), because, in the final analysis, for the French themselves, ‘ou qu’il aille un nègre demeure un nègre’ (1952, 140). Fanon thus seems much more keenly aware of the cultural splitting engendered by colonialism than Senghor and this informs his analysis of postcolonial identity. Like Senghor, Fanon believes in the value of pre-colonial African culture and he views cognisance of it as an important political moment, but also, perhaps, as a more complex moment than Senghor allows:

*Je concède que toutes les preuves qui pourrait être données de l’existence d’une prodigieuse civilisation songhaï ne changent pas le fait que les Songhaïs d’aujourd’hui sont sous-alimentés, analphabètes, jetés entre ciel et eau, la tête vide, les yeux vides. Mais, on l’a dit à plusieurs reprises, cette recherche passionnée d’une culture nationale en deçà de l’ère coloniale tire sa légitimité du souci que se partagent les intellectuels colonisés de prendre du recul par rapport à la culture occidentale dans laquelle ils se risquent de s’enliser. Parce qu’ils se rendent compte qu’ils sont en train de se perdre, donc d’être perdus pour leur peuple, ces hommes, la rage au cœur et le cerveau fou, s’acharnent à reprendre contacte avec la sève la plus ancienne, la plus anté-coloniale de leur peuple.* (1961, 254-55)
Important as past culture may be, however, it cannot for Fanon provide an adequate foundation for the national culture of the future, because the rupture introduced by colonialism is so complete. ‘La domination coloniale, parce que totale et simplifiante, a tôt fait de disloquer de façon spectaculaire l’existence culturelle du peuple soumis’ (1961, 284). Eventually, then,

Cette obligation historique dans laquelle se sont trouvés les hommes de culture africains de racialiser leurs revendications, de parler davantage de culture africaine que de culture nationale va les conduire à un cul-de-sac. (1961, 260)

In this scenario culture and cultural identity must be re-instituted through some other means. For Fanon this is best achieved through the promulgation of the nation-state. ‘Se battre pour la culture nationale, c’est d’abord se battre pour la libération de la nation, matrice matérielle à partir de laquelle la culture devient possible’ (1961, 280).

This is, of course, a precise inversion of Senghor’s contention that cultural independence is the necessary precursor of political independence (see above). Fanon’s definition of culture is not entirely dissimilar to that of Senghor, but it is not dependent on a potentially misleading, or even illusory, vision of the past:

La culture nationale n’est pas un folklore où un populisme abstrait a cru découvrir la vérité du peuple [...].

La culture nationale est l’ensemble des efforts faits par un peuple sur le plan de la pensée pour décrire, justifier et chanter l’action à travers laquelle le peuple s’est constitué et s’est maintenu. (1961, 281)

So it would seem that Fanon and Senghor share some common ground in their thinking about culture and nation, in as far as they both see the nation-state as the most effective means of formulating the collective identity of the people.
Fanon’s position is more radical, however, both culturally and politically. It dispenses with Senghor’s emphasis on a mystical African character as the basis of national culture and is thus more capable of addressing the sort of discontents we saw expressed in chapter one.

Despite their differences, however, both men see artistic and especially literary practice as a crucial locus for the production of a cultural or national identity. Senghor repeatedly insists that ‘en Afrique noire, “l’art pour l’art” n’existe pas; tout art est sociale’ (1964, 207). Art must function as ‘l’expression de la réalité sociale’ (1971b, 186). ‘L’art et la littérature y sont des techniques sociales […]. Il s’agit […] de faire participer le peuple dans la vie collective de la cité’ (1971b, 190). So art is construed as a functional means of giving expression to the collective body. ‘C’est à dire que l’art nègre au sens général du mot est un art fonctionnel, pourtant, engagé’ (1971b, 191). Fanon has a similar view, though he concentrates more specifically on literature. Initially imitative of its European model, he contends that the literature of the colonized people gradually establishes its own voice and function. ‘De réplique mineure du dominateur qu’elle était, la production [littéraire] autochtone se différencie et se fait volonté particularisante’ (1961, 287). As this happens, ‘Il [l’intellectuel colonisé] adopte progressivement l’habitude de s’adresser à son peuple’ (1961, 288). It is at this moment that the literary text can begin to fulfil its revolutionary potential:

C’est seulement à partir de ce moment que l’on peut parler d’une littérature nationale. Il y a, au niveau de la création littéraire, reprise et clarification des thèmes typiquement nationalistes. C’est la littérature de combat proprement dite, en ce sens qu’elle convoque tout un peuple à la lutte pour l’existence nationale. Littérature de combat, parce qu’elle informe la conscience nationale, lui donne forme et contours et lui ouvre de nouvelles et d’illimitées perspectives. Littérature de combat, parce qu’elle prend en charge, parce qu’elle est volonté temporalisée. (1961, 288)

Thus the thinking of both Senghor and especially Fanon might be said to echo that of European Marxists such as Lukacs or Goldmann for whom the novel operates as a mirror to society, providing an accurate reflection of the social conditions in which it was produced.
It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that in the period leading up to independence the novel begins to replace poetry as the predominant form in African literature, nor is it surprising that most of these novels adopt what may broadly be defined as a realist aesthetic. This has led some European critics to take a rather harsh view of the African novel of the '50s and '60s:

The Negro-African novel in French [...] has proved on the whole a disappointing literary phenomenon [...]

These writers mostly follow the traditions of the realist, or social realist, or naturalist novel, including the latter’s determinist philosophy, now mainly discredited [...]. Contrary to the poetry of the same period [...] it is difficult to find traces of contemporary European innovations in the structure and style of the African novel in French [...]. By setting out to be a faithful mirror of the African condition of the first half of the twentieth century the French African novel remains obstinately based on the French novel of the nineteenth century. (Blair 1976, 181-82)

I’m not sure that this argument needs addressing specifically, as I hope that a detailed examination of some of the novels in question will render its more vitriolic aspects untenable. Nevertheless, it is true that many critics, both African and European, have agreed that the novel functions as a reflection of social/national reality. Thus Mohamadou Kane can claim that

c’est dans le roman africain que trouve sa plus grande légitimité l’assertion de L. Goldmann lorsqu’il écrit que ‘le roman se caractérise comme l’histoire d’une recherche de valeurs authentique’. (1982, 27, emphasis mine)

and Richard Bjornson can assert that,

the print culture of the Cameroons has been largely responsible for creating the universe of discourse that enables people to conceptualize a national identity. (1991, 459, emphasis mine)

Whilst Bernard Mouralis agrees that
la littérature négro-africaine s’est consacrée très largement […] à l’expression des revendications sociales, politiques, culturelles qui allaient être resumés dans le mot d’ordre d’indépendance. (1984, 145)

So it seems that a critical paradigm is easily identifiable in which political independence is accompanied by a proliferation of realist novels, which both reflect and influence the formation of a new, national, cultural identity. Furthermore, this paradigm may be easily inserted into a literary historical schema in which the poetic cultural utopianism of the negritude movement is replaced by novels of colonial alienation, such as those discussed in chapter one, which in their turn develop into literary explorations/formulations of a new, nationalist identity. So far so good, but it remains to be seen if closer examination of the novels in question will vindicate this paradigmatic view.

Certainly we see these tendencies beginning to develop in some of the novels I mentioned in chapter one, particularly as they become more critical of the colonial system. In Dadié’s Climbié, for instance, we find the following passage, which seems to combine an emphasis on cultural dislocation with an affirmation of the functional potential of art:

La seule valeur du travail de l’artiste, c’est ce qu’il éveille en nous, la flamme d’espoir qu’il nous infuse et surtout la compréhension qu’il nous donne des choses […]. Dans ce domaine nous avons du travail à faire pour révéler nos richesses, pour exprimer notre culture.
– Et si j’affirmais à mon tour, que nous devons lire beaucoup, peut-être plus qu’aucun autre peuple au monde, parce que nous sommes précisément à la croisée de deux civilisations? (1954, 119)

This conception of art seems similar to that of Senghor, but Climbié also exhibits elements of nationalism. Climbié, the novel’s protagonist, is an educated African who has entered the civil service and left his native Guinée to work for the French administration in Dakar. Significantly, Climbié’s politicization coincides with his return to his homeland, where his nascent nationalism is revealed in his valorization of the most mundane objects: ‘Des mangues de son pays! […] mûries par le soleil de son pays! Soleil différent de tous les “autres
soleils” (1954, 173). Climbié becomes increasingly disillusioned with his place in the colonial system that he had previously subscribed to:

Lui Climbié, il est un ‘objet’ parce qu’il n’est toujours pas un citoyen-métro. Il n’a même pas juridiquement, la même valeur que tous ses amis naturalisés Français qui sont là autour de lui. (1954, 179)

He becomes a political agitator — presumably in the cause of independence though this is not specified, a feature of these novels to which we shall return — and is eventually imprisoned. On his release he sells his books in a symbolic rejection of the western knowledge that has until now given meaning to his world. So we find in the concluding sections of Climbié a protest against the colonial establishment and a rejection of western modes of knowledge, combined with a vague, unspecified sense of national identity. Throughout the novel it is suggested, both through the text’s apparent mimetic function and through explicit statements such as the one cited above, that the novel’s purpose is to provide an accurate portrayal, an authentic representation of colonial life.

In order to ascertain how far the exploration of national identity is developed in later novels I would like to examine in some detail the work of the Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, widely acclaimed as an exemplar of the politically engaged African artist.

This is the genius of Ousmane Sembène, that his vision and his work are the expression of his ideology [...]. Ousmane Sembène has achieved his literary success not in order to win prestigious literary prizes, but to provide a social and political service to African peoples wherever they may be found. (Case 1993, 12-13)

I do not wish to hold Sembène up as a representative figure. He is, as all great artists are, a unique and singular talent. Nevertheless, we can see in Sembène’s work a concern with the formulation of cultural identity. Martin Bestman writes that ‘il [Sembène] a pris conscience de l’extrême importance de la recherche d’une identité africaine’ (1981, 15). However, the way in which Sembène
conceives this identity is very different to that of the negritude movement, of which he is contemptuous: ‘For me Negritude has never existed. It is like the sex of the angels [...]. In fact it was a kind of inferiority complex [...]'. Negritude, as I see it, is one tremendous mystification...' (cited in Schipper 1999, 193). For Sembène, as for Fanon, African identity is to be discovered, not through quasi-mystical biological determinism, but through engaged political struggle and communitarianism. A recurring feature of Sembène’s fiction is that

L’individu ne prendra véritablement sens qu’en fonction des rapports et les intérêts du groupe qui l’entoure. Cette conception concorde avec l’esprit communautaire ou le socialisme africaine. (Bestman 1981, 20)

An examination of his work may help us to apprehend some of these processes in action.

Having been expelled from school at an early age, Sembène was an auto-didact who worked as a fisherman, a soldier and a docker before becoming a writer. His first novel Le Docker noir was published in 1956. It tells the story of Diaw Falla, a docker and union activist working in Marseilles in the 1950s. Diaw has devoted all of his (limited) spare time to writing a novel based on the last voyage of the slave ship Sirius. When he is unsuccessful in getting this book published, Diaw entrusts it to the French writer Ginette Tontisane. However, she passes it off as her own work and has it published to huge critical acclaim. Enraged, Diaw confronts her, a tragic encounter that leads to her death and his conviction for her murder. Sembène’s novel dramatizes the imbalance of power that is always present in relations between Europeans and Africans and the appropriation of African labour, be it physical or creative. Diaw is exploited both as a docker and a novelist and is alienated from the economic benefits or social status that might accrue from either mode of production. Furthermore, his creative labour is not recognized by the European gaze that scrutinizes Diaw at his trial. Figuring him as a purely physical presence, it is argued that Diaw could not possibly have written a sophisticated novel, but that he must have been driven to murder Ginette by murderous lust. As Diaw is imprisoned we observe not only the racist stereotypes at play in French society, but also the
appropriation of the African body and of the African as body. That Diaw’s novel tells the story of an unsuccessful revolt on a slave ship – the ultimate symbol of the appropriation of African labour – lends an additional irony to the tale.

Whilst *Le Docker noir* is clearly a parable for many aspects of the colonial experience, as a narrative it plays out on a very personal level. In novels such as *Ô pays, mon beau peuple* (1957) and *L’Harmattan* (1964) Sembène widens his focus to take a broader societal view. ‘La ligne d’orientation et la signification de l’œuvre romanesque […] évolue progressivement du particulier au général’ (Bestman 1981, 19). *L’Harmattan*, which is set around the 1958 referendum in which Senegal decided whether to become independent from France or to remain a ‘département’, is perhaps particularly susceptible to analysis within the nationalist paradigm. The high point of this phase of Sembène’s career, however, is his 1960 masterpiece *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, and it is to this novel that I would now like to turn.

*Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* tells the story of the 1947 Dakar Niger railway strike, in which the African workers of the colonial railway went on strike in demand of better pay, holidays, pensions and family allocations. The title refers to the way in which the strikers enumerate themselves: ‘Une superstition veut que l’on compte des “bouts de bois” à la place des êtres vivants pour ne pas abréger le cours de leur vie’ (Sembène 1960, 77). The novel is epic in scope, depicting the effects of the strike across a great number of protagonists and locations. Its *table de personnages* lists forty characters and the setting moves constantly between Bamako, Thiès and Dakar. The constant interaction between these different people and places allows Sembène to sustain integrity of focus and despite some strong set pieces the novel never becomes episodic. Narrative tension is also maintained by the trajectory from the workers’ initial optimism to a grim stoicism as food shortages begin to take their toll, then finally to victory as the authorities accede. Within this vast panorama, some key events can be identified: the murder of two apprentices by the French foreman Isnard, the negotiations between workers and the railway management, the riots of the
Dakar women, the march of the Thiès women to Dakar and the great public meeting at which Bakayoko, the charismatic union leader, persuades workers from other industries to join the strike.

Whilst the novel is quite clear about Sembène’s political sympathies and effectively highlights the inequity and brutality of the colonial regime, it is striking that it does not appear to be directly concerned with issues of political independence or nationalism.

One might argue that the exploitation of the African workers can be seen to derive directly from the political structures of colonialism and the racial views inherent in that project. The ‘cheminots’ themselves, however, deny that the strike has a racial or nationalist agenda. For them it is purely an industrial dispute, a class issue. In an unsuccessful negotiation with the railway chiefs, one of the union representatives claims:

Monsieur le directeur, vous ne représentez ici ni une nation, ni une race: une classe. Et nous aussi nous représentons une classe dont les intérêts sont différents de ceux de la vôtre. (Sembène 1960, 281)

So class appears to be posited as a primary identity signifier, ahead of race and nation. One cannot read or discuss the novel without being cognisant of this and other Marxist influences at work. Issues of class struggle and solidarity form the novel’s central concerns. Sembène closely identifies the workers with their labour: ‘la machine était en train de faire d’eux des hommes nouveaux. Elle ne leur appartenait, c’étaient eux qui lui appartenaient’ (1960, 63). The commodification of this labour and the ways in which its profits are distributed are precisely what the strike is about. Furthermore, the support for the strikers from European unions implies that class identification extends beyond national or continental limits.

We have already noted how Senghor, Fanon and other African critics see the novel form in terms reminiscent of European Marxist critics. Sembène’s text appears to fit neatly into this paradigm. In both subject matter and scope it
seems to aspire to Lukacs's desideratum that the novel should function as a reflection of social reality, revealing the underlying economic structures of a given society and attempting to give a complete sense of its functioning. It would also be easy to discern this parallel on a formal level, as the epic scope and realist aesthetic of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* appear to position it directly within the mimetic tradition of the nineteenth-century novel so beloved of Marxist critics. Sembène encourages us to take this view of his work when he claims that 'La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement: rester au plus près du réel et du peuple' (Sembène 1964, 9).

*So Les Bouts de bois de Dieu is obviously susceptible to a Marxist interpretation. To say that the novel appears to privilege class over nation does not preclude a nationalist reading however. Marxism and nationalism are not, of course, mutually exclusive concepts, as the rhetoric of African Socialism seeks to demonstrate. In any case, Sembène's vision is more nuanced than a simple Marxist exposition would imply.*

Firstly, it is clear that, despite Lahbib's protestations, things other than class are at stake here. Lahbib's statement is a reaction to a frenzied outburst by Dejean the works overseer, who claims that ‘vous êtes menés par des bolcheviques, et vous insultez une nation, une race qui vaut cent fois la vôtre!’ (Sembène 1960, 280-81). A few paragraphs earlier Dejean has mused that to concede on the question of family allocations,

\[
\text{C'était beaucoup plus d'agréer un compromis avec des ouvriers en grève, c'était reconnaître pour valable une manifestation raciale, entériner les coutumes des êtres inférieurs, céder non à des travailleurs, mais à des Nègres et cela Dejean ne le pouvait pas. (Sembène 1960, 280)}
\]

It is clear that for the French at least, the strike is much more than a simple industrial dispute. Issues of race and nation are predominant in their minds and it is also clear that industrial concessions are seen as the 'thin end of the wedge', leading eventually to a complete loss of control in the African colonies. The level of hysteria this engenders is revealed as Dejean becomes progressively
more infuriated and ends by striking Bakayoko, thus neatly inverting the hierarchies of savagery and civilization he is trying to promote. For the strikers too there is a racial element to the disparities in their working conditions:

En quoi un enfant blanc est-il supérieur à un enfant noir? En quoi un ouvrier blanc est-il supérieur à un ouvrier noir? On nous dit que nous avons les mêmes droits, mais ce sont des mensonges, rien que des mensonges. (Sembène 1960, 25)

There is also an overwhelming concern with progress and modernity throughout the novel. This is manifested on both a political and social level. One feature that is often remarked upon is the novel’s treatment of women. Throughout, Sembène is concerned to valorize the role of women and to address the attitude that the strike ‘n’est pas une histoire de femmes’ (Sembène 1960, 290). Women are instrumental in keeping the strike going on a day to day basis and there are a number of central female characters. In Dakar, Ramatoulaye becomes a focal point of local protest after she slaughters the prize goat of Al Hadji Mabigué, a rich merchant who opposes the strike. When the police come to arrest her, she leads the other women in a successful struggle against them. When mounted reinforcements arrive to help the police, the resulting battle causes a fire that rapidly engulfs the quartier and it is only the next day that Ramatoulaye is led to the police commissariat accompanied by a huge demonstration of women. When the police attempt to use water cannon to disperse the crowd, one of the protesters, Houdia M’Beye, is killed. This, like the murder of two apprentices in Thiès, is one of the key events that underlines the brutality of the colonial regime and gives moral authority to the strikers. Ramatoulaye, like many of Sembène’s characters, achieves great eloquence in adversity. As she storms out of the police station she seems to give voice to a pure anti-colonial fury when she says of the African police interpreter:

Je préfère devenir aveugle, être brûlée dans un incendie ou mourir par petits morceaux que d’adresser la parole à ce bouc. Ce que j’ai fait à Vendredi [Al Hadji Mabigué’s goat], je suis prête à le refaire. Ces gens-là ne sont ni des parents, ni des amis, ils sont prêts à lécher le derrière des toubabs pour avoir des médailles, tout le
If Ramatoulaye is almost an accidental rebel, an ordinary person thrust into an extraordinary situation, we find in the figure of Penda, who leads the march from Thiès to Dakar, a more deliberately political figure. Penda is described in the table des personnages as a ‘femme de mauvaise vie’ and some of the other characters seem to see her as such: ‘Ze ne veux pas que le piting me sert’ (Sembène 1960, 224). Sembène, however, is keen to show how Penda grows in both moral and actual authority: ‘Elle tenait tête aux femmes et se faisait respecter des hommes’ (Sembène 1960, 224). After the unsuccessful meeting with the railway management, it is Penda who takes the initiative and proposes that the women march from Thiès to Dakar to attend the great public meeting:

Je parle au nom de toutes les femmes, mais je ne suis que leur porte-parole. Pour nous cette grève c’est la possibilité d’une vie meilleure [...]. Nous devons garder la tête haute et ne pas céder. Et demain nous allons marcher jusqu’à N’Dakarou [Dakar]. (Sembène 1960, 288)

This intervention is in and of itself radical. ‘De mémoire d’homme c’était la première fois qu’une femme avait pris la parole en public en Thiès’ (Sembène 1960, 289). Some of the men are initially opposed to this action: ‘Je ne suis pas pour que les femmes partent. Qu’elles nous soutiennent, c’est normal; une femme doit aider son mari. Mais de là à faire la route à Dakar […] Je vote contre’ (Sembène 1960, 289), but Bakayoko persuades them that ‘Nous n’avons pas le droit de décourager ceux ou celles qui veulent faire quelque chose. Si les femmes sont décidées il faut les aider’ (Sembène 1960, 289). Penda successfully leads the march to Dakar, but is shot by the police at the entrance to the city, thus achieving a form of martyr status. Her key significance, however, is to show us that the women too have a stake in the strike and that its significance for them extends beyond the narrowly industrial.

^ ‘Toubab’ from the Oulof for convert is a mildly pejorative term for white people. It is still used in many parts of West Africa, particularly by children.
So Penda and Ramatoulaye both represent forms of female political resistance, which impact upon the strike, on colonial relations and also upon the position of women within Senegalese society. Whilst many of the women in the novel are content to inhabit a ‘traditional’ role, accepting polygamous relationships and a life of childrearing and domestic labour, women such as Penda chart out a new space of female participation in the community. This is reinforced by the presence of educated young women such as Bakayoko’s precocious stepdaughter Ad’jibid’ji or the literate, culturally europhile N’Deye Touti. The latter is, in fact, a slightly ambiguous figure, representing the liberating potential of education, but also the alienation it engenders:

Elle se sentait de plus en plus éloignée de tous ceux qui formaient son entourage, elle vivait comme en marge d’eux; ses lectures, les films qu’elle voyait, la maintenait dans un univers où les siens n’avaient plus de place, de même qu’elle n’avait plus de place dans le leur. (Sembène 1960, 100)

En fait, N’Deye Touti connaissait mieux l’Europe que l’Afrique, ce qui lorsqu’elle allait à l’école lui valu plusieurs fois le prix de géographie. Mais elle n’avait jamais lu un écrivain africain, elle était sûre d’avance qu’une telle écriture ne lui aurait rien apporté. (Sembène 1960, 101)

At the beginning of the novel N’Deye Touti is a rather shallow figure, snobbishly despising the ‘absence de civilisation’ (Sembène 1960, 100) that she feels surrounds her. By the end of the novel, the events of the strike and her unrequited love for Bakayoko, have politicized and matured her, leaving her an impressive, if slightly melancholy, figure who rejects the unquestioning adhesion to European values that characterized her youth: ‘Un matin qu’on cherchait du papier pour allumer le feu, elle alla prendre ses cahiers sauf un […] sur laquelle […] elle écrivait un poème qui était un peu comme le chant de mort de sa jeunesse’ (Sembène 1960, 347).

These women presage quite a different future: ‘Petit père dit que demain femmes et hommes seront tous pareils’ (Sembène 1960, 157). A feminist reading
might be slightly concerned at the extent to which this discourse is dependent on the very masculine figure of Bakayoko, nevertheless, there is clearly a re-imagining of the social sphere here that is compatible with the sort of reconfiguration of cultural identity inherent in the nation building project.

It is not only the women in the novel who are living through a process of cultural transformation, however. As we noted above, the railway workers are closely identified with the locomotives with which they work. A conventional Marxist reading might see this as an example of the alienation produced by industrialized capitalism, but Sembène offers another, more interesting, perspective. ‘Il sentait confusément que la machine était leur bien commune […]’:

Quelque chose de nouveau germait en eux, comme si le passé et l’avenir étaient en train de s’êtreindre pour féconder un nouveau type d’homme, et il leur semblait que le vent leur chuchotait une phrase de Bakayoko souvent entendue: ‘L’homme que nous étions est mort et notre seul salut pour une nouvelle vie est dans la machine, la machine qui, elle, n’a ni langage, ni race.’ […]

leur communion avec la machine était profonde et forte, plus forte que les barrières qui les séparaient de leurs employeurs, plus forte que cet obstacle jusqu’alors infranchissable: la couleur de leur peau. (Sembène 1960, 127-28)

So the relationship to machinery, to technology, is not simply one of alienation, but may also be a source of self-esteem and identity. Technology offers a way of seizing modernity, of participating in the world on an equal footing.

This concern to act in a ‘modern’ way informs many aspects of the strike’s direction. It can be seen clearly in the treatment of the strikebreaker Diara. Tiémoko, a strike leader and neighbour of Bakayoko’s in Bamako, is concerned to find ways of discouraging people from going back to work, but is uncomfortable with the use of violence as a deterrent. ‘Mais est-ce que frapper les gens est la bonne façon de les convaincre?’ (Sembène 1960, 134). Slowly an idea occurs to him:
Il avait beaucoup lu, sur le conseil de Bakayoko et pas toujours assimilé ses lectures; soudain une phrase lui revint en mémoire [...]. ‘Pour raisonner, il ne s’agit pas de avoir raison, mais pour vaincre il faut avoir raison et ne pas trahir.’ (Sembène 1960, 140)

The phrase is from Andre Malraux’s *La Condition humaine*; inspired by this book Tiémoko organizes a tribunal at which Diara is publicly judged and shamed. A concern with the future and with communality is evident here, as Tiémoko explains to Diara’s son.

– Tu vois cette grève set une école. Nous avons frappé des types. Etait-ce un bien?
– Je ne sais pas. En tout cas ils n’ont pas repris le travail.
– D’accord, ils n’ont pas repris. Mais est-ce qu’un résultat d’avenir? [...] 

Écoute Sadio, ton père est le frère de mon père, tu es mon cousin. Ton honneur est mon honneur; la honte de ta famille, c’est la honte de ma famille et la honte de notre pays, c’est la honte de toutes les familles réunies [...] 

– […] Mon père là devant de tout le monde et chacun l’insultant le couvrant d’opprobre! J’aimerais mieux mourir que d’assister à…
– Il ne s’agit pas de mourir cousin. Il s’agit de gagner. Il s’agit de faire quelque chose de propre et de le faire en hommes. (Sembène 1960, 140-41)

One might still feel that this concern with modernity, though it may entail a transformation of social relations, is not explicitly or necessarily linked with a nationalist political project. Indeed, it seems to be precisely about some form of international solidarity. I shall argue, however, that modernity can only be interpreted in this context within a nationalist schema. In any case, we do see in the novel moments of hostility towards French rule: ‘comment se dresser sans haine contre l’injustice?’ (Sembène 1960, 368), and, as we saw in the case of N’Deye Touti, adoption of European customs and procedures is shown as complex and problematic.

Many of these issues are brought together in the character of Bakayoko, who is presented as representative of the strikers’s spirit:
Although he does not appear ‘on stage’ until the last quarter of the novel, Bakayoko is a constant presence, enigmatically and, in a sense, epigrammatically. As may be inferred from many of the preceding quotations, Bakayoko is permanently present as other characters cite his words and ideas:

Bakayoko […] a dit un jour […] que ni les lois ni les machines n’appartiennent à une seule race! (Sembène 1960, 144)

Il [Bakayoko] abordait un tas de questions: le chômage, l’enseignement, la guerre en Indo-Chine; il parlait de la France de l’Espagne et de pays plus éloignés comme l’Amérique ou la Russie. (Sembène 1960, 107-8)

Bakayoko’s presence is so pervasive that it angers Daouda Beaugosse, a young militant envious of the attraction N’Deye Touti feels for Bakayoko. He is provoked to wonder:

Quel était donc ce Bakoyoko, on aurait dit que son ombre était sur chaque chose, dans chaque maison; dans les phrases des autres, on retrouvait ses phrases, dans leurs idées ses idées à lui. (Sembène 1960, 110)

When we look at Bakayoko’s aphorisms he seems to preach the language of universalist modernism, but is also fiercely critical of colonialism: ‘Il me dit: “Il y a tant de belles choses chez nous, qu’il n’est pas nécessaire d’en introduire les étrangères”’ (Sembène 1960, 108). Bakayoko realizes that the forms of modernity advocated throughout the novel can only be achieved ‘dans une Afrique indépendante et rénovée’ (Sembène 1960, 343) and cannot be realized through subservience to the French:
étant donné que votre ignorance d’au moins une de nos langues est un handicap pour vous, nous emploierons le français, c’est une question de politesse. Mais c’est une politesse qui n’aura qu’un temps. (Sembène 1960, 277)

The question of language also alerts us to another way in which Bakayoko embodies some of the features of the nationalist movement. Sembène is clear about his ethnic identity. He is a Bambara from Soudan (Mali), part of the Mandinke people who once ruled over the Mali empire; he is referred to more than once simply as ‘le Bambara’ and other characters greet him jocularly as ‘Bambara dyion (esclave Bambara)’ (Sembène 1960, 267). So Bakayoko is clearly set apart from the predominantly Oulof strikers of Thiès and Dakar and this outsider status is underlined by his absence, and by his restive movement along the railway from Soudan to Senegal. Yet despite Dejean’s claim that he is ‘un anti-blanc, un sale raciste!’ (Sembène 1960, 275), Bakayoko’s peripheral position allows him to rise above the ethnic prejudices occasionally voiced by other characters: ‘Est-ce que les Bambaras ne comprendront jamais que ces esclaves [les oulofs] […] ne sont que des menteurs’ (Sembène 1960, 15), ‘je n’aimerais pas me marier avec un homme d’un autre peuple’ (Sembène 1960, 104).

At the great public meeting towards the end of novel, Bakayoko persuades workers from other industries to join the ‘cheminots’ in a general strike. A great deal of his persuasive power derives from the fact that he is able to transcend ethnic specificity, speaking in Oulof, Toucouleur, Bambara and French. Of course the decision to speak primarily in African languages is a politically charged one, although it is hard to ignore the irony of a sentence like ‘Je vous remercie tous de m’avoir donné la parole, dit-il en oulouf’ (Sembène 1960, 336, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, Bakayoko’s speech brings together many of the themes we are examining. He is fiercely critical of colonialism:

On nous a dit que les Gouverneurs nous avait apporté de nombreux et grands changements. Il est vrai que je suis jeune mais je n’en ai pas vu beaucoup et je demande aux vieux ouvriers de dire ceux qu’ils ont vus! (Sembène 1960, 336)
He appeals to the workers both as a class and as a people: ‘Il dépend de vous travailleurs de Dakar, que nos femmes et nos enfants connaissent des jours meilleurs’ (Sembène 1960, 338). He is also highly dismissive of the ‘official’ channels of political representation, who still sought in 1948 to improve Senegalese conditions within the colonial structure. Both the marabouts and the deputies are roundly condemned: ‘Le grand Sérsigne N’Dakarou vous a parlé de Dieu. Ne sait-il donc pas que ceux qui ont faim et soif désertent le chemin qui mène aux mosquées?’ (Sembène 1960, 336).

Notre député nous a dit qu’il était là pour nous venir en aide. Demandez-lui pourquoi il vote des lois sociales dans un pays qui se trouve loin du nôtre, et pourquoi il ne peut faire appliquer ces lois dans son propre pays? Demandez-lui comment il vit, combien il gagne? (Sembène 1960, 337)

Most striking of all perhaps is the way in which Bakayoko seems almost to physically incorporate the link between modernity and political progress. As he speaks to the crowd: ‘aucune crainte ne l’habitait. Ce n’était plus la foule qu’il voyait devant lui mais deux rails luisants qui traçaient un chemin vers l’avenir’ (Sembène 1960, 336).

So Bakayoko’s discourse is not explicitly nationalistic. He does not speak of the nation directly, or call for immediate independence. It is difficult, however, to imagine any other political project that could correspond to his perspective, especially in light of the way he condemns the work of deputies like Guèye and Senghor, who sought increased political autonomy without full independence.

Here, as throughout the text, a nationalist political project is the only one that seems to make sense, even if it remains unvoiced. This point is reinforced by the novel’s epigraph in which Sembène writes:

Les hommes et femmes qui du 10 octobre 1947 au 19 mars 1948, engagèrent cette lutte pour une vie meilleure ne doivent rien à personne ni à aucune ‘mission civilisatrice’, ni à un notable, ni à un parlementaire. Leur exemple ne fut pas en vaine: depuis l’Afrique progresse. (Sembène 1960, epigraph)
What constitutes progress in this context? In 1960, when *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* was published, West African nation building was in full swing. As we have seen this is the year in which Senegal, along with nearly all of France's African colonies, achieved independence. If, therefore, Africa has progressed since 1947, then this progress must be associated with the nationalist project, which is moreover, ascribed a genesis in the events portrayed in the novel. The text promotes a collective identity which is bound up in communitarianism, collective endeavour, education, sexual and ethnic equality and an embrace of modernity. This identity is associated with a nationalist politics, which in turn is shown to have its roots in the events of 1947-48, thus contributing to the sense that the emergence of the nation-state was an inevitable process in post war African politics.

So *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* does seem to fulfil many of the criteria demanded by the a nationalist literature paradigm, despite the fact that it only deals obliquely with the question of the nation-state. This apparent paradox has led Christopher L. Miller to describe the novels of this period as representing a 'generalized nationalism-without-a-state' (1998, 121). In his book *Nationalists and Nomads* Miller discusses this phenomenon at some length. He argues that:

The character of African nationalism before independence is quite peculiar – 'nationalism' in this period refers not to affiliation with a particular state but simply to any form of resistance to colonialism and any explicit assertion of African rights. (1998, 120)

This leads Miller to the conclusion that 'a surprising aspect of literature in Africa is the dearth of "positive" nationalist vision [...]. Nationalism initially manifested itself in the form of almost pure resistance' (1998, 144). Miller himself makes an exception of Ô *pays, mon beau peuple!* and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, claiming that 'the former in particular follows the model of socialist realism and is essentially a novel about the need for agricultural cooperatives among African peasants' (1998, 144). Nevertheless, if by a "'positive" nationalist vision' we understand a detailed prescription for the type of political entity which was to replace the colonial state, Sembène’s novels of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s do seem to fit into the pattern Miller describes, offering a critique of
colonialism without explicitly outlining a specific political alternative. The general applicability of this analysis is indicated by our earlier observations on Climbié and by Miller’s own extensive reading of Oyono’s Une vie de boy (Miller, 1998). Notwithstanding the lack of a positive nationalism, however, it is also clear that within the political context of the time, it is only through a nationalist political project that resistance to colonialism may be realized. As our reading of Les Bouts de bois de Dieu demonstrates, the pure resistance Miller identifies is necessarily subtended by a nationalist politics. Both within the texts themselves and in the ways in which these texts were read and theorized, this nationalism was, in its turn, seen as simultaneously deriving from and contributing to the formation of a rejuvenated cultural identity.

All the novels we have examined so far, however, belong to the period leading up to independence and it seems reasonable to ask what happened to this ‘generalized nationalism’ in the years after 1960 when African nationalists found themselves living in specifically demarcated nation-states. Again, Miller proposes a convincing argument. He claims that in the years immediately following independence, African writers turned rapidly from critiques of colonialism to critiques of the new postcolonial nation-states. ‘We might say that African literature moved from participation in one form of nationalism (resistance to colonialism) to opposition to another form of nationalism (the new nationalism of African “independent” states)’ (1998, 145). He goes on to argue that,

It would be difficult to count all the francophone novels that question, subvert, or attack postcolonial state nationalism [...]. Critics generally agree that post independence francophone literature has largely been ‘a literature of transgression,’ and that ‘there are few novels and plays that are not contestatory’. (1998, 145)

This is certainly true and it is important to note that the writers Miller lists are not just those of a new post-independence generation (Yambo Ouologuem, Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopès, Calixthe Beyala), but also of older anti-colonialists/nationalists like Sembène. The rapidity with which such writers passed from agitation for independence to a critique of the post-independence
state is quite striking. Sembène’s 1963 film Borom Sarret represents a vehement attack on the new bourgeois elite. Indeed the move into film-making itself is a political act, allowing Sembène to find a wider audience for his art: ‘What interests me is exposing the problems confronting my people. I consider the cinema to be a means for political action’ (cited in Pfaff 1993, 14). ‘The filmmaker must not live in an ivory tower; he has a definite social function to fulfil’ (cited in Pfaff 1993, 15). The eighteen-minute film, the first to be made in Africa by an African, depicts a day in the life of a cart driver, the ‘Borom Sarret’ of the title, who struggles to make a living in the outskirts of Dakar. After a series of misadventures, the Borom Sarret is tricked into giving a stranger a lift to the ‘Plateau’, the Europeanized, bourgeois district of the town. Cart drivers are prohibited from entering the ‘Plateau’ and the Borom Sarret is stopped by the police who confiscate his cart as a fine. At the end of the film he is left facing destitution.

It is easy to read the film as a parable of alienation, in which the cart-driver, a man identified only by his profession, is swept along by the seemingly inexorable forces of economic exploitation and social marginalization. (We might note the emphasis on materiality supplied by constant shots of cart wheels and other objects.) His helplessness is highlighted by the fact that his dialogue is only a voiceover that comments on the unfolding action and cannot influence it. This is underlined by the fact that the dialogue is actually spoken by Sembène himself, not by the actor who plays the Borom Sarret. The distinction between the Borom Sarret, nameless representative of the proletariat, and the bourgeois world from which he is (literally) excluded is clearly defined. The nature of the economic and political relations between them is equally clear and we are evidently meant to identify with the Borom Sarret, drawn into his suffering by a series of lingering close ups of his increasingly desolate face. However, there is a further dialectic at work here. The contrast between proletariat and bourgeois is mapped onto a parallel opposition between traditional and Europeanized cultures. The Borom Sarret’s

*Borom is the Oulof for ‘boss’ and sarret the equivalent of the French charrette.*
journey to the Plateau signals a movement from one economic reality to another, but is also a movement between two cultural systems. In the ‘quartier indigène’ things are relatively free and easy, the system of relationships here owes something to the mutuality of traditional village life (e.g. the Borom Sarret’s grumbling willingness to give free lifts) whereas the ‘Plateau’ is governed by a strict system of rules and procedures directly inherited from colonialism. This change is reflected by the repeated shots of the modern European-style architecture so unfamiliar to the Borom Sarret – ‘ces maisons, il doit être agréable de vivre dedans’ (Sembène 1979, 40) – and so different from the shacks and market stalls of his area. We also hear a change from traditional Senegalese music to Bach and then to a Beethoven symphony based on a Christian psalm, played (in an ironic comment on charity and forgiveness?) after the Borom Sarret has lost his cart.

Within this framework, the Borom Sarret, with his amulets, his faith in his ancestors and his attentiveness to his family griot, seems to represent the voice of disillusioned tradition, exploited and defrauded by the modern world:

\[
\begin{align*}
en \text{ effet ce n'est pas parce que la vie nouvelle m'a réduit à ce travail d'esclave, que je ne suis plus noble comme mes ancêtres!} & \quad \text{(Sembène 1979, 38)} \\
Ça c'est la prison! C'est ça! C'est la vie moderne! C'est la vie maintenant de pays! & \quad \text{(Sembène 1979, 41)}
\end{align*}
\]

The depth of disillusionment developed in the three years that separate this film from the optimism displayed in the epigraph of Les Bouts de bois de Dieu is depressingly evident. The same concerns can be seen in more of Sembène’s films of the ‘60s and ‘70s that were also published as novels. Le Mandat of 1965 tells the story of Ibrahima Dieng’s attempt to cash a money order sent to him by his nephew in Paris. The state is characterized here by a stagnated and corrupt bureaucracy and by the permanent fear of police informers. Greed and dishonesty permeate every level of society, acting parasitically both upon traditional hospitality and kinship ties and upon Islamic alms giving. Throughout the novel the state is treated with deep cynicism. ‘Dans ce pays, si
tu connais personne pour te soutenir, tu n’arriveras à rien’ (Sembène 1965, 160); ‘l’honnêté est un délit dans ce pays’ (Sembène 1965, 209).

Perhaps the best known of Sembène’s satires of the postcolonial state is his 1973 film and novel *Xala*. The film tells the story of a wealthy (and supposedly pious) businessman – El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye – who is afflicted with an impotence curse – the *xala* – after taking a young third wife. As El Hadji attempts to discover the source of his *xala*, Sembène uses his predicament to expose the corruption of the postcolonial elite, developing the critique he began in *Borom Sarret*. El Hadji is a former school teacher who was involved in the anti-colonial movement, but who since independence has become an increasingly dishonest businessman:

très connu, ayant une ‘surface’, le milieu industriel l’utilisa comme prête-nom moyennant quelque redevances. Il joua le jeu [...] La loi n’y voyait goutte. Mais tous savaient la vérité. (Sembène 1973, 11)

We also see through El Hadji that the old difficulties of reconciling African and European cultures remain:

El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, était […] la synthèse de deux cultures. Formation bourgeoise européenne, éducation féodale africaine. Il savait, comme ses pairs, se servir adroitement de ses deux pôles. La fusion n’était pas complète. (Sembène 1973, 11)

It is notable in this context that El Hadji’s daughter Rama, ‘Membre des association démocratiques […] partie du groupe de langue Oulof’ (Sembène 1997, 25) and her contemporaries maintain a more radically nationalist agenda than their elders, who are portrayed, through their financial corruption and uneasy cultural assimilation, as maintaining a neo-colonial system: ‘Nous voulons la place de l’ex-occupant. Nous y sommes […]. Quoi de changé […]? Rien. Le colon est devenu plus fort, plus puissant, caché en nous […]’ (Sembène 1973, 139).

So we can see that Sembène’s later work is strongly critical of the postcolonial state. Whilst there are echoes of the optimistic politics of *Les Bouts de bois de
Dieu, in characters like Rama, it is clear that for Sembène there is no fundamental discontinuity between colonial and postcolonial state. He sees it as his project to reveal this:

In Africa we first thought that with the independence of 1960, paradise was dawning. We know better now. The whites may have left, but those who are presently in power behave in exactly the same manner [...] we are confronted with our own middle class in power, willingly letting itself be carried along to become the equivalent of the white middle class.

These people are willing accomplices of imperialism in Africa. We must have the courage to criticize their practices. (Cited in Schipper 1999, 192)

Far from undermining the nation-state, however, Miller believes that this sort of transgressive, contestatory literature may work paradoxically to reinforce it:

The critique of the postcolonial state can wind up creating and supporting a national culture. By attacking particular regimes, these publications contribute to an emergent ‘universe of discourse’ that is specific to that nation-state. (1998, 147)

Thus:

What any writer says about the nation matters less than the fact that he or she is addressing the question of the nation in the first place and thereby contributing to a national discourse. This is but one way in which nationalism legitimates itself and makes itself inevitable: the harder you pull, as in Chinese handcuffs, the tighter its grip. (Miller 1998, 147)

This argument is highly persuasive. Certainly when we come to examine several of the writers that Miller lists in support of it (Ouologuem, Labou Tansi, Beyala) we will see how their novels do contain virulent critiques of the postcolonial state. Close reading of some these novels, however, will lead us to question whether this critique is really targeted at a national level, or whether the sort of mediation between local and universal performed by these texts is best described in terms other than nationalism. Nonetheless, it seems indisputable, as Miller points out, that the effect of these texts has been to constitute national discourses: in as far as this is how they have been read.
Certainly we can detect a shift in critical trends over the 1980s as general studies such as Kesteloot’s *Les Écrivains noir de langue française* (1963) and Chevrier’s *Littérature nègre* (1984), which treated all francophone African writing as a single entity, came to be replaced by studies focused on a national level, such as Richard Bjornson’s *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience* (1991) and Dorothy Blair’s *Senegalese Literature: A Critical History* (1984). Pius Ngandu Nkashama argues that there are three reasons for this shift:

1° [...] les œuvres elles-mêmes portent les marques des situations propres à chaque pays [...].
2° [...] des anthologies nationales se multiplient [...]
3° [...] la critique littéraire [...] rend compte de cette impossibilité d’une lecture totale des textes littéraires actuels. (1984, 230-31)

The debate is most explicitly theorized in three issues of the journal *Notre librairie* in 1986. All three are entitled ‘Littératures Nationales’ and bear the subtitles ‘mode ou problématique?’, ‘langues et frontières’, ‘histoire et identité’. The question posed by these publications is essentially whether it is possible or desirable to identify specific national literatures in Africa. On an editorial level this question is prejudged by the fact that, to date, *Notre librairie* has published nearly 20 issues devoted to the literature of individual countries and thus operates as a major influence in the construction of such national literatures. The 1986 issues, however, give space to opposing views on the subject.

Alain Ricard claims that African literature does exhibit specifically local characteristics. Using Soyinka as an example he notes that ‘chez Wole Soyinka on entend beaucoup des choses [...] qui sont véritablement enracinées. Il ne pourrait être d’ailleurs que de l’ouest du Nigéria’ (Ricard 1986, 7). This statement, however, carefully leaves open the question of whether this racination should be described in relation to the nation-state. For Adrien Huannou the question is more straightforward; if nation-states exist, then so by definition do national literatures:
Pour nous, la carte d’identité, le passeport sont des objets qui ont une grand signifiance politique [...]. Le roman d’Adiaffie appartient à la littérature ivoirienne d’abord parce qu’il est ivoirienne. Légalement parlant [...]. Il faut tenir compte du fait que les États nations en Afrique sont peut-être fragiles, mais sont des réalités avec lesquelles il faut compter. La littérature doit tenir compte de la politique. (1986, 7)

For Jean-Norbert Vignondé writing in the same issue of Notre librairie, however, it is precisely the fragility and permeability of the postcolonial nation-state that renders the idea of national literatures untenable (Vigondé 1986). He is also dismissive of Nkashama’s idea that a set of thematic concerns can be identified pertaining to specific nation-states. The fact that many modern authors set their novels in fictional African states reveals, Vignondé argues, not merely political prudence, but a desire to underline the fact that ‘les situations socio-politiques s’inscrivent toutes dans la problématique générale du système néo-colonial’ (1986, 90). Vignondé’s comments raise many important issues about the suitability of nationalism as a mode of analysis to which I shall return in the next chapter. For the moment though, I would like to note that, if the nationalism of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s has passed, there remain at this point in the literary history of francophone Africa two ways in which nationalism and the prose novel continue to be intertwined: the paradoxical affirmation through critique described by Miller and the critical formulation of specific national literatures, as exemplified by Notre librairie. It is important to realize that this connection between nation and novel is real in as far as it is constantly re-iterated. As Miller puts it, the concentration on national literatures recognizes, prior to any analysis of content and outside of any value judgement, the political reality of discourse within nation-state borders, the power of governments to influence and control print culture […]. Despite resistance to the state – and also precisely because of resistance – meanings are accruing to the nation-states of Africa. (1998, 151)

This notion of meaning accruing to the state through literature and the ways in which literature is read and received directly echoes the thinking of Senghor, Fanon and others, whereby literature is posited as the means through which a national cultural identity may be forged and articulated. I would not wish to
challenge Miller’s conclusion, but it is, fundamentally, a point about how literary texts are read, not about the texts themselves, a fact that Huannou acknowledges when he says that ‘l’écrivain peut réclamer une certaine universalité, mais si le critique estime qu’il faut le classer en Côte d’Ivoire ou en Bénin, c’est le droit du critique’ (Huannou 1986, 7). In fact, as we shall see, many of the same texts that are mobilized in support of national literatures can be read in quite another way that is, at the least, highly ambiguous in regards to national identity. This is a contradiction which I hope will prove to be productive rather than simply divisive.

It is also worth noting that all these moments of literary nationalism involve using literature to try and establish some form of authenticity: what it really is to be African, to be Senegalese etc. This alignment of cultural praxis and national identity requires the adoption of what Glissant calls a ‘principe d’une filiation, dans le but de rechercher une légitimité sur une terre qui à partir de cette moment devient territoire’ (1996, 59). Identity becomes equated with geo-historical genesis; the racine unique is reconstituted and reinforced. As we shall see in the next chapter, we may have some cause to be suspicious of such a potentially atavistic gesture, given the particular complications of nationalism in Africa.
Chapter Three

As a political phenomenon, nationalism has proved both real and enduring. In Benedict Anderson's formulation, it continues to be 'the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (1983, 3) and, as Timothy Brennan observes, 'the rising number of studies on nationalism in the past three decades reflects its lingering, almost atmospheric, insistence in our thinking' (1990, 48). In the African context, nationalism has been posited as a means of assuming a unifying and unitary cultural identity in the aftermath of colonial alienation. As we saw in the previous chapter, literature, particularly the novel, continues to be invoked as a privileged mode of agency in the (re)formulation of this national identity. The political and discursive effects of the nation extend in a variety of directions and are undeniably substantive, permeating lives in an infinite number of ways. Despite this apparent hegemony, however, indeed partly because of it, nationalist discourse is permanently disrupted. This is particularly true in Africa, where the nation-state project has been subjected to constant strains, deriving both from internal contradictions and from external pressures. The nation-state does provide one way of representing identity, but it is constantly aggressed by the competing claims of other ontological loci such as ethnicity, gender, class or religion. The irruption and proliferation of subversive, counter-national discourses can be accounted for in both general and local terms.

As we have noted, the nation conceived as imagined community benefits from an inherent mobility. It need not be pre-determined in terms of its content. Nevertheless, it remains vulnerable to Partha Chatterjee's question: 'whose imagined community?' (1996, 214). In his essay of this title Chatterjee objects that,

> if nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History it would seem has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be the consumers of modernity [...] Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized. (1996, 216)
Chatterjee goes on to argue that in fact, anti-colonial nationalisms do create their own ‘modular forms’, concentrating upon the exclusion of the colonial state from an ‘inner’ or ‘spiritual’ domain which bears ‘the “essential” marks of national culture’:

Here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community then this where it is brought into being. (1996, 217)

This act of cultural imagining is, for Chatterjee, the necessary precursor of political struggle within the ‘material’ domain. This struggle for control of the ‘inner’ domain corresponds to the sorts of nationalist discourse we have observed in the novels of writers like Sembène. It is not clear, however, that the creation of non-western national forms (if indeed this is possible) entirely resolves the difficulties raised by Chatterjee’s title. However the nation is being imagined, whatever its content, there remains the question of who is imagining it. Most of the forums in which this imagining takes place – political discourse, cinema, theatre and, of course, literature, to name but a few – are elite forms in as far as their production relies upon intellectual and financial resources that are not universally available. This is true even where the reception of these discourses is genuinely popular (though this may be the case less often than is sometimes argued). A certain degree of scepticism is hard to resist when faced with the claims of popular nationalism as advocated by the likes of Fanon, Sekou Touré or Nkrumah; a scepticism which may seem justified in light of the later political careers of the latter two figures. Imaginings of the nation remain, in practice, discourses which are provided by the few for the many. There will always be people within the nation whose attitude towards it is one of antagonism, indifference or ignorance.

These are not simply circumstantial difficulties pertaining to particular applications of the nationalist project. They are inherent in the signifying practices of nationalist narratives. The nation is an imagined community, but this imagining is necessarily delimited. If ‘nation’ is to signify anything, there
must exist that which is not the nation. Like all categories, the nation thus enunciates its other(s), signalling its boundaries through the act of its own articulation. The nation, like the state to which it gives form, must always indicate its limits. Nationalist discourse is thus always double, designating what is inside, but also what is outside of the nation. The ‘outside’ is inevitably a disruptive presence. Homi Bhabha claims that

The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new people into the body politic, generating new meanings [...]. (1990, 4)

This is best understood through the Derridean concept of différance (1972, 1-29). For Derrida, no signifier is ever self sufficient; each operates as part of an endlessly iterative chain, or loop. Meaning is always deferred and pluralized, as each signifier is ‘infected’ by the traces of other signifiers. So the existence of an ‘outside’ which is always obliquely acknowledged by the narration of the nation prohibits its completion as a site of identity by ‘covertly’ giving voice to alternative forms of imagining located on what we might call the ‘slip-side’ of signification. This is what leads Bhabha to talk of the ‘ambivalence of the nation as a strategy of narration’ (1994, 140). It is more than a question of topography, or of membership. Benedict Anderson describes how the nation operates in ‘homogenous, empty time’ (1983, 24), its members partaking simultaneously (if separately) of an ongoing shared history. Here too, however, the act of signification necessarily articulates Otherness, hinting at the possibility of excess, the necessity of a ‘beyond’. Bhabha writes:

The sign temporalizes the iterative difference that circulates within language, of which meaning is made, but cannot be represented thematically within narrative as a homogeneous empty time. Such a temporality is antithetical to the alterity of the sign which [...] alienates the synchronicity of the imagined community. From the place of the ‘meanwhile’, where cultural homogeneity and democratic anonymity articulate the national community, there emerges a more instantaneous and subaltern voice of the people, minority discourses that speak betwixt and between times and places. (1994, 158)
This last sentence hints at the real difficulties of nationalist discourse. Narratives of the nation, particularly literary ones, are not simply concerned to define the nation in time and space; they also ascribe it a form. They have a content which provides a putative characterization of national culture. In doing so it also signals a limitation of what the nation as imagined community can contain:

Once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its signifying difference is turned from the boundary ‘outside’ to its finitude ‘within’, the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of ‘other’ people. It becomes a question of otherness of the people-as-one. (Bhabha 1994, 150)

So the nation operates through a process of exclusion, not only of those who are outside it, but also of those aspects of its members that cannot readily be encompassed by description in terms of national identity. These ‘dissident’ identities do not disappear, of course. Whether or not they are explicitly articulated themselves, they are always produced within narratives of the nation. Persisting as the slip-side, the différence, of a discourse which inevitably generates

Counter narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities. (Bhabha 1994, 149)

These problems are common to all articulations of the nation, but they are particularly acute in the postcolonial context. The hybridization effected by colonialism is not simply reversible. As Helen Tiffin puts it:

postcolonial cultures are inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. (1995, 95)

This statement is fairly self-explanatory, but it can be elaborated upon in a number of ways. We saw earlier how Partha Chatterjee evokes the possibility of a non-western formulation of nationhood, but thinkers like Timothy Brennan
have argued that this is impossible because ‘nationalism is enmeshed in the particular history of Europe and its ideology of “democracy”’ (1990, 53). Even if alternative imaginings of the nation exist, they necessarily operate in relation to this ‘particular history of Europe’. Chatterjee argues:

The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on identity but rather on a difference with the ‘modular’ forms of the national society propagated by the modern West. (1996, 216, emphasis Chatterjee’s)

This assertion only serves to illustrate the problem, however. Defining identity in terms of difference from a dominant Other does not lessen the extent to which identity is determined through relation with that Other. Differentiation and identification seem to operate an inescapable dialectic here and the postcolonial state is caught in a vicious circle in which difference from the West is as much of an engagement with it as emulation would be. Homi Bhabha writes of the way in which colonial discourse engenders a mimicry which is ‘the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite’ (1994, 86). In order to maintain and justify its control over the colonized subject, colonial discourse assigns to that subject a radical alterity, at the same time the colonized must remain sufficiently similar, sufficiently normalized and comprehensible, for control of it to seem possible and worthwhile. This creates an ambivalence at the heart of colonial discourse which initiates the possibility of its own critique, rupturing it from within. ‘The menace of mimicry is its double vision [similarity & difference/identity & alterity] which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority’ (Bhabha 1994, 88). In the post-colony this scenario persists in inverted form. Through the postulation of an independent identity, constructed through western intellectual categories and in the face of western geo-political dominance, the postcolonial nation designates itself as a subject that is almost different but not quite. So the authority of postcolonial nationalism is disrupted not only through the différence produced by any narrative of the nation, but also through a mimicry that challenges its epistemic autonomy vis à vis the West. Postcolonial culture thus continues to hybridize itself in the way Tiffin
describes, tracing a continuous oscillation between local and western modalities of thought.

This interplay of difference and sameness is well illustrated by Chatterjee’s description of the way in which anti-colonial nationalist movements operate. As we have seen, Chatterjee argues that these movements establish a ‘sovereign territory’ within a ‘spiritual domain’, formulating ‘a “modern” national culture that is [...] not western’. This is complemented, however, by the political contestation of a ‘material’ domain ‘of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology’ in which ‘Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated’ (1996, 217, emphasis mine).

To be a nation, then, is to be different, but also the same. The post-colony can assert a cultural difference from the west, but in as far as it designates itself a nation, it signals an ongoing reliance on normative western models.

Clearly this has significant implications for readings of literature. As we have seen, for many African critics the primary function of literature was the expression of a national consciousness. This now seems problematic. If nationalism itself is conceptually dependent on Western discourses, then the literature that expresses it must be similarly implicated. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Writes Back*:

> All too often nationalist criticism, by failing to alter the terms of the discourse within which it operates, has participated implicitly or even explicitly in a discourse ultimately controlled by the very imperial power its nationalist assertion is designed to exclude. (1989, 18)

This is one of the factors that lead African critics of the 1970s such as Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, the *bolekaja* critics, to demand a rejection of literary values that were so readily incorporated into western intellectual

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7 'The name *bolekaja* (literally meaning come down and fight) [...] was adapted from the phrase used by the conductors or ‘touts’ of Nigerian ‘mammy-wagons’ (passenger-carrying lorries) in their fierce vying for customers' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989, 128).
paradigms. Instead they maintained that 'African literature is an autonomous entity, separate and apart from all other literatures', possessing its own 'traditions, models and norms' deriving from pre-colonial orature. In many ways this position is similar to that of negritude and as Soyinka was quick to point out it shares its weaknesses of essentialism and reductionism (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989, 129). African intellectuals like Paulin Hountondji and Valentin Mudimbe have commented extensively both upon the 'epistemic dependence' (Bayart 1991, 32) of nationalism and upon the search for cultural authenticity. We will return to some of the issues they raise later, but for the moment I would like simply to recall Mudimbe’s analysis of how the 'colonizing structure' creates the marginalization or alienation reflected in novels like L’Enfant noir or L’Aventure ambigüë. We can now begin to see three reasons why the discourse of nationalism is incapable of addressing this alienation. Firstly, because it too operates through a process of differentiation and exclusion which continues to generate alienation. Secondly, because it fails to radically challenge the marginalizing structures of alterity and identity through which colonialism initiated this alienation. Thirdly, because nationalism as a discourse is both incomplete and multiple. It is hybridized by its coalescence of western and local forms and, more irreparably, by the ambivalence of its own signifying practice. Like colonial discourse, nationalist narratives fracture from within, giving voice to their own Other(s), articulating the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of alternative forms of identity.

In Africa the theoretical weaknesses of nationalism are supplemented by the concrete pressures to which the nation-state has been subject. In many cases these have been severe enough to constitute a real crisis of legitimacy. As we noted earlier, the boundaries of most African nations encompass and cut across a variety of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Despite the unifying rhetoric of nationalism, these identities have not simply disappeared. As Bayart constantly reminds us, we should never forget the historicity of African societies. Both colonialism and postcolonial nationalism are but moments in the ongoing life of the continent (Bayart 1991). Forms of identity other than the nation continue to flourish and to exert a claim upon African peoples. Aside
from ethnicity, religion and language, a cursory list might include pre-colonial modes of political organization and the dynamics of their evolution and interaction, commercial/trading affiliations, patron-client networks, caste, class or gender. All of these points of identification continue to operate within and across national frontiers, exerting an influence that is for many people more immediate and more powerful than that of nationality.

This situation both contributes to and is exacerbated by the political and economic crises that have befallen the majority of West African states. These have deep-seated causes. In their attempt to develop a sense of national identity and to overcome the weaknesses of the colonial states, which were institutionally weak and economically malintegrated, the majority of newly independent African nations embarked upon a highly centralized nation-building endeavour. Typical of this era were large-scale state projects such as dam or road building, or investment in public services. These undertakings were financed partly by buoyant international markets for cash crops and partly by extensive twenty-five year international loans. All this activity was conducted by the state either directly or through cumbersome parastatal agencies. As the political scientists Addebayo Olukoshi and Liisa Laaksa have noted, ‘the nation-building project was […] state-driven from the outset, often relying on a top-down approach that carried far reaching centralizing implications’ (1996, 13). This created oversized state sectors and drained rural resources into urban areas in an unsustainable fashion. The 1970s saw some attempt to redress this with a renewed emphasis on peasant productivity. Throughout West Africa, Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRDPs) were set up, but they tended to focus exclusively on technocratic details and were generally failures, especially in light of the droughts of the mid 1970s.

By the end of that decade most West African states were experiencing severe economic problems. In addition to environmental difficulties and mismanagement, many theorists of the ‘dependency’ or ‘underdevelopment’ schools believe that colonialism introduced Africa into the global economy in a structurally unequal fashion. Colonial and neo-colonial policies perpetuate this
inequality, ensuring western prosperity at the cost of African prosperity. While underdevelopment theory may take insufficient account of the agency of African states, it is certainly true that a colonial legacy of extraverted monoculture and single commodity mineral exports left African countries dependent upon western economies and dangerously exposed to risk on the international markets. Groundnuts in Senegal, cocoa in Ghana, cotton in the north of Nigeria or oil in the south, in all these instances crashing prices in the 1970s severely affected the national economies, all of which have exhibited minimal or negative GDP growth since the late 1960s.

These and other factors laid the foundations for the economic crises that developed in most West African states through the 1970s and ‘80s. In response to increasing difficulties in debt servicing, the World Bank and the IMF made international aid conditional upon the adoption of neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes. Like a great deal of Africanist discourse these programmes have tended to treat Africa as a blank sheet, an economic *tabula rasa* to which ‘pure’ fiscal models can be applied without sufficient reference to local conditions. Structural adjustment packages insisted, among other things, upon currency devaluation, exchange, interest rate and trade liberalization, privatization, the withdrawal of public service subsidies, cutbacks in public sector employment and a general diminution of the role of the state in economic affairs. Whilst this sort of neo-liberal economic policies have been more or less successful in the west and may yet prove so in Africa, their immediate results are hard to assess. Reformed exchange rates and reduced budget deficits are generally agreed to have increased stability, but many commentators argue that they have also inhibited the potential for sustainable growth. The reduction of deficits has largely been achieved through the curtailment of investment expenditure which is further restricted by high interest rates. Moreover, while some economic policies may benefit individual countries they do not necessarily have the same effect when followed by a group of countries in a given region, a phenomenon known as the ‘composition fallacy’ (Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhill & Rothchild 1992, 305-19; Olukoshi & Laaksa 1996, 16-24). These are not simply
economic failings, however; they also effect the state’s ability to promote itself as a legitimate force for social cohesion:

The deflationary thrust of the IMF/World Bank model fed into the overall zero-sum approach of the market to produce massive cutbacks in social and welfare services, and thus further weaken the basis of the postcolonial social bargain that imbued the postcolonial state with some legitimacy and underpins the quest for postcolonial nation building. (Olukoshi & Laaksa 1996, 19)

Furthermore, Structural Adjustment measures tended to target the professional middle classes, many of whom were employed in the public sector. These were precisely those who might have been expected to contribute most fully to the formation of a civil society and ‘whose class, occupational gender, and/or generational identities had endowed them with a national outlook that was central to the construction of a postcolonial national-territorial political space’ (Olukoshi & Laakso 1996, 22).

There is little doubt that these economic and political problems have been worsened by the prevalence of what the Cameroonians call la politique du ventre, that is the exploitation of political power for the accumulation of wealth. Bayart argues that this should not be viewed as simple corruption because it is so institutionalized and because it forms itself part of the historicity of African societies: ‘[the] politics of the belly […] is a system of historic action whose origins must be understood in the Braudelian longue durée’ (1989, ix). The participation of individual agents in this system is, perhaps, inevitable. As the Cameroonians say: ‘a goat eats where it is tethered’ (Bayart 1991, ix). Nonetheless it seems indubitable that the politics of the belly, whilst not necessarily responsible for the current crises that afflict so many African nations, has nevertheless severely inhibited the possibility of resolving these problems. Resources have been stripped from the state, sometimes, as in Mobutu’s Zaire, in a systematic and spectacular fashion. This process has led Bayart to talk in a recent book of ‘the criminalization of the state in Africa’ and the move from a ‘kleptocracy to a felonious state’ (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 1999). Moreover, the processes of corruption tend to reinforce modes of identification
such as family, *ethnic* or religious affiliation that do not correspond to a national identity.

A combination of these factors has led to the complete disintegration of the state as an effective agent in many parts of Africa. Bayart has remarked upon how

> The simple capacity to administer of even the best established regimes is diminishing, for example in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal [...]. In large swaths of sub-Saharan Africa, the capacity to execute any form of policy has quite simply evaporated. (1999, 19)

This infrastructural breakdown contributes to a crisis of national identity as the state fails both politically and discursively to maintain and promote its own hegemony. Unable to rely upon the provision or protection of the state,

> people had to fend for themselves. In doing this some resorted to ‘traditional’ social and spiritual resources [...]. Others sought solace in new or resuscitated/reinvigorated ethnic or religious associations. (Olukoshi & Laaksa 1996, 20)

In other words, as the capacity of the nation diminishes, the pull of sub-national identities increases. This process can be observed throughout West Africa. In recent years ethnic tensions have increased in central Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Separatist movements have continued to make their presence felt in the Nigerian delta and the Casamance region of Senegal. Increasingly violent struggles over resources and political hegemony have overswept Liberia and Sierra Leone. Religious fundamentalism has flourished, with the introduction of Sharia law in Northern Nigeria, the exponential growth of the Da’wa Islamic movement in Côte d’Ivoire and the expansion of charismatic and Pentecostal churches across the region. We could of course adduce many further examples to this list. What is significant, however, is that the contestation of the state’s role as a guarantor of identity occurs not only in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo where crisis is so severe that the state has essentially ceased to exist, but also, as Bayart points out, in relatively stable regimes. Senegal is a case in point. Sheldon Gellar claims that
one of the most stable and least repressive political regimes on the African continent, Senegal has been spared the ethnic and religious strife that has torn apart other African nations and avoided the military coups that elsewhere have spelled the end of civilian rule. (Cellar 1982, 23)

This is accurate as far as it goes. Since the power struggles of the early '60s between Senghor and his Prime Minister Mamadou Dia, Senegal has been remarkably secure at a governmental level. Senghor was the first African head of state to voluntarily relinquish office before the end of his term, handing over to his successor Abdou Diouf in January 1981. More surprisingly perhaps, widely praised multi-party elections in 2000 saw a peaceful end to forty years of socialist rule with the election of veteran opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade. Throughout this period ethnic conflict has been kept to a minimum and the Senegalese have proved particularly tolerant of non-Senegalese nationals residing within the country, although large numbers of Mauretanians were expelled from the north of the country in a retaliatory measure after many Senegalese nationals resident in Mauretania were killed in rioting. Cellar's slightly utopian analysis does not tell the whole story, however. Senegal's economy has closely followed the regional trajectory outlined above, suffering particularly from drought in the mid 1970s and from reliance on groundnut monoculture. Attempts to diversify the economy (phosphates, fishing, tourism) have yet to come to fruition. These economic difficulties have had much the same effect in Senegal as they have elsewhere in West Africa. Gellar claims that Senegal's pre-colonial political traditions and its long colonial history have helped forge a strong sense of Senegalese national identity among the majority of the people. Even the peasants of the countryside tend to regard their Senegalese national identity as more important than their ethnic identity. (1982, 98)

Nevertheless, as Gellar acknowledges, ethnic and regional disputes do exist in Senegal. The Toucouleur of the Senegal river valley feel increasingly marginalized from the predominantly Oulof national government and a low
level war of secession rumbles on in the Casamance, where Diola and Mandinka groups continue to privilege regional over national identity. More pertinently still, Senegal is not immune from ‘the politics of the belly’, as Gellar points out:

It would be impossible to comprehend the flavor and essence of Senegalese politics without some understanding of the important role played by ‘clan politics’ in the country’s political life [...]. Senegalese clan politics is highly personalized and revolves around the prestige of the clan leader and his ability to reward followers with favors, material resources, and reflected glory. In the context of Senegalese politics, clan leaders are not necessarily professional politicians. They can also be religious leaders, rural notables, heads of ethnic communities, businessmen, or trade unionists vying for power within their own community or organization. (1982, 26)

So politics, even at the national level, is infiltrated and determined by identities that are not those of the nation. The most striking example of this in contemporary Senegal is the ever expanding influence of the three Islamic Brotherhoods: the Mourides, the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya. The Mourides in particular exercise increasing economic, political and ideological influence, dominating the informal economy to such an extent that Bayart observes that ‘Dakar appears ever more as the mere shadow, the this-worldly mirror, of Touba, holy city of the Mouride brotherhood and a national capital of fraud and smuggling’ (1999, 20). It seems reasonable to suppose, then, that although the political stability of the Senegalese state allows it to promote some form of identitarian hegemony, this national identity is, even here, in competition with other forms of identification, other modes of belonging.

It is important to realize, however, that when people choose between different constructions of identity, they are not making absolute choices between concrete ontological alternatives. There is a fluidity inherent in all these identities and the relations between them may be more mobile and more strategic than is readily apparent. Let us take the example of ethnicity, which is often treated as a definitive and irreducible mode of identity, one that is uniquely threatening to the unitary discourse of the nation-state. In Africa it has often been assumed that ‘the diversity of ethnic identities was inherently
negative and obstructive’ (Olukoshi & Laaksa 1996, 13). Many postcolonial states used the question of ethnicity as a justification for the implementation of single party states, arguing that multi-party democracies created an institutional space for the pursuit of ethnic rivalries that endangered the existence of the nation. It is certainly true that ethnic identities are both epistemologically and functionally real. Moreover, identification along ethnic lines has on occasion had horrifying consequences, both in Africa and elsewhere. Yet as the anthropologist Michael Schatzberg points out:

> Over the past twenty years, African social scientists have developed an impressive body of literature which demonstrates conclusively that ethnic groups are neither primordial nor immutable. (1988, 9)

Indeed, the provenance of many ethnic groups is relatively recent, created by European ethnographic classification, or by colonial divide and rule policies and African manipulations of them. Speaking of Cameroonian politics, Bayart argues that ‘contemporary ethnic groups are often of recent creation and do not seem to have existed for much longer than the State itself’ (1989, 47). More generally, he claims,

> Most situations where the structuring of the contemporary political arena seems to be enunciated in terms of ethnicity relate to identities which did not exist a century ago or, at least, were then not as clearly defined. (1989, 51)

Furthermore, there is nothing fixed about ethnicity. Schatzberg continues:

> Depending on the context of the moment, people may migrate from one cultural identity to a second or even a third. Ethnicity in other words, is a protean, contextual, and intermittent phenomenon. (1988, 9)

Again, Bayart agrees: ‘Ethnicity is a complex and relative phenomenon, not a stable combination of invariables […]’ (1989, 47). He draws on a range of examples from Cameroon, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire and Kenya to demonstrate that ethnicity is both a flexible and a politically/economically strategic phenomenon: ‘The most striking examples of ethnic strategies are those
connected with the resources of the modern economy [...]’ (1989, 56). Ethnicity never functions alone, however: ‘A relative and not a substantial notion, ethnicity is just one among many areas of social and political struggle’ (Bayart 1991, 56-57). Schatzberg analyses this interrelation in some detail. He argues that both state and class are just as ‘protean’ and ‘contextual’ as ethnicity. All three are inextricably interrelated in what he calls a triple helix.

Each strand of [...] the helix is always changing. But not only is each strand a protean and intermittent phenomenon in its own right, each of the helix’s component parts also forms a significant part of the context of the other two. Frequently therefore social class and the state compose the context in which ethnicity becomes politically salient. Similarly the context in which social class comes to the fore might well be a combination of ethnicity and the state. So, too, for the state. (1988, 11)

This image of the helix is a useful one, but it must be extended to include other forms of identity such as gender and religion. These exist not as sharply differentiated entities, but as interacting processes which are constantly in the process of constructing themselves and each other. Bayart reminds us that ‘Ethnic identity does not [...] exclude other lines of identification; biological, religious or economic [...]’ (1989, 50), nor does it preclude their simultaneity. Each ‘line of identification’ determines the context or the production of the others in an infinitely complex nexus, which, Bayart continues, must be understood in a diachronic dimension:

Far from the problematic intangibility of tradition, ethnic consciousness reveals social change, of which it is a matrix [...]. If this extreme diachronic flexibility of ethnic identities were recognized historically, one would see that pre-colonial black Africa was not, strictly speaking, made up of a mosaic of ethnic groups. (1989, 50)

Bayart’s historicist perspective alerts us to several important issues. It underlines the need to deconstruct and recontextualize ethnicity and its supposed opposites, but it also prompts us to examine the supplementary dichotomy between tradition and modernity. This distinction between a ‘traditional’ African culture and a westernized modernity has arisen time and
again in this study. It is at the root of the agonised alienation we found in novels like *L'Enfant noir* and *L'Aventure ambiguë*. In a different way it informs the nation-building of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* in which respect for tradition is arguably outweighed by the emphasis on the progressive modernity appropriate to 'une Afrique indépendante et rénovée' (Sembène 1960, 343). Colonialists, nationalists and culturalists alike have all been able to mobilize the binarism of tradition and modernity for their own strategic purposes. In reality, however, tradition, like ethnicity, may be subject to revisionary analysis. For Bayart, the conception of a stable pre-colonial culture is simply another instance of failing to grasp African societies in their historic dimension. Tradition and modernity do not and cannot exist separately; they too must always interact:

In fact, tradition was neither monolithic, immobile nor closed [...]. Also, contemporary social actors constantly straddled the arbitrary circumscribed sectors of tradition and modernity. It is doubtful that they have a clear awareness of their limits [...]. (Bayart 1991, 12)

This statement should not be taken to indicate false consciousness or a lack of vision on the part of these ‘social actors’, but an instinctive grasp of the fact that in reality, in lived experience, tradition and modernity collide and coalesce. In a recent ethnography Charles Piot describes this process amongst the Kabre of northern Togo:

It is easy to show that whatever Kabre are – including the very name ‘Kabre’ – has been fashioned within, not outside, the encounter between Europe and Africa, as well as within the encounter between Kabre and various non-European others. (1999, 173)

If this tradition owes its present form to, and derives its meaning from modernity as much as from anything local or ‘indigenous’ it becomes analytically impossible to separate the two. Where does the ‘traditional’ end and the ‘modern’ begin/where is there an ‘outside’ that is not also ‘inside’? Where is there a ‘local’ that is not also a ‘global’? (1999, 173)

Like ethnicity and nationalism, tradition and modernity, local and global, the terms African and European are not dialectically opposed, but are simply
constituent parts of an increasingly heteroglossic discourse of identity. Moreover, this is a discourse in which individual actors are both manipulated and manipulative, re-articulating identity in diverse times and contexts to achieve particular ends. This heteroglossia is further complicated by the cultural and epistemic hybridization inherent in the postcolonial situation, but it is not produced by it. West African cultures are hybrid in and of themselves: ‘the phenomenon of creolisation is inherent in the historicity of African societies’ (Bayart 1991, 27-28).

So even where it is possible to make a claim for historical or geographical racination, it remains necessary to describe identity in terms of this hybridity or creolization. To a limited extent this has always been a feature of ethnographic accounts of Africa. Evans-Pritchard, for instance, emphasized the assimilationary character of Nuer ethnicity and Victor Turner analysed Ndembu social life in terms of a dialectic of schism and continuity, but both men failed to ground these analyses within a broader historical process (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Turner 1957). As we have seen, recent ethnographies, like those of Schatzberg or Piot, focus specifically upon these processes of creolization. Piot’s study also constitutes an important critique of earlier anthropological work from both the structural-functionalist and Marxist traditions. In *The Gender of the Gift* Marilyn Strathern claims that anthropologists consistently attempt to analyse ‘other’ cultures in terms of analytic categories that are specific to Europe or America when in fact ‘it cannot be assumed that “their” contexts and “ours” will be recognizably equivalent’ (1988, 9). Piot transfers this argument to the West African context, where he is concerned to show that analyses informed by classic Euroamerican social theory [...] do not adequately capture the meaning or nature of social life in other places. In particular such analytic frameworks fail to get at local understandings of social relations – and of gender, power, agency, history, and modernity – in [...] West Africa. (1999, 7)

Piot hopes to avoid these pitfalls by construing culture as a hybrid, aggregate process: ‘Cultural mixing here [amongst the Kabre] as elsewhere in Africa is
seen not so much as a loss of culture as an addition to it' (1999, 23-24). He suggests that

by critically, self-reflexively tacking back and forth between Euroamerican and African knowledge practices – at once doing an ethnography of Kabre and of Europe – we might open a productive space that allows for the interrogation and unsettling of longstanding anthropological assumptions. (1999, 24-25)

I have highlighted Piot’s argument not because I am specifically interested in questions of ethnographic method, but because it is essentially a reformulation of some questions that are now becoming increasingly familiar to us. To what extent can we understand Africa through western intellectual models? What is the relation of African cultures to those of the West and how do we describe it/them? Piot’s response is that because these cultures are inherently hybridized, a product of a continuing interaction with western and non-western others, they can only be understood through a dialogue between western and African knowledge practices. ‘Part of such a process […]’, he continues, ‘involves writing texts that confront the difficulties of their own making’ (1999, 25). Piot thus aligns himself with a great deal of recent anthropological theory which emphasizes the textual and dialogic dimensions of anthropological practice. In an influential essay in *The Predicament of Culture* James Clifford deconstructs or decentralizes the ethnographic. Ethnography as he describes it is the interpretation of cultures, but it is an interpretation that takes place in an increasingly mobile world system, ‘a global condition of what Mikhail Bakhtin called “heteroglossia”’ (1988, 23). Within this ‘ambiguous, multivocal world’ (1988, 23) the ethnographer can claim no special authority to represent ‘other’ cultures. Ethnography is always produced through some form of encounter or engagement:

It becomes necessary to conceive of ethnography not as the experience and interpretation of a circumscribed ‘other’ reality, but rather as a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects. (Clifford 1988, 41)

Inevitably this affects the written manifestations of ethnography:
The words of ethnographic writing [...] cannot be construed as monological, as the authoritative statement about, or interpretation of, an abstract, textualized reality. The language of ethnography is shot through with other subjectivities and specific contextual overtones, for all language, in Bakhtin’s view, is a ‘concrete heteroglot conception of the world’. (Clifford 1988, 42)

The practice of writing ethnography is one of textual production, but they are texts which are produced through a process of dialogue between the ethnographer and his/her ‘subjects’. Despite their apparent authority, ethnographic texts cannot be attributed to a single author; they do not articulate a single voice. Furthermore, Clifford suggests, pace Barthes, that such texts are also subject to varying interpretation at their point of reception:

The writing of ethnography, an unruly, multisubjective activity, is given coherence in particular acts of reading. But there is always a variety of possible readings beyond the control of any single authority. (1988, 52-53)

So the authority of ethnographic texts is contested both by their ethnographic and by their textual nature. In his introduction to Writing Culture Clifford pursues this line of thinking further (Clifford & Marcus 1986). He says of the essays in that volume that

their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures. (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 2)

The claim here is not just that ‘anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority’ (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 10), it also challenges the ‘objective’ nature of ethnographic ‘truths’:

Even the best ethnographic texts [...] are systems, or economies of truth. Power and history work through them in ways their authors cannot fully control.
Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete. (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 7)

From here Clifford is able to formulate a fuller statement about the nature of culture:

the principle of dialogical textual production goes well beyond the more or less artful presentations of ‘actual’ encounters. It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power laden and incongruent. In this view, ‘culture’ is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power. (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 14-15)

Culture is contested, temporal and emergent. Representation and explanation – both by insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence. (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 19)

This last point is crucial because what is at stake here is not simply the way in which cultures are represented, but the way in which they are constructed. A construction that occurs at least in parts through the act of representation itself. So the sort of ideas Clifford discusses suggest not just how westerners can best understand Africa, nor even how Africa understands itself, but also, as Piot maintains, how African identities are formulated through this very process of dialogue and representation.

Historically, of course, this interaction has not been entirely open or equitable. As Clifford point out, it exists ‘between subjects in relations of power’. Such relations are rarely perfectly balanced and the relationship between western and African epistemological practices has been both agonistic and hierarchical. Euroamerican models of knowledge have tended to dominate those of Africa, establishing a hegemony which masks the dialogic nature of culture and creates a polarized dialectic between African and Western identities. As we have seen, this tension haunts the novels of the 1950s and underpins both the discourse and practice of African nationalism. The distortion and alienation produced by this dialectic are familiar to us by now. Responses to it include both negritude and nationalism, each of which attempts to posit some form of
authenticity and each of which fails to escape from an epistemic dependence on the west. It is all very well for Western anthropologists and theorists to argue that cultures are plural, dialogic phenomena, but for postcolonial Africa the problem of relating to the West refuses to go away. It seems incumbent upon us then to look at some theoretical responses to this issue that have arisen from within Africa.

In *African Philosophy*, the philosopher Paulin Hountondji criticizes the way in which thinking from and about Africa seeks to identify some form of authentic cultural or intellectual form (1983). He describes this process as ‘ethnophilosophy’, that is, ‘the imaginary search for an immutable collective philosophy, common to all Africans’ (1983, 38). Negritude is one example of such ethnophilosophy, but it is not alone: ‘Negritude is not the only form of cultural nationalism. There are other phrases – for instance, ‘authenticity’, or ‘the repersonalization of the African’ which it has seized upon’ (Hountondji 1983, 162). Obviously, the position of the bolekeja critics is another example of this tendency. The promotion of an authentically ‘African’ mode of thought does not lessen Africa’s epistemic dependence on the west: quite the contrary, ‘contemporary African philosophy, in as much as it has remained an ethnophilosophy, has been built up essentially for a European public’ (Hountondji 1983, 45)

We thus remain unwittingly prisoners of Europe, trying, as ever, to force her to respect us and deriving naïve pleasure from declaring for her benefit what we are naïve enough to regard as our philosophical identity. (Hountondji 1983, 50)

As Mudimbe has pointed out, escaping this epistemological prison is likely to be complicated:

For Africa, really escaping from the west entails appreciating exactly what it costs to detach oneself from it; it means knowing to what extent the west has, perhaps insidiously, drawn near to us; it means knowing what is still western in what we reproach the west for, and to measure how much our claim to it is perhaps a ruse, at the end of which it is waiting, immobile and elsewhere. (Cited in Bayart 1991, 31)
For Hountondji the only response to this dilemma is, in effect, to cease to worry about what it means to be African and to engage with contemporary western thought in a deliberately ‘neutral’ way.

There was a need therefore to start by demystifying Africanity, by reducing it to a fact – simply the fact and in itself perfectly neutral, of belonging to Africa – by removing the mystic halo of values arbitrarily grafted upon this fact by ideologists of African identity. (1983, xii)

We must at all costs liberate our thought from the Africanist ghetto to which it has been confined. (1983, 54)

We must treat this proposition with some caution, however. It is developed in a more radical form by Marcien Towa who claims that:

La volonté d’être nous-mêmes [...] nous accule finalement à la nécessité de nous transformer en profondeur, de nier notre être intime pour devenir l’autre.. Pour nous approprier le secret de l’Europe, avoir un esprit nouveau et étranger, nous devons révolutionner le nôtre de fond en comble, ce faisant nos devenons assurément semblables à l’Européen. (Cited in Miller 1990, 23)

In effect, then, Towa argues for a complete, strategic disavowal of difference. This seems a little extreme. One can certainly understand the motivation behind it, after all, as Hountondji argues, an African should be able to talk about Kant or Hegel, without it being at all relevant that he is African. If we want to talk about culture, however, about identity, then the complete disregard for local identity is not only impoverishing but falsifying. If society is constituted through an interactive dialogic process then it is just as misleading to ignore the ‘African’ elements of it, as it is to wholeheartedly promote a pseudo-authentic culturalism. Moreover, the condition Towa aspires to, ‘devenir l’autre’, is perilously close to the state which causes such existential crisis for Samba in L’Aventure ambiguë: ‘nous voilà devenus autres’ (Kane 1962, 125). This hardly seems like progress. Hountondji’s subtler position, however, seems fully cognisant of these difficulties and acknowledges the ‘internal pluralism’ (1983, 166) of African cultures. He despises notions of ‘traditional’
African culture because they implicitly condone a value distinction in which the 'traditional' is unfavourably compared with the modern. Like Piot or Bayart, Hountondji is anxious to deconstruct this opposition. When we speak in these terms, he argues, 'we ignore, or pretend to ignore the fact that African cultural traditions are not closed, that they did not stop when colonization started but embrace colonial and postcolonial cultural life' (1983, 161-62). It is this sort of thinking that leads to the polarization of African and western intellectual practices that we have already described. Hountondji continues:

What we must now realize is that this polarization has proved disastrous and that its destruction is one of the first and most important conditions of our cultural renaissance. African culture must return to itself, to its internal pluralism and to its essential openness. We must therefore, as individuals, liberate ourselves psychologically and develop a free relationship both with African cultural tradition and with the cultural traditions of other countries. (1983, 166, emphasis mine)

So Hountondji advocates an ongoing, dialogic interaction between western and African cultural traditions, an interaction which, he too stresses, is inherent to the nature of African societies.

We begin to see then that a similar set of ideas arises from a variety of disciplines. Postcolonial literary theory, the social sciences, anthropological theory and philosophy all in their different ways suggest that African cultures should be seen not in terms of authenticity or modernization, but as ongoing constructs, which continually transform themselves by assimilating, adapting and transmuting a bewildering variety of epistemological and cultural influences. This analysis is reminiscent of Glissant’s description of ‘créolisation’ in the Caribbean. Indeed it is striking that in the early 1970s the anthropologists Ronald Cohen and John Middleton define plural societies in Africa as ‘situations in which individuals from differing cultural backgrounds interact in some continuing fashion’ (1970, 8-9) A formulation which precisely prefigures Glissant’s definition of creolization as ‘une rencontre d’éléments culturels venus d’horizons absolument divers et qui réellement se créolisent’ (1996, 15). Glissant’s work is relevant here, not only as a further theorization of cultural
pluralism, but because it explicitly connects this process with the ongoing formulation of a cultural identity. Glissant theorizes modes of subjectivity that are sufficiently mobile to evade the monolithic prescriptions of totalizing discourses like negritude or nationalism: rhizome identities constituted through the interconnection of diverse cultural elements. This type of identity now appears a necessary condition of African modernity. Any attempt to engage with African cultures and their products must locate them (and itself) within an impossibly complex nexus of competitive yet combinatory voices. These configurations never stand still. It is in this liminal space of cultural happening that identities are produced and contested. But how do we speak from the interstices? How do we give voice to a location which is constantly in movement, which mutates as soon as it achieves tentative form? My contention is that literature provides us with a privileged locus for this activity.

Why should this be so? Why literature? Why, more specifically, the fictional prose narrative?

In order to grasp this point we must consider some of the structural similarities between identity and textuality. I would like, therefore, to refer to some predominantly western theorizations of identity which also suggest figures of pluralism and transmutation but which ally this plurality to a specifically textual model. In doing so we must of course remain aware of the dangers of applying western theoretical models to an African object. The preceding discussion has illustrated all too well the potential consequences of this sort of manoeuvre. Neo-colonialism of the intellect is alive and well and we must strive to avoid it. Nevertheless, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* put it,
This formulation needs to be extended to encompass the potentially complex relationship between postcolonial theory itself and literary texts, but it does point towards the manner in which these diverse discourses are connected. Moreover, if, as Hountondji and others argue, African philosophy must proceed through a ‘free relationship’ with other cultures (Hountondji 1983, 166), then it seems appropriate to respond in kind. To refuse on principle to include ideas of western origin in a consideration of African literature is to consign Africa to exactly the form of essentialist culturalism Hountondji condemns. My argument here will be that African literary texts stand, inevitably and self-consciously, at a point, or rather points, of cultural intersection. By drawing on both western and African theories and texts this study hopes to occupy a culturally interstitial space that is, structurally at least, similar to that from which African texts (and cultures) are produced.

The western philosophical history of thinking about personal identity offers a profoundly non-textual perspective, consistently displaying all the characteristics of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ that Derrida claims has dominated western thought (1967). As human beings, we are subject over the course of our lives to a variety of perceptions, emotions and other experiences. We are apt to posit some object that collects and orders these experiences. The existence of this object has traditionally been seen as either an empirical (e.g. Locke), or an a priori truth (e.g. Descartes), according to philosophical persuasion. Furthermore, we tend to ascribe certain properties, pertaining over time, to this posited object. This, despite the fact that such an object can only be experienced, if at all, sequentially. This enduring, property-bearing object is what we term personal identity. Our belief is generally that each individual is constituted by such an object, which they experience, as it were, from the inside, as subject. This idea that if there are things that happen, there must be a thing to which they happen is, though not necessarily false, an archetypal example of the ‘metaphysics of presence’. Moreover, as Strathern argues in The Gender of the Gift, other cultures may conceive identity and personhood in

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*See Locke (1700); Descartes (1641).*
radically different terms. However, the predominance of such thinking has gradually been displaced.

If there is any unifying trope within which modern theorizing about the self can be located, it must surely lie, as Foucault suggests (1966), in the shift from an imagined ontology, the fiction of being as essentialized totality, to an attitude that is at once epistemological and creative. This paradigmatic shift begins, perhaps, with Hegel who suggests in *The Phenomenology of the Mind* that the self defines itself in terms of its difference from some external object coming to know itself through successive postulations of the world’s objectivity (1807). Hegel develops his account of the formation of consciousness into a complex dialectic in which the struggle between the self/subject and the world/object is conceptualized as a competitive master/slave relationship. These theories have been hugely influential. Transmitted via the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger they can be detected in the existentialism of Sartre and Kierkegaard, as well as in the work of later thinkers like Foucault and Lacan for whom identity is seen, not as an enduring, property-bearing entity but as a mobile iterative phenomenon. It becomes a discursive relation between different points of experience the knowledge of which we create rather than discover. These ideas are discernible not only in the French intellectual tradition, but also in the works of English philosophers such as Derek Parfitt (1971). As we have already seen, it is also visible in contemporary discussions of culture which privilege a constructivist or dialogic perspective. Anthropologists like James Clifford and Clifford Geertz famously claim that culture should be seen as ‘an assemblage of texts to be interpreted’ (Clifford 1986, 38).

To theorize this more fundamentally, to try and understand why not only culture, but perhaps all identity, is essentially textual, I would like to draw some ideas from the psychoanalytic thinking of Jacques Lacan, who was much influenced by Hegel. Lacan’s thinking remains controversial and, like his other great mentor Freud, much of it is problematically unfalsifiable. Nevertheless, many aspects of Lacan’s account of the ways in which meaning and subjectivity are generated may usefully underpin this discussion. For Lacan, language
functions as the structuring principle of the human mind: 'l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage' (Lacan 1973, 23). Meaning is generated through a process of identification and differentiation. The formulation of subjectivity (the meaning of the self) is equally subordinate to this principle. The unified self the infant sees in the mirror is illusory; the reality of subjectivity is a fragmented dialectic of identification and differentiation with Otherness. The subject is thus endlessly displaced and recreated by a process of signification within the Symbolic order. So, if the subject is not a stable entity, but the product of a signifying process, then the subject can exist only in as far as it is able to signify/articulate itself as subject and to differentiate itself from other objects. Subjectivity is thus inseparable from a demand for recognition addressed to the Other (Lacan 1966).

There is a danger here, as pointed out by feminist critiques of Lacan, that we will be forced back into the politics of binarism – Self/Other. Within such a binary system one term will inevitably be privileged over another. This is a danger that is particularly acute in the postcolonial context, as Fanon recognizes when he says: 'On me démontrait que ma demande n’était qu’un terme dans la dialectique' (1952, 107). This demand for recognition is a contradictory moment. The desire for the Other to recognize one as a differentiated entity is also a moment of institutionalization. The assertion that 'I exist/I am different from you', can only be met by a reductive gesture that identifies me in that difference. I can only exist as subject through the recognition of that subjectivity by another, but that very recognition objectifies me. I become just some thing that is different. To be recognized by the Other is, then, as Fanon shows, to be fixed by that gaze into a specific ontological space. This is one of the ways in which the postcolonial subject is lured into an epistemic subjugation by the West. As Homi Bhabha shows, however (1994), this is also a moment of splitting, in which identity and difference are at play. The gaze of the Other objectifies, but this objectification relies upon an acknowledgement of difference and vice versa. This process can never be successfully concluded one way or the other and so is kept in perpetual motion by the impossibility of its own completion.
The second factor that allows Lacan’s schema to escape simple binarism resides in the nature of signification itself. The subject exists via its ability to articulate itself as such, but the signs it uses to do this are inherently unstable. Lacan’s idea that the subject is endlessly displaced and recreated through the process of signification can be elucidated by appealing once again to the Derridean notion of *différance* (Derrida 1972, 1-29). If the sign has no static meaning, but bears within it the traces of a plethora of other meanings, then we can see how whatever ‘sign position’ the Lacanian subject adopts from which to articulate his differentiation will already be in retreat. Each and every ontological site the subject chooses, exceeds and unmakes itself by virtue of its articulation. There is no one meaning that can be ascribed to the subject. It is already contaminated by a host of other meanings, between which it describes an endlessly mobile trajectory. In other words, whichever sign I use to denote myself – white, male, European, even cheerful or gloomy – is already overdetermined and undermined by the play of signification. So the ontological fixing of the self is permanently deferred. Any attempt to talk meaningfully about subjectivity must, therefore, acknowledge that our idea of a unified self is a narrative, a fictional totality whose uncertain foundations are the endlessly shifting sands of the signifying process. This is the same process that we have already seen undermining nationalist discourse.

Reading Lacan in this way establishes three crucial forms of connection each of which hints towards the utility of the literary text in this context. Firstly, we replace the sternness of Lacan’s Hegelian dialectic with a dialogic view of identity, akin to that propounded by the creolization theorists. In both cases, identity is located, not in historical genesis, but in the interstices of a number of discursive locations. The restless movement of the subject/sign away from a final determination, imagined by Deleuze and Guattari as ‘lignes de fuite’, or ‘déterritorialisation’ (1980, 9-37), allows a re-configuration of identity as a locus of infinite diversity and possibility. This convergence between Lacanian and Glissantian thought allows us to draw a link between western and non-western theoretical discourses, thus responding in a limited way to Hountondji’s
invitation. Secondly, it allows us to make a connection between the ways in which we structure individual and collective/cultural identities. The discursive epistemes of collective culture determine the forms of discourse that are available for individual subject formation, while individual subjectivities are self-evidently a necessary condition for the collective. Each, therefore, provides the 'ingredients' that figure in the formation of the other. At the same time, individual and collective interact in as far as the awareness that identity is not a prescribed, monolithic entity inevitably has a political dimension. As Homi Bhabha puts it:

Political empowerment and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective. Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition: they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as project. (1994, 3)

So we can see why conceiving of identity in the terms outlined above might be politically and ethically significant. Moreover, as Bhabha, Said and others have argued, 'nations are narratives' (Said 1978; Bhabha 1990), which, as Anderson points out, are also the products of a collective imagining. These acts of imagination and narration occur through discourse and we have seen some of the ways in which their essentially textual nature subverts and hybridizes them. Clifford's argument suggests that it is not only national cultures but cultures per se that share this textuality and that these cultures are formulated through the dialogic interaction of individuals: 'Cultural poesis – and politics – is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions and discursive practices' (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 24). We can now see how the discursive processes by which we construct corporate identities are structurally analogous to those that operate on the level of individual psychology. This allows us to posit a relationship between the product of individual imaginations – literary texts – and the product of collective imaginations – cultures – in as far as each is constructed through similar textual procedures. So we can begin to see why literature should provide so suitable a forum for the exploration of this type of identity. The third connection arising
from our reading of Lacan is a clear link between the production of subjectivity and of the literary text in as far as they are both forms of signification which exist only within the space of their own articulation. If the self is, as has been claimed, a form of narrative, it seems likely that it will share some of the characteristics of the narrative text. Consider the following points: a text demands to be read, it exists to be read and to some degree it exists only in as far as it is read. Like the self, the text is dependent upon its own articulation. Moreover, the text also works through the ascription of meaning to inherently volatile signs, both on the level of individual signs and in the creation of a narrative that will ascribe meaning to the totality of those signs. The text also possesses, however, the ability to manipulate and exploit this very volatility for its own ends. It is clear, then, that there are deep structural similarities between the process of textual production and the processes whereby we produce an idea of identity.

These similarities are not necessarily interesting in and of themselves. What is interesting, however, is the way in which some texts exploit these similarities to explore the possibilities that identity has to offer. Glissant writes that composite cultures ‘commencent directement par le conte’, where the conte is imagined as ‘une autre configuration de l’écrit, d’ou l’absolu ontologique sera évacué’ (1996, 63). What would such writing be like? Perhaps we can imagine it as the scriptible described by Roland Barthes, texts of which the reader is ‘non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur’. ‘Le texte scriptible: c’est nous en train d’écrire’ (1970, 10). Such texts use the unstable, polyphonic nature of signification to inhabit a multiplicity of ontological sites, to create new discursive spaces, to interrogate culture from below, outside and in between its normative parameters. ‘Interpréter un texte [scriptible], ce n’est pas lui donner un sens […] c’est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait’ (Barthes 1970, 11). Using their awareness of the lacuna and aporia that exist within the process of representation, these dissident texts are able to articulate and explore ways of being and feeling that evade the normalizing discourse of social doxa, ‘ce texte est une galaxie de signifiants non une structure de signifiés’ (Barthes 1970, 11). They enter into the negotiation of modulations of identity that play off the
demands of totalizing ontological topoi to emerge as something new and creatively vibrant. They are thus able to give voice to the endlessly mobile, interactive phenomenon that is contemporary African identity. Put more elegantly, in the words of the Congolese poet and novelist Sony Labou Tansi: ‘L’art c’est la force de faire dire à la réalité ce qu’elle n’aurait pu dire par ses propres moyens ou, en tout cas, ce qu’elle risquait de passer volontairement sous silence’ (1985, avertissement).

To think in this way is perhaps to align oneself with a great deal of postcolonial theory. While such theorizations suggest certain readings, they are no substitute for reading itself. In the chapters that follow, I would like to examine how some recent and contemporary African writers have represented processes of identity formation in their work. Through these readings, I hope not only to give focus and context to the theoretical issues discussed here, but also to show how literary texts – the ways in which they are written and read as material locations for the re-negotiation of identity – may help us to envisage solutions to some crucial problems which cannot adequately be resolved by a purely theoretical approach.
Chapter Four

In the previous chapter we saw how the failure of monolithic discourses like negritude or nationalism to adequately represent the individual subject demands a new epistemology of subjectivity. However, the necessity for individual subjects to coexist within a social or cultural system means that the question of collective identity remains a pressing concern. Organizing identity along the connective, horizontal axis of the rhizome must, as I have already suggested, entail a certain reconfiguration of social relations. In this chapter I would like to turn away from theory slightly, to examine how these issues are played out in the works of two modern African authors. In the works of Yambo Ouologuem the critique of negritude and associated national movements achieves its most explicit and profound expression, whilst the novels of Ahmadou Kourouma begin to map out a new hybrid postcolonial aesthetic.

*Le Devoir de violence* (1968), the first and only novel of the Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem, tells the story of the fictional African Empire of Nakem from 1202 to the late 1940s. It is a troubling, complicated text, in which the reader is brutalized by a seemingly interminable succession of violent and sexually explicit episodes. The first two sections of the novel, occupying about a sixth of its total length, take the form of a historical chronicle, describing the brutal reign of the Saïf dynasty through successive wars and invasions, ending with the French conquest in 1900. The final two sections dwell in detail on Saïf's political manoeuvring against the French over the next forty years and come to centre on the (mis)adventures of Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, the son of two of Saïf's serfs, who is eventually elected, as a pawn of Saïf's, to be Nakem's first député to the Assemblé Nationale. Throughout this (hi)story, the novel's most striking motif is the extreme violence which perpetuates Saïf's ruthless grip on power and the brutal oppression of the ordinary African people, the négrière. As indicated by the novel's title, this violence, sometimes described in disturbing detail, sometimes with equally disturbing casualness, is nihilistically translated by Ralph Manheim as 'niggertrash'.
presented as an inevitable feature of the human condition.

When first published in 1968, *Le Devoir de violence* received rapturous critical acclaim. *Le Monde* proclaimed it the ‘first African novel worthy of the name’ (Galey 1968) and it went on to win the the Prix Renaudot of that year. Upon translation into English *Le Devoir* was equally successful in the Anglophone world, particularly in the United States where it attracted sufficient attention for Ouologuem to appear on the *Today Show*. The near hysterical enthusiasm with which the novel was received began to be tempered by two sorts of criticism. Many Africans found the novel ideologically difficult, arguing that it portrayed too negative a picture of the continent. (It is significant, as we shall see, that these ideological questions are framed as questions of accuracy.) More significantly for the novel’s future some critics began to remark upon excessive ‘borrowings’ from other texts, firstly from a previous Renaudot winner, André Schwartz-Bart’s *Le Dernier des justes* (see Sellin 1971) and, upon publication of the English translation, from Graham Greene’s *It’s a Battlefield* (see Anon, 1972).

Schwartz-Bart was famously magnanimous, declaring that,

I am deeply touched, overwhelmed even, that a black writer should have leant on *Le Dernier des justes* to write *Le Devoir de violence*. Thus it is not Mr Ouologuem who is in debt to me, but I to him.

(1968)

Greene, however, was less touched and legal proceedings were instigated. Fuel was added to this fire by the fact that Ouologuem had in 1969 published his *Lettre à la France nègre*, a selection of polemics, one of which, *Lettre aux pisse copies, nègres d’écrivains célèbres*, purported to give a method whereby one could construct ‘UN MILLIARD DE ROMANS SANS PEINE!’ (1969, 168) from fragments of previous texts. This letter now came to be seen as an ‘all too real modus operandi’ (Sellin 1971, 120) and contributed to the condemnation of Ouologuem as a plagiarist. Ouologuem defended himself in *Le Figaro littéraire* (1970) and in an interview with ‘K.W.’ in *West Africa* (1972), in both cases, he
admitted that *Le Devoir* did use passages from other texts, but claimed that he had indicated this in his original manuscript and that the references had subsequently been suppressed by the publishers, Éditions du Seuil. 'K.W.' claimed to have seen this manuscript, quotation marks and all (1972), but Seuil vociferously denied its existence.

It is not necessary to rehearse the hyperbolic details of this scandal, the final result of which was the ongoing withdrawal from sale of the French edition of *Le Devoir de violence*. Nevertheless, it is impossible to write about Ouologuem without declaring some sort of position in relation to this controversy. It may well be, as Miller and other critics have pointed out, that the fevered reaction to ‘l’affaire Ouologuem’ has obscured a balanced consideration of the novel (Miller 1983). Yet it is also true that the plagiarism issue raises questions that are central to an understanding of the text’s project. The most interesting feature to emerge from the furore is that *Le Devoir de violence* does not merely plagiarize a couple of passages from well known authors, but is largely constructed from a patchwork of other texts. Ouologuem himself suggests sources including the sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Lope di Pigafeta, the detective novelist John McDonald, the *Tarik el Fetach*, the *Tarik el Sudan*, Amharic and Bambara epics and French colonial archives (KW 1972). In addition to the passages from Schwartz-Bart and Greene, other critics have identified passages from Maupassant and suggested sources including Villon, Hugo, Flaubert and Saint-Exupéry (Chaulet-Achour 1982; Songolo 1978).

The complexity of this intertext inclines one towards the view that Ouologuem’s borrowing from other texts is so pervasive and, as Seth Wolitz has shown, so transformative of the originals as to constitute a valid artistic practice in its own right (Wolitz 1973). There is also an astonishing conjunction between form and content. As Christopher Miller has pointed out, Ouologuem’s ‘collage’ technique mirrors his thematic concerns on a narratalogical level:

as the writing of the novel plugs itself into other texts, borrowing stealing, and violating, the characters within the plot become bodies

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cutting and cut up, raping and raped, in the success formula for the popular novel, sex and violence. (Miller 1983, 65)

Further than this, however, *Le Devoir de violence* operates as ‘a satire on origins’ (Huggan 1994, 117), relentlessly deconstructing the idea of cultural or historical authenticity. This position is reinforced by the ambiguous nature of Ouologuem’s artistic practice and the disparate pedigree of his text.

This becomes apparent in the opening section of the novel ‘La Légende des Saïfs’ which condenses into twenty pages the history of Nakem from 1202 to 1900. Initially this section appears to mimic the epic style that Glissant associates with the development of *cultures ataviques* (1996, 22). However, a close reading reveals it to be a systematic demolition of such a racinated culture and the possibility of its representation. The opening paragraph of the novel is instructive in this regard.

Nos yeux boivent l’éclat du soleil, et, vaincus, s’étonnent de pleurer. *Mascallah! oua bismallah!*... Un récit de l’aventure sanglante de la négraille – honte aux hommes de rien! – tiendrait aisément dans la première moitié de ce siècle; mais le véritable histoire des Nègres commence beaucoup, beaucoup plus tôt, avec les Saïfs, en l’an 1202 de notre ère, dans l’Empire africain de Nakem, au sud de Fezzan, bien après les conquêtes d’Okba ben Nafi el Fitri. (Ouologuem 1968, 9)

Both narrative and historiographical conventions are challenged here. Aliko Songolo (1978) has suggested that the ‘*Mascallah! oua bismallah!*...’ functions as a figurative clearing of the throat, a way of excusing or disassociating the narrative that follows, but in doing so it implies the existence of an omniscient, self-conscious narrator, as does the parenthetical ‘honte aux hommes de rien!’ and the countless similar exhortations throughout the book. Yet the possibility of such a narrator producing a ‘unified’ narrative is undermined by our knowledge that the first sentence is lifted practically verbatim from *Le Dernier des justes* (Sellin 1971). Far from being univocal, the text is already practising the dismemberment and quotation of other texts. Within the novel’s first three sentences, then, its narrative integrity is already fragmented. This ambiguity concerning the narrative voice is perpetuated throughout the text and, as we
shall see, it does not always depend on a specialized intertextual knowledge to become apparent. Songolo also suggests that the novel’s first sentence subverts our narrative expectations by bringing together three words, ‘yeux’, ‘boivent’ and ‘éclat’, which normally belong to different semantic fields (1978).

The opening paragraph of *Le Devoir* also contravenes the conventions of historical genesis and its representation. The story of the *négraille*, we are told, could easily be drawn from the first half of this century, implying that knowledge of history/genesis is not a necessary condition for the comprehension of cultural phenomena. If, however, we insist upon such knowledge, ‘la véritable histoire’ begins in the year 1202, a suspiciously precise date, and one whose status as a point of origin is immediately undermined by its positioning in reference to an antecedent event. If the year 1202 is after the conquests of Okba ben Nafi el Fitri then it is not the beginning of either the real or the narrated history. So historical racination is refigured as an arbitrary, fictive procedure. When in the next paragraph we are told that ‘raconter la splendeur de cet empire...n’offrirait rien que du menu folklore’ (Ouologuem 1968, 9), the project of accurately representing history is also shown to be a futile undertaking. So *Le Devoir* opens with a paradox, purporting to give us ‘la véritable histoire’, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the impossibility of such a project.

This is reiterated in the following pages, where the genesis of the novel’s narration is exposed to further doubts. As the violent history of feudal Nakem begins to unfold, we are told that

*Il en fut ainsi à Tillabéri-Bentia, à Granta, à Grosso, à Gagol-Gosso, et dans maints lieux dont parlent le Tarik el Fetach, the Tarik el Sudan des historiens arabes. (Ouologuem 1968, 10)*

Again, the implication is that we are being narrated an ‘authentic’, ‘legitimate’ history, impeccably derived from primary sources. Yet a few lines later it is revealed that ‘le griot Koutouli, de précieuse mémoire, achève ainsi sa geste’ (Ouologuem 1968, 10) followed by a passage in quotation marks. The reader is
likely to be somewhat confused, there has been no previous indication that the story is being narrated by Koutouli and even in retrospect it is impossible to identify at which point (if at all) his voice is introduced. Is it to Koutouli that we should ascribe interjections such as ‘Maschallah! oua bismallah!…’ and ‘honte aux hommes de rien’? Or has he finished a tale we have never seen him begin? The answers to such questions are not apparent. The fact that Koutouli’s statement is reported and is clearly – ‘de précieuse mémoire’ – in the past, indicates that he cannot be the text’s sole narrator, but no suggestion is given as to his relative significance. Koutouli’s voice is added to the novel’s increasingly polysemic babble and the text again makes clear its refusal of a unitary narrative perspective.

Leaving aside the question of the narrator, it is clear that even without a detailed knowledge of *Le Devoir’s* intertext, we can see from its first two pages that the novel draws on a variety of cultural sources, notably those of the Arab historians and those of the griots. To this extent at least, then, the text is already proclaiming a hybrid derivation.

Some consequences of this become apparent a page later in the story of Saïf Isaac El Héït, a great early emperor of Nakem of whom we are told:

> le sort [...] dota la légende des Saïfs de la splendeur où somnolent de nos jours encore, les rêveurs de la théorie de l’unité africaine. (Ouologuem 1968, 11)

This is clearly a barb aimed both at the political aspirations of pan-Africanism and at the cultural postures of the negritude movement, both of whom wish to use this vision of pre-colonial history to promote a unified collective identity founded in the authenticity of its cultural roots. For Ouologuem, as we know, unity and authenticity are fictions to be dismantled and the story of Saïf Isaac El Héït is rapidly subjected to this process:

> Ici nous atteignons le degré critique au-delà duquel la tradition se perd dans la légende, et s’y engloutit; car les récits écrits font défaut, et les versions des Anciens divergent de celles des griots,
lesquelles s’opposent à celles des chroniqueurs. (Ouologuem 1968, 11)

So there is no single, clearly apprehensible ‘truth’ about El Héït, merely a series of conflicting stories. Indeed we are presented with several divergent accounts of his life and origins. The ‘unité’ and the ‘splendeur’ to which the pan-africanist and the negritude poet would appeal, do not really exist, but Ouologuem is at pains to emphasize the power of this myth, the better to demolish it:

Véridique ou fabulée, la légende de Saïf Isaac El Héït hante de nos jours encore le romantisme nègre, et la politique des notables en maints républiques [...]. (Ouologuem 1968, 14)

Mais il faut se rendre à l’évidence: ce passé – grandiose certes – ne vivait, somme toute, qu’à travers les historiens arabes et la tradition orale africaine, que voici. (Ouologuem 1968, 14)

But we have already been told that the accounts of the Arab historians and the griots differ, we have seen how they obfuscate rather than complement each other. To which version does the ‘que voici’ refer? Even if we could know this there is no way of establishing its accuracy, or authenticating it in the face of competing accounts.

Having thrown into doubt the accuracy of his history Ouologuem outlines a gruesome litany of bloodshed, slavery, rape and invasion continuing all the way to the turn of the twentieth century. The violence of this history attacks the romanticized vision of African history whilst the constant (usually coerced) displacement of populations and shifts of ideologies satirizes the notion of an authentic African cultural identity.

We can see, then, that the first section of Le Devoir de violence signals the novel’s polyphony and its insistent interrogation of the origins, both of the people it describes and of itself qua text. The narratalogical *mythe fondateur* of a unified artistic consciousness is exposed by the constant narrative shifts, contradictions and borrowings, whilst the history of pre-colonial history of Africa, in as far as
it is discernible at all, is brutally denuded of the prelapsarian status to which Senghor and other negritude writers would elevate it.

This critique is continued in ‘La nuit des géants’, the lengthy third section of the novel, particularly in the section concerning the German anthropologist Fritz Shrobénius. This character is obviously based on Leo Frobenius, whose *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* (1936) was very influential in the development of negritude. Frobenius was one of the first European writers to insist upon the existence of high culture in pre-colonial Africa. He believed that civilization was ‘une force antérieure à l’humanité’ (Césaire 1941, 27) which he termed Païdeuma. This Païdeuma had two manifestations: *la civilisation éthiopienne* and *la civilisation hamitique*. Frobenius believed that *la civilisation éthiopienne* was a discrete, unitary cultural entity: ‘Je ne connais aucun peuple du Nord qui se puisse comparer à ces primitifs pour l’unité de civilisation’ (Césaire 1941, 32). Suzanne Césaire describes this culture in the following terms:

La civilisation éthiopienne est liée à la plante, au cycle végétatif.

Elle est rêveuse, toute repliée sur soi, mystique, L’Ethiopien ne cherche pas à comprendre les phénomènes extérieurs à lui. Il se laisse vivre, d’une vie identique à celle de la plante confiant dans la continuité de la vie: germer, pousser, fleurir, donner des fruits et le cycle recommence. Poésie vécue, sentie profondément, que l’éthiopien n’est capable d’exprimer, de projeter en dehors. (1941, 30)

Ouologuem’s Shrobénius, determined to find ‘un sens métaphysique à tout’ (Ouologuem 1968, 102), describes African culture in similar terms to Césaire/Frobenius:

La plante, poursuivait Shrobénius, germe, porte son fruit, meurt, et renaît quand la semence germe. La lune se lève croît jusqu’à être pleine, pâlit, décroît et disparaît, pour reparaître à nouveau. Le destin de l’homme, tout ainsi que celui de l’art nègre, n’est pas différent: comme le graine et l’astre le jeu symbolique de cet art est

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10 Huggan (1994) suggests that in addition to Frobenius the character of Shrobénius is also a composite of the ethnographers Fritz Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt.
dévoré par la terre et renaît sanctifié [...] (Ouologuem 1968, 110)

He also has a similar view of African history to Frobenius:

Il a fallu que l’impérialisme blanc s’infiltrât là, avec sa violence, son matérialisme colonisateur, pour que ce peuple si civilisé, brusquement dégringolât à l’état sauvage, se vit taxé de cannibalisme, de primitivisme, alors qu’au contraire — témoins: la splendeur de son art —, la grandeur des empires du Moyen Age constituait la visage vrai de l’Afrique, sage, belle, riche, ordonnée, non violente et puissante tout autant qu’humaniste [...] (Ouologuem 1968, 111)

But the history that Le Devoir de violence has displayed to us is not at all like this. It is dark, violent and disjunctive and its témoins, Ouologuem included, are unreliable and discordant. Shrobénius is a fraud, a ‘marchand-confectionneur d’idéologie’ (Ouologuem 1968, 111), whose lofty project is touched by cynicism:

d’une part il mystifia son pays, qui, enchanté, le jucha sur une haute chair sorbonnicale, et, d’autre part, il exploita la sentimentalité négrillade — par trop heureuse de s’entendre dire par un Blanc que ‘l’Afrique était ventre du monde et berceau de la civilisation.’ (Ouologuem 1968, 111)

The romanticized account of African history/culture offered by Shrobénius/Frobenius is presented here as a fraudulent invention, a mystification designed to exploit the sentimentality and cultural vanity of the African people. Inevitably, there are winners and losers in this process. Saïf, who sells real and counterfeit artefacts to Shrobénius at great profit, is as always, one of the winners. While the losers are the négraille, who

offrit par tonnes, conséquemment et gratis, masques et trésors artistiques aux acolytes de la ‘shrobéniusologie’. Ah...Seigneur, une larme pour la mentalité célèbrement bon enfant de la négraille! Seigneur...par pitié!...Makari! makari! (Ouologuem 1968, 111)

Shrobénius perpetrates both literal and symbolic theft (or plagiary), re-appropriating and transforming Nakemian history for his own ends. Nor is his theorizing separable from the physical violence that characterizes the novel.
While Shrobénius busies himself with abstract invention, his daughter Sonia addresses herself to the more corporeal task of seducing Saïf’s son Madoubo. Their love making is spied upon by Sankolo, one of Saïf’s thugs, who, surprised in a masturbatory frenzy by his fiancée Awa, brutally murders her. He, in his turn, is observed by Kassoumi, who denounces him, thus initiating a cycle of revenge whose indirect consequence will be the election of Kassoumi’s son Raymond-Spartacus to the Assemblée Nationale.

This incident allows Ouologuem to extend his critique to the doctrines of political nationalism. After the second world war, ‘il avait soufflé sur le Nakem-Ziuko un courant d’émancipation’ (Ouologuem 1968, 188). The French grant to their colony a limited degree of autonomy and the right to elect their own député to the Assemblée Nationale. What seems to be part of an enlightened progression towards self-determination is soon revealed to be a cynical ploy, both on the part of the French, for whom the measures are ‘la traduction législative du mot d’ordre fameux [...] : “Lâchons l’Asie, gardons l’Afrique!”’ (Ouologuem 1968, 188), and for Saïf and the Nakemian aristocracy, who

prétètèrent coopérer avec les Flençèsssi, plaçant en avant les rejetons même de la civilisation française: les fils de serfs, formés à l’école chrétienne et missionnaire, à travers lesquels, défendant ses intérêts au sein de l’Assemblée Nationale à Paris, la tradition nakem gouvernerait. Amoul bop toubab, makoul fallé! (Ouologuem 1968, 188)

Saïf contrives to have Raymond-Spartacus, who has been educated in France, put forward as the candidate for the Assemblée, calculating that:

Choisir dans ces conditions Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi, c’était combler le peuple s’exaltant à l’abreuvoir des destinées prodigieuses, et flatter le Blanc qui piaillerait avoir civilisée son sous-développé: Ouhoum! gollè wari! (Ouologuem 1968, 189-90)

Despite the rhetoric of progressive politics the reality is that Saïf remains firmly in control. Raymond-Spartacus, believing in his own propaganda and the power of his French degrees thinks that he will be able to control the colony’s destiny, but he has miscalculated:
The emerging nation-state is merely a discursive mask for the continuing domination of the already powerful, a re-manifestation of the will to power that underwrites all political activity and that requires the ascendancy of the individual over the collective. This, Saïf suggests in conversation with Bishop Henry, is the essence of political relations:

L'homme est dans l'histoire et l'histoire dans la politique. Nous sommes déchirés par la politique. Il n'y a ni solidarité ni pureté possible. (Ouologuem 1968, 201)

The totalizing discourses of culture or politics do not conform to any underlying reality. Such discourses suggest a meta-entity, a coherent collective identity, where in truth there are only individuals locked in a savage battle for mastery.

Political nationalism and the romanticism of negritude are singled out for extensive criticism only because, as we have seen in previous chapters, these were the two most prevalent discursive strategies pertaining to the construction of a unified cultural identity in postcolonial Africa. For Ouologuem, these monolithic discourses are not merely insufficient to represent the realities of cultural life, but are acts of deliberate bad faith, false representations designed to perpetuate particular power structures, whilst masking the violent realities of human interaction.

However, this falsity is not distinctive to the specific doctrines of negritude or nationalism. It is a feature of any discourse attempting to postulate or characterize a collective identity that develops from a founding point d'origine or cultural root. Ouologuem's critique of this conception of cultural origin is, as we have seen, double pronged. He employs a narrative technique that calls attention both to the unreliability of historical testimony and to its own
inauthenticity, whilst depicting a culture that is generated by a fragmented process of disjunction, invasion and war. So the only discernible roots this culture has are acts of violence, both physical and symbolic. Any attempt to represent culture perpetuates this brutality, as such discourses can only be created through the violent reappropriation of history (of the sort practised by Shrobenius). Again there is a conjunction of form and content, as the plagiarism through which Ouologuem constructs his novel is itself a form of violence perpetrated on other texts (Lack 1995). It is unsurprising, then, that Miller, perhaps the most perceptive writer on Ouologuem, concludes bleakly that

_Le Devoir de violence_, both in its narrative method and its narrated content, posits destructive violence and theft as origin itself, and interprets cultural roots cynically, as the result of invasion and contamination. (Miller 1983, 64)

He thus agrees with Soyinka’s equally gloomy conclusion that _Le Devoir de violence_ is ‘a fiercely partisan book on behalf of an immense historic vacuum’ (Soyinka 1976, 104). It would appear then that _Le Devoir_ is an unremittingly negative book. Soyinka comments of Ouologuem that ‘the positive does not engage his re-creative attention’ (1976, 106), his approach is one of ‘total and uncompromising rejection’ (1976, 105), written from a stance of pure and unadulterated opposition. In this schema, collective identity is a mechanism through which the powerful exploit the weak and culture is a malicious fantasy directed to the same ends. Any discourse which tends towards the production of these concepts is, by its very nature, a fraudulent mythology.

Towards the end of the novel, Bishop Henry outlines the parable of a Chinese game, ‘le trait d’union’. In this game the legs of two birds are attached by a cord. The birds are released and, believing they are free, they fly off in different directions. Before they have got very far, however, the rope suddenly tautens and the birds are killed. The bishop concludes that ‘L’humanité est une volaille de ce genre. Nous sommes tous victimes de ce jeu; séparés mais liés de force’ (Ouologuem 1968, 194). Miller takes this game to be a paradigmatic encapsulation of Ouologuem’s philosophy:
The Chinese game describes Ouologuem’s vision of the world as a whole: a forced linking of unwilling opposites, which proceed to tear each other apart. (Miller 1985, 237)

So human beings are locked in an inescapable cycle of violence and mutual destruction – *Le Devoir de violence*. This is the reality of social relations. Cultural identity is no more than a mystification produced by the politics of this dialectic.

This negative interpretation of Ouologuem is convincing and widely held. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a close reading of *Le Devoir de violence* does offer other possibilities besides this relentless nihilism. I do not wish to suggest that the novel has a secret positive agenda. However, I do wish to argue that *Le Devoir* opens the door for a radical, hybrid account of cultural identity, even if in the end, it turns away from it. We have seen how Ouologuem deconstructs cultural and political doxa. In Barthesian terms he exposes the natural as artificial, showing that the ‘realities’ of cultural identity, of the *racine unique*, are flimsy discursive constructs. Once he has savagely demolished those constructs he believes to be based on bad faith (negritude, nationalism etc.) the field is open for a recasting of collective identity. It is true that the way in which Ouologuem does this is, as we have seen, overwhelmingly negative, but at least it is new. Ouologuem breaks the (falsifying) discursive links that bind individuals into a collective and replaces them with his own links of violence and coercion, the *trait d’union*. However, the first part of this process does not entail the second. There is here a moment of possibility. Somewhere in between Ouologuem’s deconstructive project and his negative vision of the world, in the interstices of disjunction and violent union, is a space in which cultural identity may be positively reinscribed.

As we shall see later, contemporary writers like Sony Labou Tansi or Werewere Liking take up the challenge to search out such a reinscription, to find a way of (re)representing cultural identity that is sufficiently mobile to evade Ouologuem’s accusations of falsification and fraudulence.
For the moment, however, I would like to look at how a similar set of issues is treated in another classic francophone African text published in 1968, *Les Soleils des indépendances*, by the Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma. Like *Le Devoir de violence*, *Les Soleils des indépendances* is often considered a relentlessly negative vision of the postcolonial African nation. Unlike Ouologuem, however, some aspects of Kourouma’s narrative technique may be seen as constructive rather than simply destructive.

Ahmadou Kourouma was born in Côte d’Ivoire in 1927, was a student activist in Bamako and was forced to serve in the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in Indochina for three years. In 1960 he returned to Côte d’Ivoire but was imprisoned in 1963 for his part in an imagined plot against Houphouët-Boigny. After his release he wrote *Les Soleils des indépendances* as a protest and the novel was eventually published in Canada in 1968. The production of Kourouma’s only play *Le Diseur de vérité* in 1974 saw him fall out of favour with Houphouët-Boigny again and he went into exile. He worked abroad as an insurance actuary until 1994 when he returned to Côte d’Ivoire. He did not publish another novel until 1990.

*Les Soleils des indépendances* tells the story of Fama, a malinké aristocrat living in the independent Côte des Ebènes (standing in for the Côte d’Ivoire). Fama is the hereditary prince of the Horodougou region in the north of the country and the novel dramatizes his inability to adapt to the politics and culture of the postcolonial era. Fama has been deprived of his rightful station first by the colonial administration whose authority he refuses to accept and then by the independent government on the grounds of his illiteracy. As the book opens we find him living effectively as a beggar, part of a group of malinké elders who survive on the alms distributed at funerals. This misery is compounded by his deteriorating relationship with his wife Salimata. The couple are childless and despite the fact that Fama’s relationships with other women have failed to produce offspring the assumption is that it is Salimata who is sterile. Salimata in turn is haunted both by her childlessness and by the memories of the
circumcision she underwent at puberty and her subsequent rape by the féticheur.

The 'plot' of the novel really gets going when Fama learns of the death of his cousin Lacina who has usurped his position as chief of Horodougou. Fama travels back to his native village of Togobala, now in the neighbouring republic of Nikinai, to oversee the funeral. When he arrives at the village he is encouraged by his old family retainers, Diamourou the griot and Balla the féticheur, to stay and reclaim his rightful position as chief. The village elders rig a meeting of the ruling party's local committee so that Fama will remain 'chef coutumier' (Kourouma 1968, 136).

Against all advice, Fama returns to the capital to set his affairs in order, taking with him his new wife Mariam (Lacina's widow). Domestic conflict soon erupts between Mariam and Salimata which Fama increasingly seeks to avoid by immersing himself in subversive politics. Eventually he is arrested and sentenced to twenty years hard labour. Some time later all political prisoners are released by presidential decree, but Fama ignores the subsequent festivities and sets off alone for Horodougou, where he intends to die. He is mortally wounded at the border and, as the novel closes, his prostrate corpse is rushed by ambulance to Togobala.

The novel's politics appear to be fiercely critical of the postcolonial state. For Fama and, it is implied, for many others the condition of postcolonialism is one of decline and degradation. This is announced early in the novel by Fama's membership of the band of mendicant professional mourners:

Les vieux Malinké, ceux qui ne vendent plus parce que ruinés par les Indépendances (et Allah seul peut compter le nombre de vieux marchands ruinés par les Indépendances dans la capitale!) 'travaillent' tous dans les obsèques et les funérailles. De véritable professionnels! […]

Fama Doumbouya! Vrai Doumbouya, père Doumbouya, mère Doumbouya dernier et légitime descendent des princes Doumbouya du Horodougou. Totem panthère, était un 'vautour'.

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Un prince Doumbouya? Totem panthère faisait bande avec les hyènes. Ah! les soleils des Indépendances. (Kourouma 1968, 11)

Despite the fact that Fama was politically active in the struggle for independence, the new nation has little use for him: ‘les Indépendances une fois acquises, Fama fut oublié et jeté aux mouches [...]’ (Kourouma 1968, 24). For Fama, independence, to an even greater extent than colonialism, has systematically destroyed what is essential in malinké culture:

L’important pour le Malinké est la liberté du négoce. Et les français étaient aussi et surtout la liberté du négoce qui fait le grand Dioula, le Malinké prospère. Le négoce et la guerre, c’est avec ou sur les deux que la race malinké comme un homme entendait, marchait, voyait, respirait, les deux étaient à la fois ses deux pieds, ses deux yeux, ses oreilles et ses reins. La colonisation a banni et tué la guerre mais favorisé le négoce, les Indépendances ont cassé le négoce et la guerre ne venait pas. Et l’espace malinké, les tribus, la terre, la civilisation se meurent, percluses, sourdes et aveugles...et stériles.
C’est pourquoi, à tremper dans la sauce salée à son goût, Fama aurait choisi la colonisation [...]. (Kourouma 1968, 23)

Within this scenario Fama’s own sterility is both constitutive and symbolic of the fact that for a man like him ‘[qui] avait conservé les bonnes habitudes’ (Kourouma 1968, 17) independence has delivered ‘Rien que la carte d’identité et celle du parti unique’ (Kourouma 1968, 25). Throughout the text we find a vehement condemnation of ‘la bâtardise des Indépendances’ (Kourouma 1968, 110) mixed with a nostalgia for the past glories of malinké civilization. ‘Être le chef de la tribu, avant la conquête des Toubabs, quelle grand honneur, quelle puissance cela représentait!’(Kourouma 1968, 89); and a despairing awareness of its present decline: ‘Dans ce monde renversé cet honneur sans moyen, serpent sans tête, revenait à Fama. La puissance d’un chef d’affamés n’est autre chose que la famine et une gourde de soucis’ (Kourouma 1968, 89).

Fama desperately desires the restitution of this pre-colonial order and, briefly, in Togobala it appears as though some semblance of this may be achieved:
Au petit de ce matin d’harmattan, au seuil de palais des Doumbouya, un moment, un monde légitime plana. Les saleurs tournaient. Fama tenait le pouvoir comme si la mendicité, le mariage avec une stérile, la bâtardise des Indépendances, toute sa vie passée et les soucis présents n’avaient jamais existé. (Kourouma 1968, 110)

This is an illusion of course. Even in Togobala the world has changed irrevocably and beyond Fama’s comprehension. Even to get to Horodougou he must now cross the border between two states: ‘Fama étranger ne pouvait traverser sans une carte d’identité’ (Kourouma 1968, 101). Once in the village he is dependent not only on compromise with the Party’s local committee, but also humiliatingly on the machinations and financial support of his two former slaves ‘lui le dernier Doumbouya, devint parasite de ses serviteurs! C’était piteux, incroyable, honteux!’ (Kourouma 1968, 127). So even here in the heartland the clock cannot be turned back and modernity makes its unwelcome presence felt. Christopher Miller argues that,

The thematic outline of Les Soleils des indépendances derives from the impossibility of a return to the conditions of pure Mande autonomy and the necessity to deal with the politics of independence and francophonie. (1990, 207)

Certainly the impossibility of this return and Fama’s inability to cope with modern politics seem to be underlined by his destruction at the end of the novel. Attempting to return to Togobala, Fama is halted at the frontier which has been closed. Undeterred, he crosses the bridge across the border anyway, shouting his defiance to the guards: “Regardez Fama! Regardez le mari de Salimata! Voyez-moi, fils de bâtards, fils d’esclaves! Regardez-moi partir!” (Kourouma 1968, 190). To evade capture Fama leaps from the bridge to the crocodile-infested river below confident that ‘Les caïmans sacrés du Horodougou n’oseront s’attaquer au dernier descendant des Doumbouya’ (Kourouma 1968, 191). Sadly Fama’s confidence is misplaced and he is fatally wounded.

This orientation towards a pre-colonial malinké past has lead some critics to view the novel as overwhelmingly negative, or ideologically inadequate. Miller
quotes Barthélemy Kotchy who echoes Soyinka’s criticism of Ouologuem when he says that the novel ‘simply points to a failure’ and Harris Memel-Foté who describes Les Soleils des indépendances as ‘the nostalgic, reactionary and impotent position of an old social class, the aristocracy, that history has stripped of its economic, political and intellectual prerogatives’ (Miller 1990, 231-32). For Miller, however,

there is no ‘ideological weakness’ within this point of view, nor any great ambiguity: it is a clearly identifiable, class- and caste-based nostalgia for the pre-colonial period. (Miller 1990, 239).

The novel is fundamentally ‘ethnocentric’ because ‘the Mande is simply the center of the world’ and because ‘it insists on ethnicity as the basis for knowledge and behavior’ (Miller 1990, 204). Such ethnocentrism is far from politically neutral as it contradicts the ideology of the postcolonial nation which is to insist on the supremacy of national over ethnic identity.

A degree of caution is called for here, as Miller admits. Many of the critiques of postcolonial modernity cited above are in fact Fama’s thoughts represented as style indirect libre and his voice is just one amongst many offered by the text. On the first page of the novel, for instance, we are introduced to a narrative voice which addresses the reader directly: ‘Vous paraissez sceptique! Eh bien, moi, je vous le jure [...]’ (Kourouma 1968, 9), and which continues to comment wryly on Fama’s actions throughout the book. The perspectives of other characters such as Balla and, notably, Salimata are also represented. We should be wary then of assuming that the novel’s politics are entirely concurrent with Fama’s. This said, the narrative voice never contradicts Fama’s view of postcolonial politics and seems often to concur with it. In the instance I cited above, for example,

Les vieux Malinké, ceux qui ne vendent plus parce que ruinés par les Indépendances (et Allah seul peut compter le nombre de vieux marchands ruinés par les Indépendances dans la capitale!) ‘travaillent’ tous dans les obsèques et les funérailles. De véritable professionnels! (Kourouma 1968, 11)
The comment in parentheses is clearly that of the narrator. Moreover, the novel does portray to us some of the moral corruption of the new era, most strikingly when Salimata is robbed by the beggars she has tried to help and when Fama is imprisoned after a sham trial. The head of state is also an effective parody of Houphouët-Boigny. At the same time, however, the novel’s polyphonic composition does allow the articulation of alternative interpretations. The narrator is frequently scathing about the aspirations of those who would return to a state of ‘pure Mande autonomy’:

Au soir de leur vie les deux vieillards œuvraient à la réhabilitation de la chefferie, au retour d’un monde légitime. Malheureusement, Togobala, les Doumbouya et même le Horodougou ne valaient pas en Afrique un grain dans un sac de fonios. Qu’importe, ils y croyaient, ils s’y employaient. (Kourouma 1968, 113)

The phrase ‘un monde légitime’ is used more than once to describe the Mande past, but its inclusion here in a context of delusion serves to ironize its standing. The claim for legitimacy is further undermined by the lengthy and horrific description of Salimata’s circumcision, her rape by Tiécoura the féticheur and the trauma of her first marriage. Before her excision Salimata’s mother tells her: ‘Ce n’est pas seulement la fête... c’est aussi une grande chose, un grand événement ayant une grande signification’ (Kourouma 1968, 34). Salimata’s interior monologue, again represented to us in *style indirect libre*, immediately questions this analysis: ‘Mais quelle grande signification?’ In doing so Salimata not only questions the practice of clitoridectomy, she also challenges the ability of traditional Mande cultural practice to make sense of the world. Salimata’s story, which comprises most of the novel’s third chapter, suggests both that the traditional malinké world may not always have been so desirable for everyone and that certain aspects of it may be simply meaningless. The status of ‘le monde légitime’ is thus undermined both ideologically and epistemologically. Moreover, while we know that for Fama colonialism and independence are effectively equivalent, ‘des enfants de la même couche’ (Kourouma 1968, 132), Salimata’s identification of the corrupt marabout who tries to rape her with Tiécoura the féticheur suggests that for
certain classes of people (women, slaves) the postcolonial era is merely perpetuating a cycle of oppression and exploitation that has always existed.

*Les Soleils des indépendances* can be seen as dialogic in as far as it offers a certain ideological plurality. For Christopher Miller, however, this 'dialogical entropy' is outweighed by the novel's ending. As Fama dies he sees a vision of himself mounted on a white charger and 'tout s'arrange doux et calme' (Kourouma 1968, 196). The novel closes on a circular note that echoes its beginning:

> Un malinké était mort. Suivront les jours jusqu'au septième jour et les funérailles du septième jour, puis se succéderont les semaines et arrivera le quarantième jour et frapperont les funérailles du quarantième jour et...

(Kourouma 1968, 196)

In Miller's view this ending means that

> Ethnocentrism wins in the discourse of the novel even if it has lost in the dramatic political outcome. A Mande utopia has been lost on earth, but the implication is that it survives in the mind. Politics will belong to the new structures, but culture will remain unchanged. (1990, 239)

This is a reasonable reading of the novel's conclusion, but it is not self-evident that it outweighs the text's earlier ambiguity. In any case we could read the ending quite differently, seeing Fama's vision as the last in a series of ironically presented delusions and the final paragraph as indicating the inevitable continuation of malinké decline both politically and culturally. Interpretation of this passage rests of course with the individual reader, but in either case the novel's political economy may be schematized roughly as follows: the postcolonial era is one of moral corruption which inspires nostalgia for a pre-colonial malinké world order which may be to a greater or lesser extent imperfect, but which cannot in any case be recovered. Put like this the novel does, like *Le Devoir de violence*, seem to occupy a position of extreme ideological nihilism. Such a comparison may, however, be misleading. It is true that *Les Soleils des indépendances* is politically pessimistic, but there are some crucial differences between the two novels. The valorization of malinké culture which
it is possible to extract from Kourouma’s text is precisely the sort of gesture that Ouologuem is keen to expose as a dangerous mystification. More significantly, while Ouologuem’s narratological technique closely mirrors his view of cultural relations as intrinsically violent, Kourouma’s play with language and the cultural position his text comes to occupy extend the novel’s dialogic possibilities in interesting directions.

One of the features of *Les Soleils des indépendances* which was most revolutionary and which has aroused the most comment from critics is Kourouma’s radical transformation of the French language. We have already observed how the use of French has both a causal and an emblematic relation to the cultural alienation experienced by many African writers. Expressions of this have ranged from the despair of Leon Laleau’s attempt to ‘apprivoiser, avec des mots de France/Ce cœur qui m’est venu de Sénégal?’ (Senghor, 1948, 108) to the irony of Sembène’s ‘Je vous remercie tous de m’avoir donné la parole, dit-il en oulof’ (1960, 336). I have already argued that the problem here is not simply one of French hindering the expression of an ‘authentic’ African identity, but of it marking a prior displacement from that identity. In the postcolonial era the politics of using French become if anything more complex, with an increasing emphasis on ‘francophonie’ as an international community of French-speaking nations. The idea of francophonie is an inherently ambiguous one. On one hand it signals a system of exchange and dialogism in that the French language is no longer the exclusive property of a metropolitan France which is forced to ‘share’ it with other nations. On the other hand, for these other countries the use of French signals an ongoing set of dependences (cultural and commercial) on France. The question of what it means to write Africa in French thus remains a complex one. *Les Soleils des indépendances* has always been positioned at the heart of this debate. The novel was published by the Presses de l’université de Montréal after winning the *Prix de la Francité*, a Canadian initiative designed precisely to promote a form of francophonie (‘la francité’) which was not culturally dependent on metropolitan France.
Kourouma himself is well aware of the difficulties faced by an African author writing in French: ‘il y a bien sûr un “mariage” contre nature entre la langue française et la pensée africaine, mais l’intellectuel africain n’a que cet outil à sa disposition et il faut bien qu’il s’en serve’ (cited in Miller 1990, 243). Unlike most of the writers we have looked at so far, however, Kourouma does not accept that one must take this tool just as one finds it. ‘Nous faisons des efforts pour africaniser le français’ (cited in Borgamano 1998, 37). Whereas most African writers in the period up to 1968 had employed a more or less classical form of the French language, Kourouma uses French as a vehicle to translate a specifically malinké pattern of thought: ‘J’ai pensé en malinké et écrit en français en prenant une liberté que j’estime naturelle avec la langue classique’ (cited in Miller 1990, 202). The French language is thus transformed, permeated with malinké words, phrases and structures:

J’ai entrepris de ‘malinkiser’ le français, d’adopter des tournures particulières, archaïques, permettant de mieux traduire la façon d’agir et de penser des Africains. (Kourouma 2000b, 99)

This fits in with the ideological reading of the text given by Miller in which malinké culture is posited as the ‘authentic’ source of meaning. As we have seen, though, the novel’s politics are potentially more ambiguous than this and in the case of language too we find a complex set of negotiations and compromises. Kourouma’s technique ‘africanizes’ French but it also fundamentally alters the malinké original. This point is well illustrated in Jean Pierre Makouta M’boukou’s discussion of Les Soleils des indépendances in his Introduction à l’étude du roman négro-africain de langue française (1980). M’boukou agrees that Kourouma’s work is effectively a transcription from malinké into French and that

cette libre transcription qui dispense l’écrivain de toute fidélité à la langue originelle a fait dire que Ahmadou Kourouma créait une langue nouvelle, qu’il renouvelait un certain nombre d’usages littéraires. (M’boukou 1980, 303)

He identifies three ‘levels’ of stylistic innovation in Kourouma’s work. The first level is a technically ‘incorrect’ use of French. M’Boukou picks out Kourouma’s
use of the word *plein*, such as when he says ‘en pleine musulmane’ instead of ‘en parfaite musulmane’, or when he uses *plein* as an adjective in the phrase ‘le petit marché frappait son plein vacarme’. He also identifies the transitive use of intransitive verbs like *dormir*, ‘la nuit mal dormie’ and the direct transcription of malinké usages which are not correct in French such as ‘coucher sa favorite parmi cent épouses’ instead of ‘coucher avec sa favorite’.

The second level of style involves ‘calques’ in which the influence of malinké creates an original though not ‘incorrect’ use of French. Examples include the treatment of dates, so that we get ‘Les jours passèrent qui suivirent le jour des obsèques jusqu’au septième jour’ instead of ‘le septième jour après les obsèques’, or the identification of people as in this example: ‘Fama Doumbouya! Vrai Doumbouya, père Doumbouya, mère Doumbouya, totem panthère’ where

La structure sujet + actualisateur + prédicat nominal n’est pas française d’origine dans le roman d’Ahmadou Kourouma; elle est un calque de la structure négro-africaine: Nominal + actualisateur + nominal à laquelle les langues ont recours pour exprimer les valences ethniques (M’boukou 1980, 308)

It is important to note that in both these cases the calque may be seen to add a level of connotation that might be lacking in ‘standard’ French.

M’boukou’s third level of style involves the creation of completely original French usages that are not based on malinké.

Ici l’auteur est complètement dégagé des liens de la langue maternelle pour n’être plus que lui-même. Même lorsque le point de départ est une image de sa langue, il la réécrit de manière si originale que l’image s’en trouve complètement renouvelée, transfigurée. (M’boukou 1980, 311)

This is an important point because it signals the fact that while Kourouma is transforming the French language he is also simultaneously and necessarily altering malinké. This is further emphasized as M’boukou goes on to argue that
Kourouma’s transformations of the French language are thus dependent on the constant influence of malinké in the text:

La présence réelle de la langue maternelle est inexistante. Et pourtant celle-ci affleure partout, sous-tendant chaque phrase, chaque paragraphe, chaque page, chaque chapitre, tout le roman, enfin. (M’boukou 1980, 312)

M’boukou concludes, therefore that like ‘beaucoup d’écrivains négro-africains Kourouma ‘parle [...] sa langue en français’ (1980, 312). This is an attractive idea but it requires some interrogation. The claim that Les Soleils des indépendances was ‘pensés en malinké et traduits en français’ (Borgamano 1998, 38) seems to imply that the ideal version of the novel (in both the platonic and colloquial sense) would be in malinké. But could such a text exist? For Kourouma a novel in malinké is not a practical option:

Pas en tous cas pour moi. Je ne l’écris pas bien, mon malinké n’est pas assez développé. Un roman en malinké n’aura pas assez de lecteurs. Très peu de Malinkés lisent actuellement leur langue. (cited in Borgamano 1998, 37)

Quite aside from these practical issues, M’boukou’s analysis demonstrates that what is unique in Kourouma’s reinvention of French is precisely predicated upon the fact that it is also a transformation of the malinké: ‘Plus il échappe aux schémas linguistiques de la langue maternelle [...] plus il crée une langue française personnelle’ (M’boukou 1980, 311). The ‘original’ malinké language thought-text cannot be recovered for it no longer exists. It is inevitably lost in the process of ‘translation’ and cannot be accurately reconstructed from the published text. Textually, Kourouma’s novel is, as is often argued, a form of malinké-français, but it is also and crucially a form of non-malinké-non-français. It is both and neither, a genuinely hybrid form.
There is a correspondence between this interplay of the two languages and the novel’s political/ideological orientation. The malinké text is irrecoverable as are pre-colonial malinke cultural and political autonomy, any attempt to turn back the clock can end only in distortion and inaccuracy. As in the political arena, it is the influence of Europe that initiates this dilution of pure malinké. The crucial difference, however, is that while in the novel’s ideological economy the move away from a pure malinké identity is characterized by decay, sterility and death, in terms of the novel’s linguistic politics it is characterized by reinvention, innovation and beauty. The novel’s political pessimism is neatly inverted by the creation of a new and beautiful hybrid language. This form of positive linguistic play both reflects and contributes to the more ambiguous ideological reading of the novel I have outlined above.

This ambiguity is further demonstrated by the novel’s cultural ‘stance’. As we have seen, malinké culture is central to the novel’s politics, but it also operates as an epistemological value. To be malinké in this text is quite simply to understand the world properly. Christopher Miller argues that Les Soleils des indépendances ‘insists on ethnicity as the basis for knowledge and behavior’ (1990, 204). This can be seen in the first page of the novel. As the ghost of Ibrahima Koné returns to his natal village we are told that: ‘Personne ne s’était mépris. “Ibrahima Koné a fini, c’est son ombre”, s’était-on dit’ (Kourouma 1968, 9). ‘No-one’, in this context is clearly, as Miller points out, no-one malinké. To be malinké then is to understand the world correctly, to ‘read’ it properly. It is made quite clear, however, that the novel is addressed to a non-malinké audience, one that cannot be expected to understand. The narrator frequently addresses the reader directly and at one point he says: ‘vous ne le savez pas parce que vous n’êtes pas Malinké’ (Kourouma 1968, 141). This makes the matter quite clear, the reader is not malinké and cannot therefore be expected to fully understand the conceptual and cultural framework upon which the novel is constructed. Again therefore we find an ambiguity, the only reader who can properly understand the text is not the reader who will read it. This is reinforced of course by the fact that the language in which it could be
addressed to such a reader (malinké) is not the language the text is actually written in.

So on three levels the text seems to centre upon impossibility. Politically it valorizes a 'pure' malinké culture to which there can be no return. Linguistically it is based upon a 'pure' malinké text which cannot be recovered. Finally, it relies on the comprehension of a malinké reader to whom it cannot be addressed. In each of these cases, however, a degree of ambiguity is created. As we have seen, the novel’s heteroglossic narrative procedure complicates its ideological perspective. Similarly the centrality of the malinké language is displaced, by the text’s construction of a malinké-français/non-malinké-non-français discourse. This discourse addresses an audience that is required to comprehend the text through a malinké epistemological optic, to be fundamentally engaged with the malinké world, but which crucially is not quite of it. In all these ways the novel creates a dialogue between the malinké and the non-malinké. Christopher Miller’s claim, then, that 'the Mande is simply the center of the world in Les Soleils des indépendances' (1990, 204) can be somewhat modified. Politically and discursively malinké culture operates as a primary influence on Les Soleils des indépendances, but as a text, the novel necessarily creates a cultural space which is neither purely malinké, nor purely anything else. This space is hybrid and dialogic, but most importantly of all it is, again, new.

The points of comparison and divergence between Le Devoir de violence and Les Soleils des indépendances now come into a clearer focus. Whereas Ouologuem rewrites cultural identity as a mystification designed to obscure the essentially violent nature of social relations, Kourouma believes in the value and reality of cultural identity, but portrays it as irredeemably degraded in the postcolonial context. Both novels share a degree of nihilism, then, although they differ in that Kourouma’s nihilism derives from the impossibility of a return to cultural roots, where Ouologuem does not believe in their existence. The most crucial difference is that Ouologuem reacts with a project that is both textually and ideologically destructive. Kourouma on the other hand reacts by inventing a
culturally hybrid form which involves the creation of an innovative cultural artifact that mediates between the malinké and European influences that inform it. In this sense, though *Les Soleils des indépendances* may appear politically negative and reactionary, it is in fact an intrinsically progressive work that maps out the way in which a distinctive postcolonial African aesthetic may be achieved. One which allows the valorization of local cultural forms without descending into the sort of mystification Ouologuem is so keen to expose.

Kourouma has continued in this direction in his subsequent career. After *Les Soleils des indépendances* he published nothing else until *Monné: outrages et défis* in 1990. In recent years he has published prolifically with *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* in 1998 and *Allah n’est pas obligé* in 2000. These novels tackle very different themes, *Monné* for example is set during the period of colonial occupation in the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, we do see similarities with the issues raised in *Les Soleils des indépendances*. A brief example from *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* makes this clear. The novel tells the life story of Koyaga, the bloodthirsty dictator of the République du Golfe. It vividly critiques the excesses of the postcolonial African state and the use of such states as proxy fronts in the cold war. Traits of real leaders like Houphoët-Boigny (Côte d’Ivoire), Eyadema (Togo) and Sekou Touré (Guinea) are clearly discernible in the grotesque figure of Koyaga, and Kourouma confirms in an interview that the novel’s title is inspired by a story about Eyadema:

> Un jour un de ses partisans, originaire du même village que lui, m’a affirmé: ‘pour les élections, Eyadema n’a rien à craindre, car si les hommes refusaient de voter pour lui, les bêtes sauvages viendraient voter pour lui’. Et Eyadema était convaincu qu’effectivement les bêtes sauvages quitteraient la forêt pour venir voter pour lui. (Kourouma 2000b, 100)

In this novel too the world is represented through the perspective of a malinké cultural form. The novel is largely narrated by the *griot* or *sora* Bigo directly to Koyaga:

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Je dirai le récit purificatoire de votre vie de maître chasseur et de dictateur. Le récit purificatoire est appelé en malinké un *donsomana*. C’est une geste. Il est dit par un sora accompagné par un répondeur *cordoua*. Un cordoua est un initié en phase purificatoire, en phase cathartique. (Kourouma 1998, 10)

The rest of the novel follows the formal pattern of the *donsomana* with a recitation of Koyaga’s life over six evenings of storytelling. Yet despite the novel’s adherence to traditional structure – ‘La vénération de la tradition est une bonne chose’ (Kourouma 1998, 10) – we also see in the passage cited above how the novel has to explain ‘ethnographically’ the cultural practices it is based upon to a non-malinké reader. This ethnographic function recurs throughout the text: ‘Le donsomana, le genre littéraire donsomana exige qu’on parle du héros dès l’instant où son germe a été placé à la sein de sa maman’ (Kourouma 1998, 22); ‘Notre tradition en Afrique veut que le respect de la mère dépasse celui du père’ (Kourouma 1998, 39). As in *Les Soleils des indépendances* there is a dual focus here. Malinké culture is both central and displaced.

In both texts, then, Kourouma manages to create a cultural artifact that is both distinctively malinké and non-malinké. A model is thus proposed for the way in which different cultural positions (malinké, French) can co-exist and combine to form something new. The extent to which this can be linked to a positive political project remains ambiguous in Kourouma’s work. What is significant, however, is the way in which he attempts to formulate a language and an artistic practice that is sufficiently mobile and heteroglossic to describe the complex and plural cultural influences that operate on the postcolonial African subject.

In later chapters we shall see how the project initiated by Kourouma is taken further by writers like Sony Labou Tansi and Werewere Liking. For the moment it is worth noting that both Kourouma and Ouologuem use individual characters to act as an index of broader cultural trends. In the next chapter I would like to look at how women writers from West Africa work through the complexities of cultural identity in relation to the individual subject.
Chapter Five

One element shared by all of the texts we have examined so far is that they are written by men. To a large degree this is, unfortunately, an accurate reflection of the development of francophone African writing. Although Marie-Claire Matip had published her autobiography *Ngonda* as early as 1958, it was not until the 1970s that literary texts by francophone African novel began to appear in any great number. Among the key texts of that decade we might list Nafissatou Diallo’s *Du Tilène au plateau* (1975), Aminata Sow Fall’s *Le Revenant* (1976) and *La Grève de Battus* (1979) and most famously of all Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*. During the 1980s this literature continued to proliferate exponentially and some critics have identified its growth as the key literary phenomenon of that period. Amongst the important new writers to emerge were Ken Bugul, Werewere Liking and Calixthe Beyala. In the works of these authors we also see a significant shift of perspective as the predominantly autobiographical concerns and forms of the 1970s began to be replaced with more audacious fictional experimentation and broader social and political themes.

Increases in the production of women’s writing were not, however, matched with a corresponding increase in critical attention. Large studies of francophone African literature such as Chevrier’s *Littérature nègre* (1984) or Mohamadou Kane’s *Roman africain et traditions* (1982) give little space to literature by women. Writing in 1994 Florence Stratton argues that.

> In characterizing African literature, critics have ignored gender as a social and analytic category. Such characterizations operate to exclude women’s literary expression as part of African literature. (1994, 1)

and thus, ‘African women writers and their works have been rendered invisible in literary criticism ‘(Stratton 1994, 1). At the beginning of the twenty-first century this is, happily, no longer entirely true. Over the course of the 1990s a number of book length studies of African women’s writing have appeared. They include Irène Assiba d’Almeida’s *Francophone African Women Writers*:
Destroying the Emptiness of Silence (1994), Odile Cazenave’s Femmes rebelles: naissance d’un nouveau roman africain au féminin (1996) and Nicki Hitchcott’s Women Writers in Francophone Africa (1999). These critical texts establish what Hitchcott terms a ‘mini-canon’ of African women writers in which the key figures include Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala and Werewere Liking. We should not assume, however, that Stratton’s analysis no longer applies. All of these studies emphasize what Almeida terms a ‘prise d’écriture’ by African women in the face of an ongoing struggle to find a literary voice. This process is hampered both by the cultural and material constraints of patriarchy within Africa and by the reluctance of the literary establishment (African and European) to give equal prominence to women writers.

Stratton suggests some structural reasons why studies of African literature have tended to exclude women writers. She argues that ‘New Critical formalism has been the reigning point of view in African Literary studies since the 1960s […]’ (Stratton 1994, 4). New Criticism tends ‘to assess works written by women differently from those written by men’ (Stratton 1994, 5).

This is not surprising given that women’s texts are being assessed on the basis of standards established first by western then by African men writers, and it illustrates the extent to which African women writers have been alienated from the African literary tradition. (Stratton 1994, 5)

Stratton is concerned primarily with anglophone literature. Nevertheless, I would dispute her identification of New Criticism as the dominant mode of analysis. Instead, as I argued in chapter two African literature has generally been read from a marxist perspective as an expression of social reality and a political tool. Such a perspective is diametrically opposed to the New Critical emphasis on the formal analysis of a single text considered independently of its context of production. Stratton’s analysis is applicable, however, in as far as this too is a critical tradition which takes men’s texts as its primary points of evaluation. Moreover, Stratton is surely right when she goes on to argue that these forms of analysis are replaced by ‘a number of models which are subsumable under the rubric of historicist or cultural criticism […]’ (Stratton
This encompasses most forms of postcolonial criticism: 'None of these critics', Stratton claims 'treat gender as a socio-political category' (Stratton 1994, 6). Instead they tend to privilege other factors such as race (post)-coloniality or class.

As a result of the assimilation of gender into other categories [race, class & coloniality], the African/postcolonial subject (including the writing subject) is constructed as male in these models. (Stratton 1994, 7)

So analytic practice effaces the gender of the writing subject and thus obscures any issues arising in relation to that gender. The irony is that it does so even as it seeks to highlight other forms of inequality and domination, indeed it is precisely the concern with these other forms that serves to conceal gender. Of course culturalist or historicist criticism is not unaware of feminism. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin suggest that:

[women] share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women like postcolonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available 'tools' are those of the 'colonizer'. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989, 174-75)

This is not enough for Stratton who argues that 'this same logic requires that feminism be designated a western phenomenon' (Stratton 1994, 9), it is thus 'outside' the postcolonial and continues to be excluded as an analytic category in the consideration of African literature. She goes on to claim that the critical practice of *The Empire Writes Back* further illustrates this essentially masculine focus:

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* are [...] blatant [...] in their designation of the postcolonial subject and writer as male – a designation that exposes their inclusion, by name at least, of three women writers as a token gesture. (Stratton 1994, 9)
Whether this is a fair critique or not, Ashcroft and his co-writers do suggest a parallel with the way in which feminist thinkers like Cixous, Irigary or Kristeva have argued that language itself works to subjugate the feminine. Obviously all three of these writers have very different concerns and perspectives and we should be wary of assuming too great a degree of affinity between them. Indeed in the context of a study of francophone literature it is interesting to note the way in which these women who work in French and in France are almost universally categorized together as ‘French feminists’, despite the fact that not one of them is actually of French origin. Nevertheless, there are some points of concurrence in their thinking. All start with Lacan’s reading of Freud. As we have seen, for Lacan meaning is generated through a process of identification and differentiation. Because the subject’s entry into this Symbolic order is initiated by an Oedipal crisis of paternal interdiction, ‘le nom-de-père’, the primary signifier is, always and inevitably, the Phallus (Lacan 1966). This means that language and any conceptual system deriving from it (for Lacan this is all conceptual systems) necessarily construct the feminine as negative: that which is not the Phallus. Thus language is inherently ‘phallogocentric’ and the feminine is constantly excluded as the alien Other of the masculine norm.

The relegation of the feminine to the negative half of a binary pairing means that language does not fully allow for the conceptualization or expression of feminine experience and particularly of feminine sexuality. For this reason Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva all share a concern with the foundation of a specifically feminine mode of discursivity which will not be contaminated or appropriated by masculine discourse. They and others differ as to what exactly such an écriture feminine would consist of, but most commentators agree that it would have to privilege semiotic over symbolic meaning, and to operate as an internal disruption or interrogation of our conventional system of signification. As Kristeva argues, such a language could appear in the text as ‘cet espace sous-jacent à l’écrit [...] rythmique, déchaîné, irréductible à sa traduction verbale intelligible’ (1974, 29). This sort of writing, it is claimed, would be uniquely equipped to express the particular aspects of feminine experience, suppressed by the Symbolic code, within which they cannot be verbalized.
We need to be slightly cautious, however. Over the course of this study we have seen many times how careful we must be in applying western theories to non-western objects. Feminism is no exception, indeed it is an exemplary case. Chandra Mohanty warns us that:

The term feminism is itself questioned by many third world women. Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia. All of these factors, as well as the falsely homogeneous representation of the movement by the media have led to a very real suspicion of 'feminism' as a productive ground for struggle. (1991, 7)

She does not hesitate to describe the unexamined application of western feminism as a form of colonialism:

The definition of colonialism I wish to invoke here is a predominantly discursive one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by a particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject which take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the U.S. and Western Europe. (1991, 51-52)

So if we cannot simply transfer western feminists ideas to Africa, what might an African feminism look like? Carol Boyce Davies paraphrases Molara Ogundipe-Leslie when she identifies six specific burdens faced by women in Africa:

1) oppression from outside (foreign intrusions, colonial domination etc.); 2) heritage of tradition (feudal, slave-based, communal); 3) her own backwardness, a product of colonization and neo-colonialism and its concomitant poverty, ignorance etc.; 4) her men, weaned on centuries of male domination who will not willingly relinquish their power and privilege; 5) her race, because the international economic order is divided along race and class lines; 6) her self. (1986, 7)

From this Boyce Davies goes onto describe a seven-point categorization of African feminism. Underpinning all seven points is the principle that we need
to reconcile a valorization of women imported from western feminism with an awareness of and sympathy for the specificities of the African context:

an African feminist consciousness [...] acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women’s lives in African societies. (Boyce Davies 1986, 9)

African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women’s agendas. (Boyce Davies 1986, 9)

This sounds simple in theory, but in practice such a project inevitably generates disagreements and controversies, even amongst writers who tend to agree. Thus Irène Assiba d’Almeida who in general writes positively of Boyce Davies, reacts furiously when she together with the writer Buchi Emecheta suggests that polygamy may in certain circumstances be advantageous.

I am afraid that both Boyce Davies’s and Emecheta’s positions are those of intellectual academics who – like most of us – do not have to confront the problems of polygamy in their own lives. (D’Almeida 1994, 14)

D’Almeida also makes it very clear that the type of caution required in applying western feminist thinking to African women is even more necessary in feminist readings of African literature:

Any application of Western theory, however balanced and careful involves the imposition of a Eurocentric point of view [...].

This is not to say that Western approaches cannot yield productive results for readers whose cultural frame of reference is the European/American academic context. But it must be understood that this is not the context in which African women’s books were written or intended to be read. Readers should not, therefore, expect to find Derridean or Lacanian readings in this study. (D’Almeida 1994, 27)

Of course, in this study the reader will already have come across both Derridean and Lacanian readings and will thus conclude that I do not share
d’Almeida’s view here. As I have already argued, I believe that it is appropriate
to use western theoretical paradigms in a consideration of African literature,
providing it is done sensitively, precisely because this literature is already
positioning itself in a culturally interstitial space, partaking, as African cultures
have always done, of both local and global systems of meaning. Nicki Hitchcott
refers to her own work as ‘a dialogue between a Western feminist reader and a
corpus of work by ‘third world’ women’ (Hitchcott 1999, 11). I would go further
and argue that many of the texts concerned are themselves already involved in
such a dialogue. It is in this sense that African feminism and feminist readings
of African literature are exemplary for this study. As Boyce Davies and
Mohanty point out, feminism must pay attention to local configurations of
culture, but it must also inevitably adopt an international perspective in as far
as it values women as women. So feminism, by its very nature, mediates
between local and global.

All of the feminist critics I have referred to privilege writing as a privileged
activity through which women can create and express their identities. They talk
of a ‘prise d’écriture’, ‘destroying silence’, ‘finding a voice’, emphasizing ‘the
importance of writing in the production of self- and collective consciousness’
(Mohanty 1991, 33). By writing, women are able to articulate an identity that is
routinely suppressed in postcolonial African society and that would otherwise
be silent. This is not a completely unequivocal process. Christopher Miller
points out that in many West African cultures, silence is also presented as a
locus of political and personal power and speech is often associated with
inferior status. In both Oulof and Malinké culture, for example kings delegate
the function of speech (and thus of storytelling and of history) to a marginal
griot caste. So,

The process of coming to speech cannot wholly be explained as an
acquisition of power. Mande and Wolof ethnographies describe the
power of speech as a mixed blessing, one that throws suspicion on
the person using it. The relation of speech and silence does not
permit any facile valorization of either. There is no simple dualism
between the two, but rather a dialectic that demands attention to
specific gains and losses, according to context. (Miller 1990, 267)
This being granted, however, we shall see in the texts of African women writers that speech, at least some forms of speech, is overwhelmingly privileged above silence. It is also interesting to note that in Oulof/Malinké epistemology speech is often presented pejoratively as a feminine attribute, so it may be that for African women writers a 'prise d'écriture' also involves the re-appropriation of a negative stereotype. In any case, as Chandra Mohanty emphasizes, it clearly has a political dimension:

the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space of struggle and contestation about reality itself. (1991, 34)

This does not mean, however, that women's writing necessarily focuses on large-scale political events. Many critics are at pains to point out how women can challenge discursive hegemony through the intimate portrayal of marginalized identities. Odile Cazenave argues that:

Pour répondre à la marginalisation des femmes, et de la littérature féminine par les critiques masculins, les écrivains femmes ont, dans un premier temps, favorisé à dessein un certain type de personnages féminins mis en marge de la société africaine. Par ce biais, elles se sont créées un espace et un regard privilégiés, qui les autorisaient à une plus grande liberté (marge) d'expression et de critique de leur société. (1996, 22)

So when we examine the construction of feminine or feminist identity in African women's writing we are of necessity looking at the ways in which they construct identities that mediate between Africa and the west, between individual and collective and between personal and political. It is in this guise that I would like to examine the works of some key women writers from francophone West Africa.

We can see many of these issues played out in Mariama Bâ's first novel Une si longue lettre and in the responses this text has provoked. First published in 1979,
Une si longue lettre was the recipient of the first ever Prix Noma award for publishing in Africa in 1980. In 1981 the novel was translated into English and subsequently into sixteen other languages. It remains by far the most canonical text by an African woman and is especially popular in the U.S. although ironically the original French edition is now out of print. As the title implies Une si longue lettre is ostensibly a lengthy letter written Ramatoulaye, a recently widowed Senegalese woman, to her friend Aïssatou, although it finally becomes apparent that, as the two women will be seeing each other the next day, the letter will never be sent. The letter is begun during the forty days sequestration that Islamic tradition demands of Ramatoulaye following her husband’s death, though it also covers events that occur after this period. In it she reflects on her marriage and particularly on the betrayal she felt when her husband took one of their eldest daughter’s friends as a second wife. Critics, both friendly and hostile, were quick to seize upon Une si longue lettre as a feminist text. Dorothy Blair describes it as ‘the first truly feminist African novel’, and a review in West Africa calls it ‘the most deeply felt presentation of the female condition in African fiction’ (cited in Hitchcott 1999, 71). Bâ’s relationship to feminism may, however, be an ambiguous one. Nicki Hitchcott, Susan Stringer (1996) and Christopher Miller all quote from Bâ’s only published lecture, ‘La fonction politiques des littératures africaines écrites’, or from an interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond, the texts of which appear to be partially identical. Miller cites the section of the interview in which Bâ says:

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects [...] as women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety man confuses with Mother Africa. (1990, 272, Miller’s emphasis)

For Miller ‘Any doubts as to a basic feminism among African writers should be dispelled by these remarks’ (1990, 272) and Stringer too moves from this passage to talk of ‘Bâ’s stated feminist aims’ (1996, 50). Miller observes, however, that Bâ’s ‘conformity to any western definition of feminism [...] is not absolute’ (1990, 272). As Hitchcott points out, Bâ argues in the same interview
that African women are more confident in their femininity than many Western women. ‘Yes that is true. We [African women] do not imitate men. African women are fulfilled as women.’ Hitchcott argues from this that:

‘Femininity’, a social construct, is embraced by Bâ as the essential property of womankind, a property with which black African women apparently feel more confident than their ‘male imitating’ Western sisters. (1999, 71)

In Western feminist terms such an embrace might be problematic. It reveals to us, however, that while Bâ is anxious to promote the advancement of African women she is also careful to map out specific identity for them, distinct both from African men and from Western women. The material and discursive struggles of African women must not be subsumed within a western model of feminism. In this sense Bâ appears to embody Boyce-Davies’s conception of a ‘specific African feminism’ that draws upon Western and African models. It also represents, of course, a hybridization of cultural tropes in exactly the way that this study is concerned with.

We should be wary, of course, of confusing Bâ’s personal views, as expressed in interviews, with the content of her fiction. Nonetheless, when we turn to Une si longue lettre we do find both these elements in place. Ramatoulaye is a member of the liberal Dakarois middle classes and belongs to the generation that was most involved with the move to independence.

Privilège de notre génération, charnière entre deux périodes historiques, l’une de domination, l’autre d’indépendance. Nous étions restés jeunes et efficaces, car nous étions porteurs de projets. (Bâ 1979, 40)

Ramatoulaye is highly educated and this education informs her progressive outlook:

Nous étions de véritables sœurs destinées à la même mission émancipatrice.
Nous sortir de l’enlisement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la
nôtre [...] faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche que s'était assignée l'admiraible directrice. (Bâ 1979, 27-28)

This perspective is reflected in the political activism of her generation.

Nous étions tous d'accord qu'il fallait bien des craquements pour asseoir la modernité dans les traditions. [...] Nous étions pleins de nostalgie mais résolument progrésistes. (Bâ 1979, 32)

The emancipation Ramatoulaye talks of also includes the emancipation of women and her 'resolute' progressiveness encompasses a politics of gender that looks beyond traditional roles of wife and mother. This is present throughout Ramatoulaye's life from her schooldays onwards; it is reflected in her determination to choose her own husband, and to be a professional teacher. It can also be seen in her complaints about the lot of working women:

La femme qui travaille a des charges doubles aussi écrasantes les unes que les autres qu'elle essaie de concilier. Comment les concilier? Là réside tout un savoir-faire qui différencie les foyers. (Bâ 1979, 34)

Ramatoulaye's 'feminism' only really comes into focus, however, after Modou takes a second wife. This event is the defining trauma of _Une si longue lettre_ and in many ways the novel constitutes an extended condemnation of polygamy. Certainly there is no doubting the hurt caused to Ramatoulaye by what she sees as her husband's betrayal:

Et dire que j'ai aimé passionnément cet homme, dire que je lui ai consacré trente ans de ma vie, dire que j'ai porté douze fois son enfant [...]. En aimant une autre il a brûlé son passé moralement et matériuellement. (Bâ 1979, 23)

Ramatoulaye's views on the way in which polygamy treats women are most explicitly articulated in her response to two potential suitors. She angrily rejects Modou's brother Tamsir who assumes that she will marry him in accordance with Islamic tradition. 'Tu oublies que j'ai un coeur, une raison, que je ne suis
We should note, however, Ramatoulaye’s actual response to being abandoned. She chooses not to divorce Modou Fall, in stark contrast to Aïssatou the letter’s putative recipient who when faced with the same situation made a total break from her husband. ‘Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom. Vêtue de seul habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route’ (Bâ 1979, 51). Aïssatou re-educates herself and eventually gets a job in the Senegalese embassy in Washington. Ramatoulaye admires this course of action, describing Aïssatou as ‘victime innocente d’une injuste cause et pionnière hardie d’une nouvelle vie’ (Bâ 1979, 53), but she does not emulate it, preferring a more piecemeal reconstruction of her life.

There is no doubting Ramatoulaye’s basic ‘feminism’, however:

Les irréversibles courants de la libération de la femme qui fouettent le monde, ne me laissent pas indifférente. Cet ébranlement qui viole tous les domaines, révèle et illustre nos capacités.
Mon cœur est en fête chaque fois qu’une femme émerge de l’ombre. (Bâ 1979, 129)

So Ramatoulaye appears as a modern, liberated professional women, with a burning sense of the injustices to which Senegalese women are subjected. In this respect she seems to correspond to a western feminist paradigm, albeit a rather conservative one. This has lead Oje-Ade to declare dismissively that Bâ’s text ‘smacks of Beauvoirism’ (cited in Stratton 1994, 135). Florence Stratton, who otherwise opposes Oje-Ade’s critique picks up on this statement, arguing that it is more applicable to Ramatoulaye than to the more obviously radical Aïssatou. She emphasizes that Ramatoulaye’s self definition is rooted in the colonial
education she sees as enabling her to escape the ‘enlisement des traditions, des superstitions des mœurs’ (Bâ 1979, 27). Thus, Stratton argues,

In accepting the colonialists’ derogatory estimation of her culture, she also accepts their view of women’s role and status in society. The traditions, superstitions, and customs of one patriarchal culture, have, in other words, merely been replaced by those of another, and these have been so completely assimilated that living her life in terms of them has become Ramatoulaye’s prerequisite for happiness. A victim of French colonial education, Ramatoulaye seems to spring full-blown from Beauvoir’s analysis of the condition of middle class French women. (Stratton 1994, 140)

So in Stratton’s view, despite Bâ’s personal politics, the text of Une si longue lettre singularly fails to delineate a specific African feminism. This view may be reinforced by the fact, behind its apparent address to Aïssatou, the novel is clearly aimed at a western audience as it constantly explains details of Senegalese culture with which Aïssatou, of course, would be intimately familiar.

Nonetheless, this analysis may be slightly unfair. The problem of how to reconcile feminist demands with Senegalese culture is directly addressed in Bâ’s novel, even if no clear solution is proposed. We have seen the ways in which Ramatoulaye may be considered a feminist, but we have also noted that she has a conservative streak. This is a considerable part of her character. The most apparent example of this is that despite her pain and inner turmoil she does remain married to Modou Fall after his second marriage. This decision may, however, be motivated by different factors. Ramatoulaye herself explains it as ‘la digne solution’ (Bâ 1979, 69), but Stratton suggests (and Ramatoulaye appears to admit) that it is also driven by fear of the fate of abandoned middle-aged women. In the event, however, this is more or less what happens to her as Modou, enraptured by his new wife, soon begins to neglect Ramatoulaye and her children: ‘Il ne vint jamais plus; son nouveau bonheur recouvrit petit à petit notre souvenir. Il nous oublia’ (Bâ 1979, 69).
Ramatoulaye’s conservatism is also apparent in other areas. In many ways her social attitudes remain deeply traditional. One of the factors in the break up of Aïssatou’s marriage was the fact that while her husband Mawdo Bâ comes from an aristocratic family she is a member of the inferior goldsmith’s artisan class. While Ramatoulaye is never less than supportive of her friend she also seems to believe in the validity of these class identities: ‘Mawdo te hissa a sa hauteur, lui, fils de princesse, toi enfant des forges’ (Bâ 1979, 33).

Despite her opposition to polygamy, Ramatoulaye is an otherwise devout Muslim who takes her observances very seriously, moreover she is sceptical, but not entirely dismissive, of the fortune telling capabilities of her griotte neighbour. The ambiguity of her attitudes can also be seen in the way she raises her children. She is perplexed by the fact that the husband of her eldest daughter Daba shares in the housework and accuses him of spoiling her daughter. Despite her generally progressive outlook she is shocked when she discovers her younger daughters smoking and reacts furiously:

J’eus tout d’un coup peur des affluents de progrès. Ne buvaient-elles pas aussi? Qui sait si un vice pourrait en introduire un autre? Le modernisme ne peut donc être sans s’accompagner de la dégradation des mœurs? (Bâ 1979, 112)

This is a reformulation of the question that has echoed through so much of the West African fiction we have looked at.

When her second daughter becomes pregnant outside marriage Ramatoulaye is shocked and furious, but compassionate: ‘on est mère pour aimer sans commencement ni fin’ (Bâ 1979, 120). She also finds time to reflect on the injustice of the fact that her daughter could be expelled from school while the baby’s father faces no such threat:

Lui Ibrahima Sall, n’encourait aucune risque de renvoi, à l’université [...].
Quelle loi clémente viendra pour secourir les lycéennes fautives, dont les grandes vacances ne camouflent pas l’état? (Bâ 1979, 124-25)
In many ways Ramatoulaye declines to question accepted gender roles. She sees herself as a professional woman, but also as a mother, a homemaker and, formerly, a wife. Despite the disappointments of her personal life she retains faith in the institutions of marriage and family, institutions to which she ascribes profound social/political significance.

Je reste persuadée de l’inévitable et nécessaire complémentarité de l’homme et de la femme. (Bâ 1979, 129)

C’est de l’harmonie du couple que naît la réussite familiale [...]. Ce sont toutes les familles [...] qui constituent la nation. La réussite d’une nation passe donc irrémédiablement par la famille. (Bâ 1979, 130)

So Ramatoulaye does try to fashion a workable feminism within the parameters of the Senegalese Islamic way of life, which she seeks to amend rather than overturn. This project is not explicitly theorized by Ramatoulaye, despite the reflective nature of the letter: rather it is pursued in an ad hoc fashion through practical living, taking decisions on situations as they arise and generally attempting to get on with life. It does not therefore, seem too far-fetched to claim that Ramatoulaye does perform a number of synthesizing gestures: between theory and practice, old and new, African and western gender politics.

Christopher Miller points out that Bâ’s textual practice also adopts an interstitial position. He argues that the epistolary novel is a predominantly female literary form, or at least such is its European history, as a genre it barely figures in the African corpus. In adopting it therefore, Bâ distances herself from the male tradition of francophone African writing. At the same time, however, Bâ’s text also deviates from the epistolary model. It is one letter not many, there are no responses and we learn eventually that the letter will never be sent. Moreover, the ‘tu’ to whom the letter is addressed shifts at one point from Aïssatou to Modou Fall and in many places the text resembles a memoir or a diary more than a letter. The resemblance to a journal is significant, Miller argues, because the journal novel is a common form in West African fiction. So Bâ simultaneously allies herself to and distances herself from both a male
African and a female European literary tradition, positioning her text somewhere in between.

None of these processes are definitive of course. Although the novel is expressed entirely through Ramatoulaye’s voice, other perspectives are presented. Aïssatou, Daba and Daouda Dieng all offer alternative visions of African feminism that the reader may choose over Ramatoulaye’s. Critics generally cite the closing of Une si longue lettre as a moment of optimism: ‘Le mot bonheur recouvre bien quelque chose, n’est-ce pas? J’irai à sa recherche, tant pis pour moi si j’ai encore à t’écrire une si longue lettre...’ (Bâ 1979, 131). It is also a moment of doubt. As the ellipses make quite clear, nothing is finished here. Any answers Ramatoulaye may have come up with, any models of modernity she has constructed, are purely provisional. The process goes on.

A different take on these issues is provided by Ken Bugul’s Le Baobab fou (1984). Although Bugul’s text reads like a novel, it is ostensibly an autobiography, published by Les Nouvelles éditions africaines in their ‘vies africaines’ series:

> La collection Vies d’Afrique est ouverte seulement au récit de vécu des êtres et ne peut comporter d’imaginaire que celui qu’aura élaboré l’auteur comme substance de son bagage culturel. (Bugul 1984, 183)

Ken Bugul is a pseudonym adopted by the author Mariétou M’Baye apparently at the insistence of her publishers who feared the revelations of the text would create a scandal (d’Almeida 1994). In later interviews M’Baye has insisted that the exact classification of the text is unimportant. A certain distance is also projected onto the text itself, the first chapter of the main section begins: ‘Ken Bugul se souvient.’ Whatever its autobiographical status, however, Bugul’s text is an eloquent account of dislocation and alienation.

At the risk of committing unwarranted violence upon the text’s complex narrative structure, the fabula of Le Baobab fou might be summarized something like this. Ken is an unhappy, traumatized child, growing up in a small village in Senegal. Abandoned by her mother and neglected by her father, she feels
rootless and throws herself into education as a way of constructing a new cultural identity for herself. 'Je croyais avoir trouver un moyen de me rassurer en me faisant toubab' (Bugul 1984, 138). Eventually she wins a scholarship to study in 'la terre promise' of Europe. 'Je voulais découvrir quelque part ou en quelqu’un le lien sacré qui me manquait. Pourquoi ne pas aller à la recherche de “mes ancêtres les Gaulois”?' (Bugul 1984, 170). When she arrives in Brussels Ken quickly falls in with a bohemian demi-monde, but she soon realizes that she is popular more as an exotic novelty than as a real individual.

Ces gens riches étaient libres de faire ce qu’ils voulaient, ils absorbaien la diaspora pour l’originalité. ‘Nous avons une amie noire, une Africaine’, était la phrase la plus ‘in’ dans ces milieux. (Bugul 1984, 101)

The ‘lien sacré’ she so desires is not on offer here. Bugul’s life eventually disintegrates and she begins a slide into drug addiction and prostitution. After a form of breakdown she eventually returns to her village in Senegal, where a tentative peace appears to be offered.

It would be tempting to see Bugul’s story as a simple parable of alienation, in which Ken’s infatuation with European culture leads to a crisis of identity which necessitates an ambiguous and inevitably partial return to the village and her Senegalese ‘roots’. Certainly this is how the text is presented by the publishers blurb:

Cette jeune fille dit tout parce qu’elle a voulu tout dire comme mise en garde à ses frères africains contre l’assimilation de certaines valeurs trompeuses. Jamais l’aliénation n’a été vécue avec une telle intensité par une sensibilité déchirée, jamais elle n’a été contée avec un tel désespoir. (Bugul 1984, back cover)

It’s certainly true that Ken’s attempts to assimilate in Europe are by any standards pretty disastrous and the novel’s structure seems at first to indicate that we should read it in the way suggested above. The text begins with two short sections titled ‘pre-histoire de Ken’ and ‘histoire de Ken’; these tell the history of Ken’s village and early childhood. The novel then goes on to recount
Ken’s disastrous European misadventures and finishes with her return to the village, as an apparently chastened character,

La conscience de tout ce qui m’était arrivée si loin du village où je suis née, me faisait prier au Dieu de m’en faire renaître, comme si presque un quart de siècle de tourment n’avait jamais été. (Bugul 1984, 180)

This sort of trajectory is misleading, however, and the text resists facile distinctions between Ken’s ‘African’ and ‘European’ lives. The first section of the novel traces the early history of Ken’s village and the giant baobab tree of the title is established as a recurring trope that symbolizes the continuity of village life. The second section centres on a childhood trauma experienced in the shadow of this very same baobab. Many years earlier the wife of the village’s founder had broken an amber necklace under the baobab and had failed to gather up one of the beads which has lain there unnoticed ever since. The infant Bugul, unsupervised by her mother, forces the bead into her ear where it causes her excruciating pain. The mother’s neglect foreshadows her later abandonment of Ken and the amber bead incident assumes the status of a major trauma. The village and the baobab that symbolizes it thus become transfigured into sites of pain and desolation: ‘ce baobab dénudé dans ce village désert’ (Bugul 1984, 25 & 30). The figures of the baobab and the amber bead explicitly associate Ken’s trauma with the earlier history of the village and the chain of events that lead her to Europe are, symbolically (and narratively) ascribed an origin in this history. Her mother’s departure is co-incidental with her attendance of the French school: ‘Mais tu allais à l’école, c’est pour cela que je ne t’ai pas emmenée avec moi’ (Bugul 1984, 114). School and the attendant infatuation with European culture becomes a way of trying to substitute for the presence of the mother. Bugul underlines this in her description of the school: ‘Le petit chemin qui y menait commençait au pied du baobab’ (Bugul 1984, 114). So Ken’s ‘rootlessness’ doesn’t derive from her assimilationist engagement with Europe, but from the emotional deprivation of her childhood in the village. The breakdown that she suffers is the result of a continuous accumulation of events that extends right back to her African ‘pre-histoire’. This is emphasized by the way in which the text recounts most of her childhood in
flashback and the way in which at her lowest moment, as she contemplates
prostitution and suicide, Ken’s mind travels back to this initial scene:

Pourquoi la mère était-elle partie? Pourquoi m’avoir laissée sous le baobab
toute seule? […].

Il ne faut jamais laisser l’enfant seul sous le baobab. La mère ne devait
jamais partir. Pourquoi était-elle partie? (Bugul 1984, 175, Bugul’s
italics)

It is difficult therefore to discuss Ken’s history simply in terms of cultural
alienation, as she herself points out:

L’aliénation? Moi qui n’avais jamais connu de milieu, de famille
issue d’une génération condamnée, moi qui n’avais aucun repère,
comment pourrais-je m’aliéner? Or l’ambiguïté établie, l’impossibilité
de l’aliénation en était peut-être déjà une. (Bugul 1984, 124, Bugul’s
emphasis)

So Bugul deliberately deconstructs the opposition between Africa as a locus of
authentic values and Europe as a place of alienation. In her life, both locations
function as successive scenes in an ongoing crisis of identity, each of which
brings particular pressures to bear. This does not mean, however, that Ken’s
story is simply that of an individual’s psychological torment or that she effaces
the specificity of her experiences in either environment. Bugul does write
movingly of the culture shock she experiences in Brussels and of the racism and
discrimination she is subjected to there. As we have seen, Ken’s attempts at
assimilation are always thwarted by the exoticizing gaze of the European. From
a feminist perspective, Bugul also provides a cogent analysis of the way in
which African women’s bodies are objectified as a site of European sexual
fantasy. Much remains to be explored in all these areas. What I would like to
take from Bugul’s text is the subtle way in which she delineates her relations to
Africa and to Europe. Like Ramatoulaye in Une si longue lettre, Ken searches for
solutions to her problems both in European style feminism and in traditional
village life. Whereas Ramatoulaye’s letter ends on an ambivalently optimistic
note, Ken’s attempts to mediate between African and European contexts should
probably be judged a failure. What, after all, is the significance of the fact that
when Ken returns to the village she finds that the baobab has been dead for many years? Like Bâ, Bugul breaks down rigid distinctions between African and European modes of thought and although Bugul’s story is eventually darker, both women suggest that ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ may both be sources of progress but also of alienation and pain.

In both *Une si longue lettre* and *Le Baobab fou* we find women attempting to map out a discursive space in which they can articulate their subjectivity and respond to the conditions that, to a greater or lesser extent they experience as oppressive. This space is neither ‘African’ nor ‘European’, though it might be seen as being both, or perhaps as being in some sense interstitial or hybrid. It is created through the biographical ‘journeys’ of the novels’ protagonists and through the intellectual positions they adopt, but to what extent is it also established through the discursive procedures of writing itself? As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, many feminist critics see the very act of writing as a politically significant moment. How is this evidenced in the work of francophone women writers? It is also important that we do not ignore the physical dimension of Ken and Ramatoulaye’s experiences. Ramatoulaye’s sequestration and Ken’s sexual objectification are both examples of the way in which a predominantly male social order seeks to combines discursive hegemony with an actual control of women’s bodies. To further investigate these complex intersections of discursivity and corporeality I would like in the next chapter to look in some detail at the work of the Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala.
Chapter Six

Beyala is perhaps the best known woman writer of African origin to be published in France today. She has to date published eleven novels beginning with *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* in 1988 and running most recently to *Les Arbres en parlent* (2002). She has also published two works of non-fiction, *Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (1995) and *Lettre d’une Afro-Française à ses compatriotes* (2000). Beyala’s novels are reprinted in the cheap paperback imprint Editions J’ai Lu and her work is both critically acclaimed and popular. She is one of the few African authors whose work can be found on sale at supermarket checkouts and other non-specialist outlets. She thus occupies an interstitial position between popular and ‘high’ literature, although her books are not as readily available in Africa. Many of Beyala’s novels have been awarded prizes, but her career has not been without controversy. In 1996, her seventh novel *Les Honneurs perdus* won the Prix de l’Académie Française. The French Literary magazine *Lire* accused Beyala of plagiarism and published an article in which passages from *Les Honneurs perdus* and from Beyala’s earlier were juxtaposed with their alleged sources, which included Ben Okri, Paule Constant and Alice Walker (Assouline 1997). Beyala responded vigorously, effectively accusing *Lire* and its journalist Pierre Assouline of both sexism and racism. A flurry of legal proceedings ensued which ended with Beyala’s publishers Albin Michel paying an undisclosed sum in an out of court settlement. This controversy is reminiscent of course of *l’affaire Ouologuem* and if nothing else it reminds us that fiction by African artists still has the capacity to provoke considerable controversy.

The precise ramifications of this scandal are not, however, my concern here. Instead, I would like to concentrate on two aspects of Beyala’s work: the way in which she constructs a transnational community of women and the way in which this female identity is mediated through the female body and its representations. As we shall see, for Beyala, the development of women’s subjectivity is governed by the discursive relation between physicality and representation. Authority over a given subject is determined through the ability
to control the terms of its representation. In the West African context, Beyala portrays this control as exclusively within the power of a patriarchy which uses it to constrain women within a subservient position. Material and psychological emancipation is thus dependent upon a reappropriation of the terms of this relation. Within this context, female sexuality becomes a crucial locus of intersection between the physical and the discursive; a site from which identity may be articulated and interrogated.

It is easy to see how this sort of project could be read in terms of European feminism. The logocentric patriarchy described by Beyala relegates the sexualized woman’s body to a position of radical Otherness. Within this position women are non-beings. Existing in the symbolic only as Other, they are excluded from the chain of signification within which the subject is formed. Furthermore, the suppression of their sexuality would, in Lacanian terms, deny them the primal desire, the Hegelian *orexis*, that motivates the processes of identification and differentiation in relation to the Other that are so crucial for the formation of the subject.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that Beyala’s novels can be read simply in terms of this sort of feminist theory. We must remain mindful, as I have tried to stress throughout, of the pitfalls of an uncritical application of theory to text. Nevertheless, such ideas do provide an interesting background to a reading of Beyala’s fiction. Moreover, Beyala herself does signal a positive relation to European feminism:

> Je suis venue en Occident attirée par vos théories, vos combats, vos victoires. Grâce aux revendications des femmes occidentales, leurs consœurs des pays africains ont vu l’espoir de se libérer des pratiques ancestrales rétrogrades poindre à l’horizon (1995, 10)

At the same time, however, she is also concerned to denote a distance from mainstream feminist thought, preferring instead to promote what she terms ‘feminitude’: ‘très proche du féminisme mais divergente dans la mesure où elle ne prône pas l’égalité entre l’homme et la femme, mais la différence-égalitaire entre l’homme et la femme’ (1995, 20). The very word ‘feminitude’
indicates a double relation, with a western tradition of feminist thought and with an African literary tradition inaugurated by negritude, the association with which also points towards the somewhat essentialist nature of Beyala’s concept. I will argue, then, that Beyala takes further the project initiated by Bâ and Bugul, delineating at the interface of discursivity and physicality a specifically feminine space that is neither overtly European or African, but which amalgamates elements from both traditions.

These issues are present in a remarkably developed form in Beyala’s first novel C’est le Soleil qui m’a brûlée which tells the story of a few weeks in the life of Ateba, a young woman growing up in the shanty town of QG (Quartier General). The text traces the emergence in Ateba of a radical feminist consciousness as she catalogues the injustices perpetrated upon women by men and the society they construct. This process reaches a bloody conclusion when the death of her best friend Irène after a botched abortion inspires Ateba to pose as a prostitute and murder her ‘client’ in a complex act of vengeance and self-assertion. The story is told in the third person with the frequent intervention of an unidentified first person narrator who watches over Ateba.

From her first appearance we see that Ateba’s life is subject to severe constraints. As a woman within a patriarchal society her options are limited, as her aunt and guardian Ada says of her: ‘J’ai réussi à lui programmer la même destinée que moi, que ma mère, qu’avant elle la mère de ma mère. La chaîne n’est pas rompue’ (Beyala 1987, 6). In other words Ateba is expected to re-enact the lives of her forebears without deviation, operating within one of the ascribed roles that QG society will allow its women. This circumscription is partly a matter of material and economic circumstance. Ateba is on one level little more than a domestic servant, as emphasized by the list of tasks she has to complete: ‘Faire la vaisselle. Ranger. Préparer le repas’ (Beyala 1987, 136). Ada is too canny an operator to give up this labour force without adequate compensation. That such compensation might take the form of a dowry is hinted at early in the first chapter of the novel when Ada tells Jean Zepp, who has just rented their spare room: ‘Je manquerais au plus élémentaire des devoirs
en te faisant pas visiter moi même la maison. *Ma fille s’en occupera...Tu verras, elle est gentille* (Beyala 1987, 13, emphasis mine).

This exchange is symptomatic of Ateba’s position. Even in so trivial an instance, we see her the subject of a double exploitation. Ada ensures that she benefits from Ateba as a source of labour whilst simultaneously exposing her to the attentions of a potential son-in-law.

This pattern of one-way exploitation is one that is repeated throughout Ateba’s domestic life. Ada never offers Ateba the support or affection that her maternal role would suggest, ‘Jamais elle ne lui a dit “Je voudrais te parler de toi”’ (Beyala 1987, 23), yet is happy to demand such comforts from Ateba when she herself is faced with crisis, such as when she is beaten and abandoned by her lover Youssef. Within the broader spectrum of social/cultural life Ateba’s horizons are similarly narrow. Withdrawn from school despite her obvious intelligence, the best she can hope for is to become a wife and mother, regenerating society both literally, by giving birth to children and figuratively, by perpetuating a set of values based around the family unit and the role of women as objects of domestic labour.

The emphasis placed on the fulfilment of traditional roles by the society of QG is highlighted at various points in the text. Observance of ritual such as the circumcision in chapter two is used to institutionalize these values. Circumcision operates as a concrete physical act that represents the conceptual passage of Etoundi’s son from childhood to the dominant realm of the masculine. Entry to ‘le monde des adultes’ (Beyala 1987, 26) is centred around the phallus and the function of women in this context is a subservient one, to serve as an appreciative audience, to provide maternal support ‘Maman, aide-moi!’ (Beyala 1987, 31) and in Ada’s case to ‘organiser cette réunion chez elle’ (Beyala 1987, 26). Woman are thus confined to certain forms of ‘appropriate’ labour and if they are not to serve a procreative function, they are to be objects of sexual gratification like Irène or Ateba’s mother Betty.
The prevailing social attitude towards women is exemplified by Jean Zepp when ‘Il divise les femmes en deux groupes: les épousables et les autres’ (Beyala 1987, 61). Jean is also, perhaps, typical in his misogyny and in his predatory sexuality. The choice that this leaves for women such as Ateba, then, is to be ‘une de ces jeunes filles bien élevés’ (Beyala 1987, 14) as Jean and Ada both wish, or to follow the path of Betty, or Irène and become one of ‘celles que la tradition récuse’ (Beyala 1987, 61). Certainly she does not have the range of expectations displayed in Jean’s fantasies of finding his fortune in Europe. In this sense the restrictions placed upon Ateba are discursive as well as material, in that public discourse as articulated by the likes of Jean and concretized through ceremonies such as the circumcision effectively curtails the range of options available to her as a woman. Of course, the positions in which women are placed are all directly beneficial to the patriarchy. As we have seen, women serve as sources of labour, as sexual objects and as reproductive units. Thus the oppression of women has both a pragmatic/economic and an ontological dimension, in its perpetuation of a given form of social organization. This system of values is seen as central to the cultural identity of the inhabitants of QG and is specifically contrasted with ‘la pensée européenne’ (Beyala 1987, 15). We may also observe that this system revolves specifically around the exploitation and appropriation of the sexualized aspects of the female body.

It is not true to say that this structuring goes uninterrogated. At various points, such as when Ateba is taken to have her virginity ascertained, bystanders indulge in what is effectively a debate between modern and traditional ways of life. Moderate views are expressed: ‘On n’a pas besoin de la virginité des jeunes fille pour défendre nos valeurs’ (Beyala 1987, 67), but these are generally dismissed: ‘Arrête tes âneries’ (Beyala 1987, 67). Moreover, the communal reaction to Ateba appearing to transgress her ‘role’ is one of disapproval: ‘une murmure d’approbation traverse la foule’ (Beyala 1987, 66). This group reaction hints at one of the mechanisms by which QG society regulates itself and its members. When Ateba returns from having spent time alone with Jean ‘attifée comme une vamp’ (Beyala 1987, 61), Ada is immediately suspicious and berates
her. Within minutes a large crowd has gathered who, as we have noted, are quick to condemn Ateba, ‘La garce faire ça à une telle mère’ (Beyala 1987, 67), until her virginity is established and the ‘verdict’ reversed. The public nature of all this is significant. There are few secrets in QG, everyone knows everyone else’s business, through observation and gossip (again discourse as a means of control). This means that any attempt to deviate from the group dynamic is instantly seized upon and brought back within the sphere of the dominant public discourse.

There are, of course, other means by which the patriarchal order keeps women within its control. In addition to financial constraint there is straightforward physical violence, of which Ateba, Irène, Betty and Ada are all victims. It is, however, these discursive and conceptual limitations, I would argue, that are most powerfully effective. Social discourse, the way in which society represents itself, the possible modulations of identity it will conceive, is appropriated by a patriarchy and subverted to its own ends. If we read this through the optic of feminist theory, we can see how in QG discourse becomes a masculine space within which the feminine cannot be articulated and women such as Ateba have no site from which they can express their own desires, feelings and aspirations. This effectuates an ontological deprivation, in which the feminine is relegated to a position of Otherness outside the prevailing discursive tropes that determine social reality and thus denied a location from which to formulate a differentiated identity.

The situation for Ateba, then, appears bleak, ‘vivre au jour le jour, sans joie, sans surprise’ (Beyala 1987, 23), but Beyala’s novel is not just a portrayal of patriarchal oppression. It is also the account of how Ateba mounts a complex resistance to this oppression. Appropriately, as we shall see, the strategies she employs operate on both a material and a discursive level. Practically speaking Ateba’s ‘rebellions’ are simple if limited. She refuses to marry Jean, she helps Irène to obtain an abortion and finally she murders the man who has employed her as a prostitute (although I think we need to be cautious about seeing this as an unqualified victory). It is notable that all of these examples turn around the
use of the sexualized female body as a figure of resistance. More interesting still are Ateba’s interior battles, her struggle to continue to conceive and articulate her individuality in the face of all opposition. This emphasis is established in Ateba’s first conversation with Jean, ‘Je garde mon identité’ (Beyala 1987, 15), and we rapidly realize that behind her apparent passivity lies a turbulent inner life in which the passions and desires she experience have no outlet beyond her own body: ‘elle se caressait, elle appelait le plaisir’ (Beyala 1987, 22). We also see that she possesses a politicized feminist consciousness, which entails a bitter recognition of the injustices of QG life: ‘Est-ce ainsi que Dieu avait imaginé sa création? Tant de pas sur le chemin pour encore plus d’erreurs, d’échecs, de méchancetés’ (Beyala 1987, 45). Part of this consciousness involves a recognition that these injustices are directly perpetrated on women by men: ‘Elle était comme nantie d’une terrible compréhension des hommes’ (Beyala 1987, 108).

This recognition of her situation is, of course, a vital precondition of empowerment and even in this Ateba differs from women such as Irène, who desire only to operate effectively within the patriarchal system. Ateba, however, has much broader aspirations. In an extraordinary act of identification she universalizes herself to encompass all women: ‘Elle était Ateba et toutes les femmes étaient elle’ (Beyala 1987, 17). In doing so Ateba makes her own situation a representative one, and her actions take on a more consciously political aspect. The implications of this gesture, however, are wider than this. Ateba is concerned to establish a communality amongst women, who together may acquire the power to achieve self-determination in a way that Ateba, as an individual, cannot. We can see this solidarity expressed both in deed and sentiment in her dealings with other women such as Irène, Betty and Enkassi. Furthermore, Ateba recognizes that such a community must be, amongst other things, a discursive one. By establishing a field of speech amongst themselves, women will be able not just to express themselves freely, but to construct themselves as subjects, independently of masculine domination. Again we might refer back to Kristeva’s concept of a semiotic field of meaning transgressing the symbolic order of patriarchy. Within such a language women
might occupy a different position from the Otherness to which a binary system of signification consigns them.

How then does Ateba attempt to establish a female discursive space? We see early in the novel that she is aware of the power of language, of the effects that can be achieved by giving or withholding speech,

‘Peut-être.’
Une sonorité douce, un défi. Ces mots lui plaisent […]. Ils ne lui [Jean] plairaient pas’ (Beyala 1987, 15)

and we later learn that she writes a series of letters to imaginary women in which she confides her innermost thoughts and questions the fate of women in QG. This can clearly be read as part of an attempt by Ateba to create a discursive community of the sort outlined above, a place in which she can discuss the issues that concern her without having to subscribe to the doxic parameters that would apply in the public arena. The fact that the women to whom Ateba writes do not exist is on one level a reflection of the extent to which her views cannot be aired. On another level, their unworldliness underlines the desire to create a discursive location that is removed from the quotidian reality within which she lives.

Further evidence of Ateba’s desire to appropriate and reinvent the significatory process that governs women can be found in her mythologizing of women’s history. The equation of women with the stars, imprisoned on earth by men, serves two functions (Beyala 1987, 146). It gives women a history of their own, bearing an identity different to that ascribed to them by masculine discourse. Within this history women can construct themselves as primal entities, not as the ‘Other’ of men. Secondly, by emphasizing the other-worldliness of women, the story underlines the separation of the feminine from the masculine that Ateba wants to effectuate. This tendency to reappropriate history can also be seen in Ateba’s constant reworkings of her memories of Betty.
These processes are also reflected textually. In addition to the third person narrative, the novel has a first person narrator. The identity, and indeed the exact nature of this narrator are never revealed. There are various hints that she is some sort of spirit, ‘Il est maintenant donné aux esprits d’avoir peur comme des simples mortels!’ (Beyala 1987, 41), that she is Ateba’s soul, ‘C’est moi ton âme’ (Beyala 1987, 153), or a reincarnation of Betty. Finally, however, she remains mysterious, ‘qui suis-je? Où vais-je? Où irai-je?’ (Beyala 1987, 41) and intangible: ‘Moi qui n’existait pas!’ (Beyala 1987, 23). By leaving this element of its narration as a site of multiple identity and plurality, the text performs a similar gesture of abstraction to that of Ateba in her identification with woman-kind in general. The Moi, the I, of the text, is both no woman and everywoman. Moreover, there is a similar emphasis on discursivity. The Moi is one who watches and occasionally intervenes in the unfolding events, but most of all she is one who tells stories: ‘Moi qui raconte cette histoire’ (Beyala 1987, 152). Thus Beyala can be seen to mirror textually Ateba’s attempt to create a discursive community of women through the use of a textual device that represents the appropriation of narrative by a community of women. The novel thus becomes a multi-layered experience, with the creation of discursive locations occurring across a number of levels.

It is difficult to assess how far Ateba is successful in her goals. Internally she succeeds in constructing a form of existence in which her expression is free, but she fails to translate this into any form of external reality. Her utopian dream of a world in which Irène and her can live free of male interference remains a dream from which she is brutally awoken (Beyala 1987, 140). Moreover, when, distraught after Irène’s death, she gives voice to her version of woman’s history she is driven out by the assembled crowd who think her a sorceress or a lunatic (Beyala 1987, 147). The ending of the novel is also ambiguous in this respect. Although Ateba’s act of murder might be seen as empowering in one sense, it also represents a type of defeat. Grief stricken after Irène’s death, Ateba can respond only by becoming the mad woman the onlookers suggest she is and her recognition of Irène in the body of her victim seems as much an epistemological confusion as an act of identification. The reversion to a violent,
‘masculine’ mode of aggression might also be seen to herald the ultimate failure of her attempt to establish a site of communication and mutuality, within which discursive co-operation resists the antagonistic duality of logocentric thinking. The final paragraphs of the novel continue to underline this ambivalence. Ateba finally declines to ‘réintégrer la légende’ (Beyala 1987, 152), turning away from the imploring narratorial voice that now claims to be her soul: ‘C’est Moi ton âme’ (Beyala 1987, 153). There is, however, in the closing sentence a hint that by moving towards ‘cette lueur plus vive, tapie dans les eaux complexes des femmes à venir’ (Beyala 1987, 153), she has in some sense gone beyond the individual and taken on the identity of women in their entirety. If so, then we must recognize that she is, at least partially, successful.

We see the same themes repeated and accentuated in Tu t’appelleras Tanga, Beyala’s second novel (1988). The novel opens as Tanga the eponymous heroine lies dying in a prison cell, in the company of Anna-Claude a middle aged white French woman to whom she tells the story of her life. Tanga, we learn, was raped and impregnated by her father at the age of twelve, prostituted by her mother and is dying by the age of seventeen. Even more than Ateba, Tanga is a victim of the brutal system within which she lives. She is condemned to function as a source of sexual gratification and economic sustenance for her family. The exploitation of her body has multifarious effects. She is deprived of any enjoyment of her own sexuality: ‘Je ne sentais rien, je n’éprouvais rien’ (Beyala 1988, 15). More significantly, her subjection to a life of prostitution at an early age and the role she assumes as chief breadwinner for her family mean that she is not able to enjoy the usual process of growing up and becoming a woman. Deprived of the normal stages of adolescence from which to formulate an identity of her own, she is forced to assume a role before she has a chance to learn who she is herself. As she puts it, she becomes ‘femme-fillette’, neither woman nor child, her subjectivity lost within a hyphenated void, circumscribed by the parameters of generic identity.

These processes are vividly symbolized by the clitoridectomy to which she is subjected at the age of twelve. For her mother this is a joyous occasion,
representing Tanga’s accession to her assigned role: ‘Elle est devenue femme, elle est devenue femme. Avec ça […] elle gardera tous les hommes’ (Beyala 1988, 20). With the excision of her clitoris Tanga is sealed within the role that patriarchy has outlined for her, the provision of sexual pleasure and domestic labour. For Tanga it represents a fundamental stage in the excision of her very identity: ‘J’héritais du sang entre mes jambes. D’un trou entre les cuisses’ (Beyala 1988, 20). The brutalization is both physical and psychic. A part of her is literally and symbolically taken away. Her selfhood is sacrificed to her role and she is left only with blankness in which to try vainly to be herself.

Much is made in Tu t’appelleras Tanga of the role of the family. For Tanga the family is not a source of security or protection, but the primary mechanism through which the patriarchal system is mediated and its values perpetuated. In Iningue society children do not function as objects of love or affection but as ‘la sécurité vieillesse’ (Beyala 1988, 82). The relationship of parents to children is profoundly problematized. Tanga’s relation with her father is one of brutality and degradation and her relationship with her mother is characterized by exploitation and antipathy. In this it fulfils a pattern that extends back over at least three generations. Her grandmother is repeatedly raped before giving birth to Tanga’s mother, who she abandons at an early age. Tanga’s mother extends this cycle by inserting pine nuts into her vagina in order to destroy her fertility and for Tanga herself progression beyond a life of prostitution involves an explicit rejection of her mother. For Tanga, motherhood as an institution is no more than an extension of patriarchal oppression, it is after all her mother who sells her into prostitution and delivers her into the clutches of ‘Tarracheuse des clitoris’ (Beyala 1988, 20). The extent to which Tanga shuns the mother child relation can be seen in her horrified reaction when Cul-de-jatte proposes that she carry his baby. This take on motherhood is a particularly striking one in an African novel, where the tendency has generally been to valorize the parental relation. In this they reflect the privileging of these relations within African societies both traditional and modern. A feature that is reflected in the text by the governor giving medals to ‘Les bonnes pondeuses […]. Service rendu à la Patrie’ (Beyala 1988, 82-83). This is also, of course, an example of how public
discourse may be used to reinforce a given set of values. It would not, however, be true to say that Tanga completely rejects the idea of motherhood. Through her adoption of the cripple boy Mala, Beyala suggests that there may be a purity and a mutuality of affection within maternal style relationships, but that this is only realizable when it is removed from a context of exploitation. Once again it is the commercialization of the female body which is projected as the core of the problem.

For Tanga, then, as for Ateba, there are few choices in life. She has a ‘role’ within the social infrastructure of Iningué society and she must fulfil it. Once again this ‘role’ turns upon the exploitation of the female body and in particular of the sexualized aspects of that body. Typically the predominance of this ‘role’ denies the opportunity for the development of a genuine subjectivity. Woman’s identity or lack of identity, therefore, comes to be closely associated with their sexual exploitation and the body comes to serve as a concretized site of oppression. As in C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée we see that the mechanisms through which these forms of oppression are effectuated operate on a variety of levels. There is financial constraint and there is simple brutality. There is also a degree of psychological coercion, such as that exerted by Tanga’s circumcision or her perception of her filial duty. Once more, however, we might identify the sort of discursive restrictions to which Tanga is subjected as the most effective. We have already begun to see how these function, both in the creation of a public discourse and in the curtailing of the terms available to Tanga to represent herself. Public discourse in this novel takes various forms, there is the official promotion of the family, the expression of tradition through ritual and the repetition by various characters of received principles and social doxa. We have already commented upon the significance of Tanga’s representation of herself as ‘femme-fillette’ and the impoverishment/effacement of personal identity it entails. We should note, however, that Tanga does not only describe herself in these terms. There are a number of important characters in the text who suffer this form of binary reduction; the implication surely being that Iningué society systematically depersonalizes its subjects in order to more effectively confine them with a given mode of labour or social function.
Like Ateba in *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brulée*, Tanga performs an act of universalizing identification, not just with women, but with the dispossessed in general and in particular with children. Her awareness of the plight of children within Iningué society is clear: ‘Cette enfance d’Iningué où l’enfant n’a pas d’existence, pas d’identité... Des parents à entretenir et des coups pour obéir’ (Beyala 1988, 67) and her adoption of Mala and her association with Cul-de-jatte’s band of child pickpockets might both be seen as parts of an attempt to find a strength in unity. As in the earlier novel, we find the idea that the creation of a community might provide a means of resistance to oppression. What is significant about such communities is that they operate through a collation of individual interests, rather than through the subsuming of individuality to a dominant teleology. The crucial difference from patriarchy is thus that they entail an identification with Otherness, rather than an attempt to obliterate it. From this perspective we can see how there might be some peripheral advantage to Tanga’s identity as ‘femme-fillette’, in that it preconditions her to the articulation of multiple sites of identity.

The formation of such communities is only one of the ways in which Tanga attempts to escape her ‘role’ within the patriarchy. Others are more direct such as her attempt to give up her life of prostitution in explicit defiance of her mother: ‘Ce que je voulais, c’était de changer l’univers’ (Beyala 1988, 5). There is also a symbolic aspect to her actions, such as the way she seals up her vagina with mud. On one level this is an echo of her mother’s actions; on another it represents both a rejection of the biological of function of motherhood and the life that her mother has determined for her. By reclaiming her virginity, ‘Je brandis pour l’humanité la virginité retrouvée’ (Beyala 1988, 143), she makes a concrete gesture of opposition to the exploitation of her sexuality and a declaration of non-availability which encompasses an active aggression towards the men she perceives as her oppressors.

The practical success of Tanga’s ‘rebellion’ is questionable. She is only partially successful in her attempt to avoid prostitution and her younger sister is
immediately drafted in as her replacement, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation. Her attempts to find love and sexual fulfilment with Hassan are also abject failures. Similarly the attempt to find community with Cul-de-jatte and his band of children is undermined by his demand that they have children together. For Tanga this makes this community start to seem dangerously like a microcosm of society at large with Cul-de-jatte as its patriarchal centre. We should note too that although Cul-de-jatte is one of the only two men with whom Tanga experiences sexual pleasure, his initial dealings with her are characterized by violence and coercion. One might also argue that her relationship with Mala involves a degree of mutual exploitation.

Ultimately, then, Tanga cannot stand alone in society and this is made brutally clear by her eventual imprisonment and death. It is interesting, however, that it is precisely at this point that Beyala chooses to open her novel, thus using the textual structure of the book to suggest that a situation which initially appears to represent Tanga’s final defeat and destruction might also open up a range of redemptive possibilities. Alone in her cell with Anna-Claude, Tanga eventually gives in to the Frenchwoman’s urgings that she should tell her life story. This, however, is no ordinary story telling; with it an extraordinary act of identification and union is performed. By telling Anna-Claude her story, Tanga ensures her own survival in some form:

Alors entre en moi. Mon secret s’illuminera. Mais auparavant, il faut que la Blanche en toi meure. Donne-moi la main, désormais tu seras moi. Tu auras dix-sept saisons, tu seras noire, tu t’appelleras Tanga. (Beyala 1988, 14)

Through the telling of their stories the two women come to acquire a wealth of shared experience and a profound mutual understanding. For Tanga this represents an opportunity to leave some sort of record of her life and to work it through to herself. By recounting her amassed experience to Anna-Claude, she is able to explore and articulate herself as subject in a manner that has always been denied her. Anna-Claude’s Otherness allows for both differentiation (she is white/French) and identification (‘tu t’appelleras Tanga’). Tanga is thus permitted the sort of Lacanian subject/object dialectic that her invisible status
as a woman has always prohibited. As in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée* the formation of discursive bonds between women is seen as a figure of empowerment, as is the reappropriation of their 'histoire' and its retelling from a feminine perspective. The novel reflects this process textually in the way it delivers its story; retrospectively, with shifts in time and a gradual circular motion from present to past and back again. Within this framework, Tanga's story proceeds slowly, almost hesitantly, attentive to the rhythms of the body, to the gaps and ellipses between what can and cannot be said. In this respect one might liken the type of dialogue created between Tanga and Anna-Claude to the type of pre-Oedipal, semiotic communication described by Kristeva.

It is, then, through an archetypically linguistic act, the telling of a story, that Tanga achieves the sort of liberation she has failed to attain through more obviously proactive methods. Such an act, however, is not without its physical dimension. Anna-Claude holds Tanga's hand to draw out her story and Tanga claims in response that 'mon histoire naîtra dans tes veines' (Beyala 1988, 14). It is significant that the link between discursive practice and the female body is maintained in resistance just as it is in oppression. The body and its expression in language are not presented as sharply distinguishable entities and it is only by gaining control of the terms of this representation that women such as Tanga can move towards physical/material self determination.

We should not, however, see the dialogue between Tanga and Anna-Claude as a one way process. If it is empowering for Tanga, Anna-Claude also benefits from it. She too has had her problems and as a Jew she has experienced a position of radical Otherness within French society: 'ses camarades l'avaient exclue de leurs jeux en la traitant de sale Juive' (Beyala 1988, 139). She has come to Africa seeking some sort of affinity; a union with Ousmane, the mythical husband of her dreams, whose devotion to her will supply the self worth she has been unable to find in France. Like Tanga, she is a dreamer, 'Anna-Claude restait belle des rêves qui la portait' (Beyala 1988, 11), but a dreamer who questions the world: 'Anna-Claude ne comprenait pas, elle interrogeait' (Beyala 1988, 11). Like Tanga she is particularly appalled at the way in which children
are treated in Iningué: ‘Où sont nos enfants? Egorgés par un boucher’ (Beyala 1988, 12). There is, then, more in common between the two women than their imprisonment in the same cell. Through the telling of their stories, they acquire in some sense a shared consciousness. Anna-Claude is able to draw from Tanga a firmness of identity and purpose that had previously been lacking in her rather peripatetic life. The success of this operation is evident in her responses to the questioning of the police chief:

- Nom, prénom, âge, profession.
- Femme-fillette, noire, dix-sept ans, pute occasionelle.
  (Beyala 1988, 173)

There is then a powerful force at work in this whispered exchange of stories. We are presented with the idea that by reclaiming the stories of their lives women can come to know themselves and each other; can speak their identities in a locus of discursive exchange free of male interference and can achieve a retrospective control of their lives in the manner of their representation and their commitment to posterity. In this sense Tu t’appelleras Tanga has far more universal implications than C’est le soleil qui m’a brulée. By the inclusion of the European Anna-Claude into this process, it is implied that Tanga’s problems, though extreme, are in some way symptomatic of the fate of women in general. This point is farther underlined by the story of Camilla, a French woman reduced to a life of prostitution and poverty on the streets of Iningué. Tanga’s manner of constructing herself and of passing on this identity through the telling of her story comes to transcend the singularity of its African context and to represent a model of resistance offered to women everywhere. This gesture of universalization itself echoes the processes of inclusion and plurality, seen within the interaction of Tanga and Anna-Claude, which the text proffers as the liberating alternative to the exclusions inherent in logocentric language.

Again of course, it is only fair to note that there is a measure of ambiguity in the extent to which these strategies are successful. If Tanga goes through a period of empowerment in the telling of her story, this is immediately followed by her death. The establishing of an autonomous identity, then, does not in itself result
in any material benefit. Similarly, there is a degree to which Anna-Claude is forced to surrender her own identity in order to realize Tanga’s: ‘il faut que la Blanche en toi meure’ (Beyala 1988, 14). Moreover, her assumption of Tanga’s identity is recognized by no-one other than herself, as is made clear by her encounter with Tanga’s mother at the end of the novel, which closes on a pessimistic note: ‘Vous nous avez tuées, madame’ (Beyala 1988, 190).

Against these setbacks, however, it is, I believe, important to recognize the grain of hope embedded within the text. Even if Anna-Claude and Tanga do not achieve their aims, there is a sense in which the possibility of an existential resistance to patriarchal oppression is offered and some strategies with which to achieve it proposed.

In order to follow through the themes of liberation and of womanhood as a universalized community, it is instructive to consider Beyala’s third and fourth novels, *Le Petit Prince de Belleville* (1992) and its sequel *Maman a un amant* (1993). In contrast to the novels we have considered so far these texts are set, not in a thinly disguised Cameroon, but amidst the immigrant African community in Paris. Another striking difference is that these stories are told not by a woman, but by a small boy, Loukoum. Despite the apparent differences between these two sets of texts, closer examination reveals a wealth of thematic continuity. The shift towards the perspective of a child might itself be seen as continuing a process begun in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*. Furthermore, behind the story of Loukoum himself, the novels concern themselves with the experience of women. The central female character is M’am, the first wife of Abdou, Loukoum’s father, though not his biological mother. Although the material living conditions of women such as M’am are substantially better than those of Ateba or Tanga, she suffers from many of the same problems. We see how even in France she is constrained in the role of subservient wife. She must cook clean and care for Abdou, while he sits chewing cola nuts and watching television. This role is accepted by both of them and by Loukoum as the natural order of things: ‘La liberté des femmes, c’est de la mauvais graine [...]. Ce n’est pas moi qui la dit c’est mon papa’ (Beyala 1992, 6).
We can see how, like both Ateba and Tanga, M'am occupies a position of suppressed Otherness in relation to male society. This is made particularly acute by her status as a childless woman. This failure to fulfil one of her defined roles has a number of results. After an initially loving and intimate relationship with Abdou, her failure to bear children causes him to neglect her in favour of a second wife and a series of mistresses. Both Abdou and M'am herself subscribe to the notion that without children she is in some way incomplete, 'j'étais un arbre desséché, ou un animal innconu mi-homme mi-femme' (Beyala 1992, 75), and she thus becomes an invisible woman. Deprived of the status of biological motherhood, she is reduced virtually to the function of a domestic servant. Once more the ontology of women is mediated purely through the employment of their (sexualized) bodies in a specific form of labour. The same sort of categorization of women that we observed in C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée and Tu t'appelleras Tanga can be observed in these novels and indeed is underlined by the fact that most of the women with whom Loukoum comes into contact are quite literally mothers or whores. The former like M'am are perceived almost as non-sexual beings, whereas the latter, like M'amzelle Esther are seen as the appropriate objects of sexual desire.

One thing that comes out of these books is an emphasis on the power of discursive restraints. Women such as M'am are not subject to the same physical deprivations that Ateba or Tanga are. Their subjugation is almost entirely discursively conditioned. Furthermore, they are exposed to a variety of public discourses. Unlike Ateba or Tanga they come into contact with women such as Mme Saddock, who present them with alternative portrayals of the role of women to those that predominate within the immigrant community. At least to some extent then the constraints that operate upon M'am are, as we have seen, internalized ones. There are a number of reason for this. Some are inherent in the significatory processes that make up a phallocentric order. As we have already noted, the relegation of women to a position of Otherness deprives them of a site of articulation, making it very difficult to conceptualize or express themselves in terms different to those determined by the patriarchy. Within
such a system it becomes difficult to ‘penser autrement’, to borrow a phrase of Foucault’s. Some women such as Tanga or Ateba can achieve this; others such as Ada or Tanga’s mother cannot.

In the context of the Parisian novels, however, this conflict between different modes of thinking is profoundly associated with issues of cultural identity. Throughout Beyala’s work we find characters who explicitly contrast traditional African values with ‘ces histoires de blancs’ (Beyala 1987, 66). For Tanga and Ateba this conflict is in many senses irrelevant. They are not interested in their status as Africans, which is relatively uncomplicated, but rather in their position as women within African society. For the immigrants of Belleville, the maintenance of an African cultural identity is a far more pressing concern. Although they do not experience the same level of indigence as the characters in the African novels, they are very much at the bottom rung of French society. Not only do they live in relative poverty through a succession of menial jobs, but time and again we see a deep seated racial prejudice in the attitudes of white French people towards them. This can be seen in the way they are rounded up by the police at the least excuse, or in the horror at Loukoum’s relationship with a young white girl. Thus women within this community experience an exclusion from the dominant social *praxis* on the basis both of race and gender: ‘Que puis-je faire, étrangère a jamais exclue?’ (Beyala 1992, 64). Within this context of displacement and discrimination we can see how it becomes vital to maintain a solid conception of one’s cultural identity in the face of its denigration and potential erosion. This anxiety is highlighted the increasingly distraught entries in Abdou’s journal: ‘Je suis perdu, l’ami. Que faire? je suis perplexe devant tes traditions que je ne veux ni froisser ni comprendre [...]’ (Beyala 1993, 197). There is also in Loukoum’s telling a constant discursive emphasis on the group identity: ‘Chez les Nègres [...] Seul l’esprit de tribu compte’ (Beyala 1992, 246). Many of the strategies we have examined being employed by women within patriarchy are echoed in the ways in which black people attempt to define themselves within a predominately white society. This similarity extends to the centrality of the sexualized black body as a locus of prejudice and of celebration, particularly if we accept Fanon’s
argument that racism can be equated with a neurosis arising from the sexual anxiety of the white man (1952). The representation of black identity, however, has been extensively examined on both a literary and a theoretical level. For our purposes it suffices to note that, in Beyala’s novels, one of the effects of maintaining an African cultural identity is that women continue to occupy an ontologically invisible position of radical Otherness. We should not, however, be tempted to see this as a simple promotion of European values in favour of African ones. M’am’s quest is precisely to find a mode of self determination that encompasses the African side of her character as well as her emerging desire for emancipation. Furthermore, one of the effects of setting the novels in a Parisian milieu is to accentuate the suggestion we identified in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* that the plight of women is in some senses a universal one, not one specific to African social structures. This theme of universality is underlined by the lack of emancipation amongst French women such as those the family meet on holiday.

After the death of Soumana, M’am begins increasingly to desire a degree of independence from Abdou. By the time the second novel *Maman a un amant*, begins we see that M’am has taken up Loukoum’s jewellery making business. She is increasingly successful as a small business woman and it is not long before she is the chief breadwinner of the family. Clearly this involves the attainment of a material emancipation such as Tanga or Ateba cannot dream of. M’am compounds this success on a personal level, she begins to be more confident in her dealings with others, to dress more attractively and according to her own tastes. Eventually she takes a white lover with whom she experiences sexual pleasure for the first time. Again, this may be seen as the sort of celebration of her sexuality and her identity as a woman that Tanga and Ateba do not achieve. If, however, we see M’am gaining in her confidence in herself as a talented, attractive woman, we must not forget that this progress has a discursive element to it. This is displayed not just in M’am’s increasing desire to learn how to read and write, but textually in the prefacing of each chapter with an entry from her memoirs. These are addressed to an unidentified interlocutor and again we see the importance placed on the
creation of a discursive community and the reappropriation of women’s stories. This is clear from the first words of the novel: ‘Oh l’Amie je veux te raconter une histoire’ (Beyala 1992, 5). Furthermore, throughout these entries we see M’am’s awareness of the power of discursivity in the formulation of subjectivity: ‘La femme est née à genoux aux pieds de l’homme – Cette phrase a bâti mon royaume intérieur’ (Beyala 1992, 21).

It is by refusing such doxic commandments, by telling to herself and to others a different story about what and who she is, that M’am is able to take the liberating steps that she does. It should come as no surprise that, after a period with her lover, the novel should end with M’am returning to Abdou. He is by this time a changed man and the terms of their marriage have altered in her favour. By returning to the family she has raised, within the African community, M’am retains those aspects of her African identity that she needs or wants. These involve an emphasis on community, ‘l’esprit du tribu’ and a privileging of the emotional bonds of family life. At the same time, however, the institutionalized aspects of these relations no longer en fetter her. In many ways, then, these are the most hopeful of the novels we have examined. Family life as envisaged here can be supportive and caring, based on equality and respect. That this hope holds for the future and may involve the inclusion of men in a ‘feminine’ discursive community is underlined by the fact that M’am’s memoirs are translated by Loukoum himself.

It is interesting to note that while Beyala’s first two novel’s were set exclusively in Africa, the Loukoum novels take place entirely in Paris. Her next two novels, Assèze l’africaine (1994) and Les Honneurs perdus (1996) feature heroines who travel from Africa to Paris, allowing Beyala to focus closely upon the interplay of cultural difference and the construction of a discursive community of women in the interstices of national cultures. The journeys her characters undertake are both literal and symbolic, but they are not linear, the status of Africa as a point of origin and of Europe as a destination are both problematized. As in all Beyala’s fiction there is a recognition of the specific problems arising from
African and European contexts and from the movement between them, but this polarity is subsidiary to a transnational solidarity amongst women

In Assèze l’Africaine the narrator’s sister Sorraya appears a typically westernized African woman, but like the characters in so many of the texts we have examined she eventually becomes disillusioned with his assimilationist ideal: ‘Jamais je ne serais considérée comme une Blanche. Je n’appartiens à rien. Une hybride’ (Beyala 1994, 339). It is salutary to come across so negative an invocation of hybridity in an age when so much postcolonial theory would have us believe in it as a universal panacea. As Nicki Hitchcott points out there is a strong echo here of Samba’s distress in L’Aventure ambiguë. Hitchcott goes on to argue, however, that

The narrative of Assèze l’Africaine problematizes hybridity when it is the result of an individual attempting to choose one culture over another. On the other hand, the text simultaneously promotes a more positive blending of cultures [...].

This international multiculturalism connects with Beyala’s vision of ‘féminitude’ as a movement of international solidarity between women in the world. It also reflects a shift towards a notion of contemporary African femininity that is no longer constrained by the binary axes of tradition and modernity or Africa and the West. (1999, 132-33)

A similar pattern can be observed in Les Honneurs perdus, the prize winning novel that caused so much controversy. Here too we are offered distinctions between ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ and ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ only to have these distinctions playfully deconstructed. Here too we find privileged the relationships between women and the link between corporeality and discursivity. The novel’s heroine Saïda grows up in New Bell or Couscousville a poverty stricken area of Douala. Despite her incurable optimism her life consists of a series of disappointments and in middle age she leaves to seek her fortune in Paris: ’J’entrevoyais Paris et je reprenais espoir’ (Beyala 1996, 147). The novel’s division into two parts, one set in Couscousville and the other in Paris might lead us to expect some form of linear trajectory, but such expectations are constantly undermined. Couscousville is a complex location.
Although blighted by poverty and effectively used as a dumping ground by the municipal authorities it is not simply the point of origin for some form of journey towards a metropolitan modernity. Within this community Modernity and its effects are endlessly debated and a variety of attitudes are expressed. Several of these are revealed when Saïda says of her father:

Papa avait l'avantage de pouvoir à son gré contredire voluptueusement les bienfaits de la civilisation. ‘Au village, il y a toujours de quoi manger’, ou: ‘Au village il y a des gens qui connaissent des plantes pour se soigner’, ou: ‘Au village ceci, cela’. Mes compatriotes opinaient du chef, non par conviction, mais par logique. Pour eux, le passé était quelque chose à oublier, même s’il apparaissait de temps à autre nécessaire d’en parler par snobisme pour montrer que nous avions des origines [...] (Beyala 1996, 62)

This passage reveals a complex attitude towards the past on the part of the inhabitants of New Bell and their attitude to the present is no less ambiguous. Saïda’s mother claims that ‘la modernité s’amène à grands pas. Il faut changer les choses si on veut survivre’ (Beyala 1996, 97). At the same time the material impoverishment of Couscousville isolates it from many aspects of modernity: ‘Nous vivions isolés [...] Nous nous dépatouillions avec les débris de la civilisation, sans rien attendre de la nation à laquelle nous semblions appartenir’ (Beyala 1996, 96). Despite this exclusion, however, there is a sense in which Couscousville is easily influenced by the progression of the outside world: ‘Les nouvelles modes les changements, nous les vivions de manière naturelle’ (Beyala 1996, 60). This process of change even encompasses (limited) education for women, from which Saïda benefits:

C’est à peu près à ce moment-là que Papa m’envoya à l’école coranique du quartier. Il n’était pas convaincu comme certain Couscousiers, que ‘les enfants instruits d’aujourd’hui feront les familles aisées de demain’ mais, déjà à cette époque, beaucoup d’hommes préféraient des femmes qui savaient lire et écrire. Cet intérêt n’était pas d’un ordre matériel – puisque les femmes n’occupaient pas de hautes fonctions administratives – mais il correspondait à un critère d’élévation sociale. (Beyala 1996, 46)

In general though the capacity for any individual resident of Couscousville to achieve any significant social elevation is, at best, limited. The local pharmacist
for example dreams of achieving some great medical breakthrough and of flying first class to Sweden to be awarded the Nobel Prize. In reality his achievements are considerably less obvious and Saïda observes with unintentional irony that:

Le pharmacien découvrait sans cesse quelque chose [...]. Quand certain d’entre nous mouraient malgré le pouvoir hyper efficace de ses décoctions, monsieur le pharmacien disait: ‘C’est la vie!’ (Beyala 1996, 50)

The pharmacist’s greatest success is to bring in the authorities when New-Bell is afflicted with a cholera epidemic, but even here he is unable to persuade the rest of the community that he has acted for the best and succeeds only in having Couscousville quarantined. When a team of doctors does arrive from Douala, they quickly rebuff his offers of assistance.

One character who does succeed in escaping New-Bell is Saïda’s childhood friend Amila de Pontifuis, who marries a rich man from the capital. Yet this too is an ambiguous development as in doing so Amila is seen to lose her own identity:

Je vis Amila de Pontifuis de loin en loin. Elle ne s’adressait plus à moi qu’en français, et quand je ne comprenais pas, elle parlait en foufouldé, hésitante, cherchant ses mots avec un accent étrange. (Beyala 1996, 70)

‘Tout a changé entre nous’, dis-je [...] ‘Nous somme différentes maintenant.’ (Beyala 1996, 71)

Amila de Pontifuis hantait mes pensées et je n’arrivais pas à m’expliquer sa métamorphose. Je compris néanmoins que les espaces qui séparaient les êtres et les choses peuplés d’esprits qui nous déplaçaient, comme des marionnettes. (Beyala 1996, 72)

So Amila’s marriage is one level destructive, but it is also widely seen as a positive form of social advancement by the other residents of Couscous: ‘tous étaient d’accord: Amila de Pontifuis avait une chance exceptionnelle’ (Beyala 1996, 75). Saïda in contrast remains unmarried and thus increasingly becomes a figure of ridicule.
Si durant cette période vous auriez eu le loisir de traverser notre ville-bidon, de croiser un groupe de Couscousières... vous les auriez entendues jacasser et rire derrière leurs masques [...]. Elles se moquaient de moi, Saïda Bénérafa, vieille fille entre les vieilles [...]. (Beyala 1996, 78)

In order to counteract this derision Saïda invents a European fiancé, but when her deception is discovered she appears yet more ridiculous.

Eventually after her father’s death she decides to go to Paris, encouraged by her mother. What she discovers there, however, is a world that is in some ways not so very different from that she has left behind. When the second section of the book opens Saïda is in the process of being evicted from the apartment of her ex fiancées cousin, who she has told us a few pages earlier: ‘m’hébergerait obligatoirement par solidarité africaine’ (Beyala 1996, 150). With the collapse of this solidarity (after two years), Saïda finds herself on the streets where she encounters Marcel Pignon Marcel and through him a community of homeless people. The themes of poverty, displacement, exteriority and the emphasis on the function and importance of community in these circumstances are strikingly similar to those in Couscousville. A fact that is noted somewhat bitterly by Saïda: ‘Quitter Couscous et me retrouver clocharde à Paris. Je n’étais pas là pour retrouver Couscous version Parisienne’, and by Marcel:

Je ne comprenais pas pourquoi les ethnologues perdaient leur temps à étudier les tribus bantous ou les pygmées dans de lointaines contrées [...] puisque les clochards, eux aussi constituaient une tribu. (Beyala 1996, 165)

Through emphasizing Saïda’s encounters with the Parisian dispossessed at the beginning of the book’s second section Beyala emphasizes certain continuities between African and European milieu, not least in the ways in which people respond to conditions of poverty and exclusion. The complexities of cultural difference and identification are best illustrated, however, through Saïda’s relationship with Ngaremba, the ‘Négresse-princesse-et-dignitaire [...] Sénégalaise de la région de Casamance’ (Beyala 1996, 171) who employs Saïda.
as a live in childminder-cum-maid. Saïda is shocked by what she perceives as Ngaremba’s western, decadence, her clothes, her straightened hair and especially her cohabitation with her French boyfriend. In contrast Saïda sees herself as representative of a morally superior ‘African’ tradition. But Ngaremba who works ‘comme écrivain public au service de la communauté immigrée de Belleville’ (Beyala 1996, 171) and is dedicated to ‘le développement de l’Afrique’ (Beyala 1996, 171) identifies herself as just as African as Saïda. Her vision of what it means to be African is more fluid than Saïda’s, less constrained by tradition, as is revealed in the following exchange between the two women:

– Pas musulman comme moi, dis-je. La charia dit que […].
– Je m’en fous, de ta charia. Je suis la maîtresse de mon esprit.
(Beyala 1996, 178)

Indeed Saïda’s much prized virginity which for her symbolizes adherence to a ‘traditional’ morality is a source of ridicule to the other immigrants of Belleville and especially to Ngaremba:

– Je suis une jeune fille, moi!
– À ton âge […].
Ngaremba éclata de rire.
(Beyala 1996, 175-76)

Indeed Ngaremba later goes on to refer to Saïda’s virginity as ‘Contre la liberté de la femme […] Contre sa dignité’ (Beyala 1996, 283).

We should not be tempted, however, to see Ngaremba simply in opposition to Saïda. Whilst it initially appears that Ngaremba represents a much more positive vision of African femininity than the increasingly absurd Saïda, the relationship between the two women is soon shown to be more complex than this. Although appears to be very much in control, cracks soon become apparent in the façade of Ngaremba’s life. She ruefully acknowledges that her association of African intellectuals is little more than a talking shop: ‘J’ai créé un club des intellectuels africains pour trouver des solutions aux misères de mon terre. Tout ce qu’ils savent faire, c’est boire, manger, danser et rire’ (Beyala 1996,
In addition to her political impotence, problems also emerge in Ngaremba's relationship with her lover Frédéric and with her daughter Loulouze, who is increasingly attached to Saïda. As Saïda becomes more secure she attends night school where she not only improves her French but also receives informal sex education from the other women. Saïda begins to have romantic liaisons, but she tells us: 'Paradoxalement, au fur et à mesure que ma vie sociale s'améliorait, celle de Ngaremba se détériorait' (Beyala 1996, 330). Ngaremba becomes increasingly ill and depressed and when she becomes pregnant she determines to abort the child if it is a girl.

Throughout the text, as in all Beyala's novels, the relationship between discourse and the body is of crucial importance. Back in New Bell much of Saïda's exclusion is caused by her spinster status, her response to this is a purely discursive one: she invents a fictional fiancé – she tells stories – though the outcome of this fiction is not successful. Similarly in Paris a great deal of both Saïda and Ngaremba's self-definition is sexual. Saïda places great emphasis on her virginity, Ngaremba on her sexual liberation, both things, however, exist essentially as discourse and as the novel progresses the discontinuity between discourse and the physical is gradually exposed. For Saïda this is a liberating process as she becomes more comfortable with her sexuality, for Ngaremba the process is one of disillusion as she realizes that the sexual independence and emotional autonomy at the heart of her self-image are illusory and that she is deeply dependent upon Saïda, Loulouze and to a lesser extent Frédéric.

The fates of the two women now seem inversely linked and it is no coincidence that it is as Saïda returns from her first sexual encounter with Marcel Pignon Marcel, feeling like 'une femme neuve' (Beyala 1996, 341) that Ngaremba commits suicide, throwing herself from the window of the home they have shared. This is a highly ambiguous conclusion; Ngaremba's brand of progressive femininity seems to have failed her, while Saïda who has so often appeared absurdly reactionary goes from strength to strength. At the same time Saïda can only do this by becoming in some degree more like Ngaremba. Any
concrete distinction between tradition and modernity is thus effectively erased. The structure of the book seems also to suggest that Ngaremba’s (auto) destruction is a necessary condition of Saïda’s fulfillment. This need not be read as an opposition between the two women, though it does indicate difference, but can instead be seen as indication of a deep kinship between them, so deep that the two no longer can or need to exist at the same time. Typically, the moment of Ngaremba’s death is also a moment of union as Saïda finally shouts ‘Je t’aime’ (Beyala 1996, 342) though her voice is lost in the crowd. So like Irène and Ateba or Tanga and Anne-Claude, Ngaremba and Saïda constitute a couple in which the identity of one partner is assumed by the other at the moment of their death. Two women occupying one ontological space. Like Tanga or Irène, Ngaremba will live on through Saïda: ‘Je compris que Ngaremba n’est pas morte’ (Beyala 1996, 348). These pairings of women correspond to Beyala’s vision of feminine communities which transcend cultural or geographic differences or determinations.

This process is mirrored in Beyala’s textual practice. In all her novels she emphasizes the relations (positive and negative) between discourse and sexuality and of course her own writing constitutes an ongoing instantiation of this link. As we saw in relation to C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, Beyala is also concerned to articulate a number of voices within her novels. Les Honneurs perdus which seems to be narrated from a single viewpoint may seem like the exception to this rule, but here too we find multiplicity in the novel’s intertext. Like Mariama Bâ, Beyala makes allusion to both French and African literary traditions. Writing a novel in French inevitably alludes to the former, but the text is sprinkled with allusions to classic African texts. The men hear Saïda returning from work in Couscousville are ‘cheminots’ raising in our minds the memory of Les Bouts de bois de Dieu. Similarly one of Ngaremba’s clients, for whom she writes a letter is called Samba Diallo, the same name as the unfortunate protagonist of L’Aventure ambiguë. When Saïda invents her fictitious fiancé she sings to him extracts from the Song of Songs from which Beyala herself took the title of C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée. Were the plagiarism identified by Pierre Assouline found to be deliberate we could incorporate it
within this textual procedure, extending it to anglophone texts from Africa and America, as Beyala continues to deny these claims, however, we should perhaps be a little careful about extending this analysis.

In any case, we can see how Beyala takes further the projects initiated by Bà and Bugul. By concentrating on the body and its representations, by giving voice to women of very different origins and emphasizing the community between them, Beyala is able to create a discursive space that is not ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’, that is neither ‘African’ or ‘Western’, but which is distinctively feminine.
Chapter Seven

In the preceding chapters we have seen how a number of recent West African novelists explore cultural and personal identity. We have seen how Yambo Ouologuem explodes concepts of cultural or narrative authenticity and how Kourouma’s pessimistic political outlook combines with the creation of an innovative form of discourse that stands at the intersection of African and European languages and cultural forms. In the work of women writers like Mariama Bâ and Calixthe Beyala we have seen a rethinking of identity that draws upon and mediates between African and non-African influences. The work of these women also demonstrates the link between personal and collective forms of identity as well as exploring the centrality of discursive processes in the construction of cultures and selves.

I would now like to look at how all these features are developed in the work of two further recent West African writers, Sony Labou Tansi and Werewere Liking. Both writers emphasize the importance of discourse in identity formation and the interrelation of the personal and political. In their texts we find a positive rewriting of cultural identity based on their continuing positioning of themselves at the interstices of local and global cultures and on the invention of distinct (hybrid) form of artistic practice. In this sense they continue the tradition inaugurated by Kourouma, but, as we shall see, they aim much more self consciously to transcend the African context and position themselves within a global literature.

Labou Tansi was born in 1947 at Kimwanza in what was then the Belgian Congo, subsequently Zaire, and is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was member of the Muvimba clan of the Kongo ethnic group. At the age of about twelve he crossed from one bank of the river Congo to the other (an early experience of interstiality?), moving to what was then the French Congo, later to become the People’s Republic of Congo, where he lived until his death in 1995. Over the course of the 1970s and ’80s he achieved considerable renown,

For this reason, amongst others, discussion of Labou Tansi's work has tended to locate him within a historical/geographical specificity. It focuses either on the political nature of his novels, or on his deep spiritual affinity with his Congolese homeland. In both cases, what is emphasized is his attempt to represent the contemporary realities of the Congo in novelistic form. Within this paradigm we may also include those formal studies that examine the way in which Labou Tansi's French is influenced by the kikongo language. Like similar studies of Kourouma these analyses are concerned to show how the French language is realigned to articulate a specific local reality. The predominant critical attitude is thus epitomised by Jean Michel Devésa's analysis of Labou Tansi's work as the attempt to 'dire l'authenticité du terroir dans la langue et les catégories des autres' (1996, 112). In other words, he is perceived primarily as a writer defined by the time and place from which he writes and who writes primarily about that time and place.

I would argue, however, that we find in Labou Tansi's work a treatment of collective or cultural identity that is universal in its implications and cannot easily be contained within a narrative of localized identity or politics. As with so many of the writers we have considered, Labou Tansi's novels are best viewed within a global framework, as indicated by his claim that 'Je crois que chaque peuple a son théâtre, alors que le roman est beaucoup plus universel' (1988b, 89).
It might be objected that this approach may lead to a ‘de-Africanization’ of his work. Jean Claude Blachère maintains that ‘on ne reconnaît plus l’Afrique dans les romans de Sony Labou Tansi’ (1993, 226). This is going too far. It would be ridiculous to argue that Labou Tansi’s work is not inspired and informed by his sense of place; just as it would be to claim that it has no relevance outside the Congolese context. Indeed, the nature of the collective identity Labou Tansi describes is precisely that it mediates between these tendencies towards localization or universality. This mediation forms part of his rewriting of collective identity as hybridized and assimilative. In this sense he is more like Kourouma or Beyala than Ouologuem. Where Ouologuem provides a view of social relations characterized solely by violence and exploitation, Labou Tansi’s treatment is based upon the negotiation of a new discursive location from which to articulate identity, although his pursuit of this project is more self-conscious than Kourouma’s. This discursive space operates in the interstices of totalizing ontological claims, allowing for a concept of hybrid, or rhizomatic identity similar to that described by Glissant; which operates through the celebration and incorporation of difference, not through its exclusion. It thus allows for positive relations between individuals in a way that Le Devoir de violence, for example, does not.

Like all the writers we have looked at, Labou Tansi locates collective identity as a function of discourse. The assembly of multiple individual subjects into a collective group must be regulated by language/discourse, both as a pre-requisite for intersubjective communication and because the formulation of subjectivity, be it collective or individual, can occur only through the essentially discursive processes of identification and differentiation. Furthermore, the ascription of properties to a posited object is itself a discursive procedure, a naming. Who we are as a group, a nation, a tribe or a family is thus largely a matter of the stories we tell about ourselves. Stories are the ties that bind, but they are also the forum in which we ascribe positive characteristics to the group. Labou Tansi’s novels are both depictions and examples of this practice. Throughout his work we find an emphasis on the centrality of discourse to social experience, a conviction that both contemporary identity and our
conception of cultural history are constituted by discursive practices. As Estina Bronzario says in *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*: ‘l’homme n’a que les mots pour dire même ce que les mots ne savent dire […] Que les mots pour exister’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 148). Labou Tansi himself claims that ‘Il n’y a que la fable qui nous permet d’approcher les choses’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 53). If we find here an echo of the Foucauldian insistence that discourse forms the basis of all cultural praxis, we find also an awareness of the dangers inherent in this discourse. Labou Tansi knows that if discourse is power, then this power can be manipulated and abused, as a kikongo proverb has it, *ludimi i kima kiamba* – language is a dangerous thing (Devésa 1996, 47). He also recognizes, however, that discourse can be used to positive effect as a vehicle for the amelioration and elucidation of social relations.

The struggle to control discourse is a consistent concern in Labou Tansi’s novels and, as for Beyala, authority over the social/collective subject is equated with the ability to command the terms of its representation. This control can only be exercised, however, if social discourse is (falsely) represented as a containable, monologic phenomenon. That is, as something that can be entirely defined by a combination of one or more fixed discursive sites (e.g., nation, race, class, gender). Such sites are portrayed as ontologically real; as being genuine properties that are in themselves sufficient to represent the individual or collective subject. This is precisely the sort of mystification we analysed in chapter three and which Ouologuem so effectively exposes. Discursively, such sites function through a process of static differentiation; one can be outside or inside, but not both. Labou Tansi refuses to be constrained by the apparent authority of such a doxa, seizing the opportunity to rewrite the possibilities of social relations. He repositions collective identity within a dialogic, overdetermined discourse that operates outside and between the circumscrip tive parameters of these monologic, discursive topoi and their ontological corollaries. He is thus able to articulate a vision of collective identity and of cultural history that revels in fluidity and openness not in stasis and closure. It evades Ouologuem’s charges of falsification because it makes no totalizing claims. Whereas, in *Le Devoir de violence* or the work of Beyala or
Bugul, cultural discourse serves only to perpetuate oppressive power relations, in Labou Tansi’s novels it is designed to facilitate a positive interaction between apparently different subjects or cultures, who can no longer define themselves simply in terms of this difference.

In the gap created by his rejection of conventional social doxa, Labou Tansi is free to reconstitute cultural identity. This gesture is performed through a process of reinscription, which may be loosely collected into three forms: thematic, linguistic and textual.

In the first of these we find that the dramatization of the struggle to control discourse recurs throughout Labou Tansi’s novels. *La Vie et demie* tells the story of Katamalanasie, a fictional African state ruled by a despotic line of totalitarian leaders, ‘les Guides Providentiels’. These autocrats attempt a violent regulation of all forms of discourse. They are opposed by the rebel leader Martial, who is brutally murdered at the beginning of the novel, and his descendants. The sanctioned discourse of the Guides portrays them as the paternalistic leaders of a unified nation-state, benevolently directed through a ‘communautarisme tropical’ (Labou Tansi 1979, 64). Any deviance from this party line is brutally repressed. The followers of Martial challenge this hegemony with a proliferating discourse of defiance:

> Au paravent idéologique que le guide avait enfourché [...] Martial avait opposé une seule phrase: ‘Qu’on me prouve que la dictature est communautaire’, et les gens de Martial paraphrasait Martial en disant ‘Qu’on me prouve que l’inhumanité est communautaire’. (Labou Tansi 1979, 64)

These aphorisms are inscribed everywhere, in books, on walls, even on people. Whereas the discourse of the Guides is closed, adhering to a fixed pattern from which no transgression is permitted, Martial’s discourse is open, allowing for paraphrase and transformation. Martial differs from the Guides in this crucial respect, even though he is at times a brutal and authoritarian figure. Even though they do not fully comprehend the power of discourse: ‘tu veux m’abattrer avec de l’encre? Et pourquoi? Nous avons beaucoup de plomb dans
ce pays’ (Labou Tansi 1979, 80), the Guides are determined to exercise complete control over the representation of social relations. This determination can be seen in their prohibition even of the colour – black – in which the opposition’s tracts are written.

The attempt to wipe out any non-official discourse can be seen even more clearly in the relations of the Guides to the Batsoua pygmies who inhabit a remote forest region of the country. The Batsoua speak a different language from the rest of the country, ‘une langue qui coulait comme un ruisseau de sons fous’ (Labou Tansi 1979, 91) – note the image of fluidity – and which does not allow a conception of the nation-state: ‘la terre n’a pas d’autre nom que la forêt’ (Labou Tansi 1979, 96). Chaïdana II the granddaughter of Martial attempts to explain this idea to her Batsoua companion Kapahacheu,

– Limites. Pour séparer. Il faut séparer, tu comprends? – Le oui de Kapahacheu ne sortait que pour ne pas contrarier Chaïdana. Il ne comprenait pas. (Labou Tansi 1979, 97)

So the pygmies too possess a discourse which does not function exclusively through differentiation and exclusion. This makes them the natural allies of Martial’s followers and the natural enemies of the Guides, to whom free discourse represents a very real threat. Typically the brutal integration of the Batsoua is disguised in the language of benevolence: ‘c’est pour leur bien: tuez ceux qui résistent’ (Labou Tansi 1979, 102). The pygmies do resist this attempted genocide and eventually the region in which they live becomes the secessionist country of Darmellia. The increasingly ruthless attempts of the Guides to quash this challenge to their ‘One Nation’ rhetoric, eventually lead to a series of apocalyptic wars with which the novel ends.

Although there is no happy resolution in La Vie et demie, we can see that to Labou Tansi the creation of an alternative discursive reality offers the only real method of countering tyranny. The ending of the novel is pessimistic because the Darmellians themselves sink into a form of despotism, organizing society around a closed dialectic of retribution and revenge. The danger Labou Tansi
warns us of is not that discursive freedom may fail us, but that we may fail it.

These issues can be observed in all of Labou Tansi’s novels. For example, in *L’Anté peuple* (1981) when the disgraced teacher Dadou finds himself aligned with Angolan rebels, they infiltrate the towns in the guise of madmen. Thus, the lunatic, traditionally associated with anarchic, uninhibited discourse, becomes refigured as a symbol of political liberation. Similarly, in *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985), the people of the Coast are portrayed as possessing a lively, independent discourse. By contrast, the authorities of Nsanga Norda promote a monologic, nationalist discourse and thus come to see the people of Valancia as a threat: ‘Ils nous en veulent à cause des relations privilégiées que nous avons avec la réalité’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 143). Like *La Vie et demie*, *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* opens with a murder, in this case the murder by Lorsa Lopez of his wife Estina Benta. Fifty years or more pass before the authorities arrive to investigate the crime. Fifty years which are filled with a burlesque series of increasingly bizarre episodes, including the painstaking re-assembly of the crime scene every time the police are rumoured to be arriving. During this time, the crime comes to be seen as ‘un crime communautaire’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 33). Within the schema of the novel the murder operates as a quasi-textual figure through which the community comes to re-examine and transform its internal relations: ‘Lorsa Lopez était devenu notre mauvaise conscience à tous. Nous le regardions comme s’il avait été nous tous’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 38). When the police do eventually arrive, they declare Lorsa Lopez’s parrot guilty of the murder. So the parrot, stereotypical figure for the repetition and transformation of discourse, is identified as responsible for the crime which has generated the maverick discourse of this rebellious community. Symbolically, then, it is as though the agents of authority identify discourse itself as the root of subversion.

Of course they are right to do so. The social discourse of the people of Valancia, like that of Martial’s followers, is far more powerful than the official discourse that would constrain it. Although the people of the Coast have a strong sense of place, ‘On n’est jamais de nulle part. La terre nous marque’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 109), and of history, ‘Nous avons derrière nous vingt-sept siècles d’histoire dans
la dignité’ (Labou Tansi 1985, 21), the conception of collective identity they ascribe to is defiantly non-exclusive, as witnessed by the fact that many of the key representatives of the Coast (e.g. Sarngata Nola and Zarcanio Nala) are actually from elsewhere. Tradition is seen not as a totalizing point of origin, but as the foundation for innovation. Identification replaces differentiation as the primary determinant of social relations. A similar emphasis is to be found in Labou Tansi’s last novel *Le Commencement des douleurs* (1995). There is the same concern with terroir, ‘Les géographies sont coupables de l’histoire qu’elles sécrètent’ (Labou Tansi 1995, 16), but also on the need to configure an identity that transcends it. Throughout the novel we find an urge to reconcile respect for tradition, ‘Arrête donc de mettre ton doigt dans les yeux de la coutume’ (Labou Tansi 1995, 55), with the awareness that ‘le monde a changé de fesses’ (Labou Tansi 1995, 56). The idea that tradition should form the basis of further development is also something Labou Tansi ascribed to in the context of literary production, claiming that ‘il faut inventer une tradition’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 125).

This brings us to the second category of reinscription, namely the reinscription of language. Or, more specifically, the transformation of the French language to create the type of heteroglossic discourse we have described. Labou Tansi’s prose is characterized by an abundance of hyperbole, metaphor, oxymoron and neologism. He is also highly influenced by the vocabulary and grammatical patterns of his own kikongo language and these too are re-inscribed in French. As in *Les Soleils des indépendances*, the effect of these techniques is to defamiliarize the French language, to shape it into a new mode of speech. The concept of *différance* would insist that all language is, by its very nature, over determined, that each sign is marked by the traces of an infinity of other signs. Meaning can never be finite, but is endlessly deferred by the manner of its own production. Within this context we might claim that Labou Tansi brings this process out into the open. He is certainly drawing upon the literary tradition inaugurated by Kourouma, but it is also a concept that would already have

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been familiar to him through his upbringing in kikongo, of which he says: ‘Dans la langue de ma mère est posé sous le langage un sous-langage, sous le dire, un sous-dire’ (cited in Ngal 1982, 138). The presentation to the reader of unfamiliar grammatical structures, new words and contradictory phrases, compels us to recognize the opacity of language. The very terms in which Labou Tansi’s discourse is articulated, its linguistic characteristics, force us to recognize its open, heteroglossic, nature, its irreducibility to a closed system of interpretation. Thus Labou Tansi reinscribes the French language as the articulation of an identity that cannot be contained within a totalized ontology. This radical revision of French, described by Valérie Layraud as ‘une réinvention “tropicale” du français’ (1988, 91) and by Labou Tansi as ‘travaux d’aménagement’ (1989, 4), might, in our terms, be characterized as the invention of a new form of social idiolect. This is also a process that is dramatized in the novels as characters self-consciously coin new words and expressions.

As well as reworking one specific language (French), Labou Tansi also reconstructs broader cultural and literary discourses. This is the third of our categories – textual re-inscription. Labou Tansi’s intertext is a labyrinthine structure in which a great number of sources are interwoven and re-presented. In the same way that he uses kikongo words as the basis of some of his neologisms, we find a great deal of Kongo culture transcribed into the novels. For example, in Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez we find frequent allusion to Kongo etiological myth, to the twelve clans into which the Kongo are divided and to the traditional days of the Kongo calendar. Similarly, in the same novel, the enormous eating and drinking contest at Estina Bronzario’s party recalls the théâtre des rois and the Lemba, two of the traditional forms of Kongo theatre described by Labou Tansi, as does the ‘procès pour rire’ of Le Commencement des douleurs. This sort of re-inscription is not simply part of a postcolonial perspective but is itself a facet of kikongo culture, which works, Labou Tansi tells us, through the transformation and proliferation of traditional stories: ‘Ma grand-mère me racontait les histoires, mais toutes ne venait pas du passé. Elle en inventait aussi [...]’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 125).
Of course, the precise nuances of these influences will escape most European readers, but they nevertheless contribute to our sense that the text is positioned in the interstices of a variety of cultural traditions. We may also find a number of intertextual references that are more familiar. Most oft cited of these is the influence of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. As long ago as 1982 Daniel Henri Pageaux published an article outlining some similarities between the two authors’ work (Devésa 1996). Naturally, this is reminiscent of the controversy surrounding Le Devoir de violence, although Labou Tansi has never been subjected to the same critical opprobrium that Ouologuem has suffered. Certainly, it has become something of a truism to say of him that he is heavily influenced by Marquez. There is some stylistic common ground between the two writers. Tchichellé Tchivéla identifies the following (amongst others) as characteristics of the Spanish American novel which can also be found in Labou Tansi’s work:

> la prédominance des formes baroques, le délire imaginatif, le réalisme magique ou fantastique [...] la dislocation chronologique du récit [...] la multiplicité des voix et des points de vue. (1988, 30)

The significance of any or all of these features is open to question, all may be seen as common characteristics of any modern novel. We do know, however, that Labou Tansi was very impressed by Marquez’s work: ‘C’est fantastique ce con de Garcia Marquez’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 222). We also know that, unlike Ouologuem (or perhaps having learnt from his fate), he was troubled at having constantly to account for this influence; to the point where he denied even having read Marquez, much to the regret of his friend Sylvain Bemba ‘Je déteste que l’on ait fait dire à Sony qu’il n’a jamais lu Marquez “avant”’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 84). Whatever the exact nature and extent of this influence, two things are clear. Firstly, the ‘re-inscription’ of Marquez forms part of the transformative tradition outlined above, as made clear by Labou Tansi’s comment that ‘Garcia Marquez, pour moi ce n’est pas un écrivain, c’est une grand-mère’ (cited in Devésa 1996, 62). Secondly, by alluding to the work of an internationally popular and respected author Labou Tansi provides yet another nexus of cross cultural references to sustain his dissident, hybridized narrative.
This process of cultural cross fertilization is augmented by references to European texts, in particular the Bible. The relationship of Labou Tansi’s characters to Christianity is ambiguous. Just as Christianity functions in a kind of spiritual intertext with older beliefs, so too the language of the Bible infects Labou Tansi’s narrative. Jean Michel Devésa has identified passages in *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* that are intertextual borrowings from *The Apocalypse of St John* and the *Book of Job* (1996). Even without such detailed textual recognition, however, it is clear that Labou Tansi’s language has Biblical inflections, as in this passage from *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*:

> Puis, à cause du cri de la falaise nous avons pensé que le Fils de la Lumière sortirait de l’océan [...] Nous nous sommes tous mis à chanter le *Magnificat*. (Labou Tansi 1985, 56)

So Labou Tansi utilizes a process of textual ‘borrowing’ which recalls Ouologuem’s narrative technique and foreshadows, perhaps, that of Beyala. As with *Le Devoir de violence*, mapping out the full intertext of Labou Tansi’s work is a potentially open-ended process. Even with the limited number of examples we have examined, however, it is clear that this textual re-inscription contributes in two key ways to the creation of the sort of hybridized discourse I am proposing. Firstly, by making the text literally heteroglossic; it contains embedded within it voices from a variety of cultural sources. Secondly by making the text itself a culturally hybrid object; it performs a Kongo cultural practice (re-inscription, transformation) within a Western genre (the novel).

We begin to see then how, through his re-inscriptive techniques, Labou Tansi effects a rewriting of social discourse as polyphonic. We have seen why this discourse is central to the formation of the cultural subject and why this subject will always be plural. The over determinacy of discourse ensures that meaning will always be in excess of interpretation. If identity must be discursively constituted, then any identity claim will bear within it the traces of an infinite number of other such claims. It thus becomes impossible to construct subjectivity purely in terms of difference, and identification is adopted as the privileged mode of relation. We have also observed how, far from de-
politicizing Labou Tansi's work, this sort of analysis actually ascribes to it an acute political importance, as a politics of oppression can only be sustained through the application of a monologic representation of social reality.

In many ways Labou Tansi's oeuvre completes the project initiated by Ouologuem and Kourouma a decade before the publication of *La Vie et demie*. By reading these novelists in conjunction we can see how the savage processes of cultural demystification and alienation can be allied to a more affirmative project, a recuperation of positive communal values through a dialogue of inclusion and identification. I do not wish to suggest that Labou Tansi provides a post scriptural happy ending to the work of earlier writers. As we have seen, Labou Tansi's novels are themselves often very pessimistic, but they do sketch out a form of discourse which makes this positive reconfiguration of social relations possible.

The consequences of this are manifold, but one remaining objection is worth dealing with as it is also applicable to the analyses of all the other authors we have looked at. It is clear I hope that Jean-Claude Blachère's accusation that 'on ne reconnaît plus l'Afrique dans les romans de Sony Labou' (1993, 226) cannot be substantiated. An alternative complaint might be that that this form of hybrid identity functions *only* as a specific response to the historical contingencies of life in contemporary Africa, for a people whose history has evolved through the disjunctive process depicted by Ouologuem; from whom, as Labou Tansi puts it 'on a piqué cinq siècles' (1995, 109). By extrapolating from these novels a general statement about the nature of collective identity, is one not guilty of ignoring their foundation in real political or social situations? I think, however, that we can claim that Labou Tansi 's work offers an analysis of culture that transcends the socio-historical specificities of its production. As I suggested earlier, Labou Tansi certainly sees his novels as universal works and the inscription into them of an internationally sourced body of cultural reference supports this view. Furthermore, as we saw at the end of chapter three, he claims a real epistemological status for his work: 'L'art c'est la force de faire dire à la réalité ce qu'elle n'aurait pu dire par ses propres moyens' (1985,
avertissement). If as human subjects we define ourselves through a dialectic of differentiation and identification with Otherness, then Labou Tansi's narratives of subjectivity are of universal relevance. Once these narratives are posited they cannot, by their very nature, be localized or racinated. They constitute a nexus of relations that are rhizomatic, connective, transformative. Our conception of ourselves becomes determined by what we are like, rather than by what we are not like. Within this schema, geographical origin, like ethnicity or nationalism is no more than another monologic discursive locus and, like other such sites, it is transcended by its very articulation. Rootedness, whether psychological, historical or political is constantly aggressed by the onward momentum of discourse. It becomes a nonsense then to try and contain a commentary on Labou Tansi's work within a narrative of geographical specificity.

So the novels of Sony Labou Tansi provide us with a vivid impression of the power of discourse for good and evil. We see how collective identity is formulated by discourse and how it can be manipulated by it. We also see, however, that discourse can be used to construct a vision of collective subjectivity that is flexible and inclusive. We begin to see the formulation of an identity that transcends place. This provides a response to the problems of identity we have seen articulated by authors like Kane and Laye, a response that seems all the more necessary given the inadequacy of the monolithic discourses that had previously been offered as remedies for this internal alienation. If, however, this development is of great importance within the development of the African novel its relevance must, in a final analysis, exceed this framework. The issues raised throughout this study and the responses offered to them in the novels of Labou Tansi achieve a global significance, because, as Labou Tansi says: 'De tout temps, sous toutes les géographies, les problèmes fondamentaux sont les mêmes' (cited in Devésa 1996, 216).

The process of reconciliation between global and local, personal and collective, 'modern' and 'traditional' can also be observed in the work of the Cameroonian playwright, poet, actress and artist Werewere Liking. Born into the Bassa ethnic group in 1950 Liking received little formal (western) education, but grew up
steeped in the traditional culture of the Bassa. Liking is a highly prolific artist and for over a decade she has been based in Côte d'Ivoire where she has formed the Villa Ki Yi, a community of painters, musicians and especially dramatists. Most of the attention paid to Liking’s work has centred around her development of *Théâtre-Rituel*, a dramatic form based on the traditional Bassa rituals. This dramatic œuvre has been highlighted by the theoretical work of M J Hourantier, who works in conjunction with Liking. Hourantier describes the Bassa healing rituals that form the basis of much of Liking’s drama as ‘comme une psychothérapie dansée, solidement structurée’ (1979, 13). This teleological aspect of Ritual is significant. The ceremonies Liking describes are non-realist in the western sense of the term, are not indeed strictly speaking representational. As ceremonies, they are things in themselves, purporting to a specific goal, rather than representations of something. Furthermore, they are designed to effect an active intervention in the lives of their participants and audience. The *Djingo*, or healing ritual described by Hourantier in *Du Rituel à la scène chez les Bassa du Cameroun* is underwritten by the belief that the sick individual the ritual is ostensibly designed to cure is, in reality, the site of a collective/social malaise. Like the ‘talking cure’ of psychotherapy, the structure of the ritual promotes an unleashing and a stock-taking of the contents of the collective psyche. In this way the participants in the ritual are able to objectify and confront issues that concern them. Ritual thus enables social change and as such it is, in a basic sense, *political* in its impact. This is a view that is shared by Jeanne Dingome, who argues that Bassa rituals ‘serve as symbolic representations of all manner of social conflicts, providing [...] a backdrop against which higher issues of topical relevance are focused. (1990, 322)

Liking herself sees her drama as being very specifically political, claiming that ‘c’est la politique qui opère tout et l’artiste doit la suivre’ (cited in Tagné 1989, 195). Close examination of individual dramatic texts shows that they do indeed contain very specific and contemporary political commentaries. John Conteh Morgan (1994) has shown how, in Liking’s play *La Puissance de Um* (1979), the pre inhumation funeral rites of the Bassa chieftain Ntep Iliga provide an arena for his widow Ngond Libii to launch a scathing attack on the mores of Bassa
society. She begins by lamenting the impotency of women, ‘C’est ici que je vis ma vie, statique mais lovée’ (Liking 1979, 10), and ends by attacking an entire cultural edifice constructed around the valorization of the masculine:

Vous commencez par mettre dans la tête d’un pauvre enfant qu’il est l’élu des Dieux. Vous l’acculez à l’image de votre propre création.

Pour vous protéger, vous et votre satanée tribu, vos fichues traditions, vos monstrueuses conventions. (Liking 1979, 24-25)

Even without further detail, we can see that Liking succeeds in addressing a modern political agenda through the use of art forms that derive directly from traditional cultural practices. In many ways, then, Liking already achieves a synthesis between tradition and modernity, creating the possibility of a ‘third’ discursive space in which the (writing) Subject is no longer committed to an ‘African’ rootedness, nor to a ‘European’ modernity. Within this interstitial location, the subject is able to articulate and renegotiate issues of modernity and tradition, of race and identity, of homogeneity and cultural difference without deferring to a pre-determined allegiance. This equates to a shift from the ontological to the epistemological as the subject becomes free to know itself, to learn the truth of itself, rather than simply to be the object of an essentializing, ‘given’ form of identity.

It is tempting to see this aspect of Liking’s work as deriving purely from the purposive nature of her theatre. It is my belief, however, that if we examine her prose work, we can see the same attempt to rework traditional cultural forms in line with the exigencies of contemporary life and to amalgamate the African and European cultural and political heritages of which contemporary Africans are the heirs.

Orphée Dafric (1981), Liking’s first novel, reworks the Orpheus myth in an African context, proclaiming, even by its title, its roots in two cultures. In this novel, two young lovers, Orphée and Nyango, marry against the wishes of their families. In an effort to win the blessing of the gods for their marriage they
undertake the ordeal of crossing by canoe the river in full spate. In the course of
their crossing (or perhaps in a subsequent dream) Nyango is drowned and her
body lost. Refusing to accept her death, Orphée travels to the underworld
where, having successfully completed a number of ritual tests, he is allowed to
take Nyango back with him. To take a fundamental myth of the western canon
and reset it in Africa, is already to make a gesture towards a form of
cultural/artistic inclusiveness. The transposition of the Orpheus myth into
Black culture is, of course, a familiar trope. We might cite Sartre’s ‘Orphée noir’
(1948) or Marcel Camus’s film Orfeu negro (1959). Bettina Soestwohner goes as
far as to suggest that the myth has in fact an African origin ‘étant donnée que –
selon la thèse de Martin Bernal – les peuples d’Europe sont eux -mêmes venus
d’Afrique’ (1995, 43). Although she does not offer any further support for this
contention. Nonetheless, we might say that Orphée Dafric displays European
influences in as far as it is based upon a Greek myth, is in novel form and is
written in French. On the other hand, there are a number of features of the
novel that derive directly from Bassa culture. The style of the novel owes much
to the sorts of rituals Liking explores in her dramatic works. Not only does the
novel depict a form of initiation ritual, it also inherits its stylistic/structural
nature from such rituals. Hourantier identifies five phases to the traditional
ritual; first a warming up phase in which the audience is coaxed into the right
frame of mind and the scenario laid out. This may involve a period of
accusation and counter accusation during which the participants in the rite
attempt to allocate responsibility for the crisis that has precipitated it. Secondly,
comes the entry of the Healer (Hilun) who officiates the ritual through songs,
dances and interaction with the audience. The third stage is one of divination
rites and the inducement of trances, in which the Hilun makes contact with the
Bessima or spirits. This ecstatic phase is followed by the denouement in which
the aims of the ritual are achieved and the process concluded. We can see how
the structure of Orphée Dafric approximates to this schema. The text opens with
several expositionary sections in which the villagers accuse Orphée of selling
Nyango into slavery. These are followed by Orphée’s induction into a series of
rites and symbolic tests mediated by the supernatural figures of Ngué’s chariot
and the giant ant. This section in turn is followed by Orphée’s ecstatic visions
and his meetings with his (spirit) ancestors before the novel’s successful resolution.

If the structure of the book corresponds to that of traditional ritual, so too do many of its stylistic features. As with ritual, the action occurs in a dimensionless space, to which the compression of many years into a few hours lends a peculiarly cosmological aurora. We also find an emphasis on polyphony that is common to both ritual and prose text. These voices within the text tend to be incantory or declamatory rather than dialogic and there is an emphasis on the rhythms and musicality of speech that is reflected in the frequent shifts between prose and verse. Moreover, this polyphony involves a ritualistic causal element; certain voices invoke certain responses, which in turn produce certain effects and there is a strong impression that these exchanges follow a pre-existing pattern. Finally there is the importance ascribed to non-linguistic codifications. Colours, shapes, sounds and images are all loaded with significance just as they are in ritual. To us, as non-initiated readers, many of these codes and meanings will remain hidden, but their traces can be felt throughout the text, contributing to a sense of semiotic richness and hermeneutic possibility.

It is clear, then, that to the reader familiar with Théâtre-Rituel, the general process of the novel, in which a form of healing is effected through a combination of self examination and collective introspection will not seem unusual. As with Liking’s ritual theatre, however, we should not be deceived into thinking that the text does not have an overtly political dimension. It is directly critical of the colonial intervention in Africa: ‘Un jour “La morte Blanche” arriva, précédée du Saint Livre, suivi du Fusil Sainte’ (Liking 1981, 33). We also find a consistent valorization of the sort of folk wisdom that is handed down to Orphée by his father – ‘Il me montrait des herbes et m’expliquait des choses’ (Liking 1981, 42) – which in an apparent reworking of the philosophy of negritude, is privileged over the spiritually bankrupt ‘humanisme’ derived from European culture. Against this, we may set the fact that Orphée and Nyango are avowedly modern in their outlook: ‘les fiancés avaient tenu à cette commodité moderne de tout avoir dans une même maison’
(Liking 1981, 18). In some ways this makes Orphée a slightly contradictory character, but one who perfectly embodies the sort of dilemma we are considering: ‘le seul jeune homme qui s’acharnait à suivre les voies de la tradition, tout en vivant avec son temps’ (Liking 1981, 43).

This deliberate level of ambiguity hints at the breadth of Liking’s project. It would be possible to play a sort of game with the text, whereby one splits it into elements, which are then identified according to their derivation from a European or an African tradition (be it political or artistic). We can then interrogate the text as to their juxtaposition and interaction, or contradiction, of each other. This might allow us to ask a number of interesting questions about the relation of different cultural forms. Such a project would be limited, however, by the difficulty of clearly attributing diverse elements to any single, stable tradition and by the lack of any criteria by which to judge the ascendancy of competing factors. Liking’s ambition reaches much farther than this. She is concerned not merely to interrogate the interaction of different cultural forms but to achieve a genuine synthesis between them, so that the notion of difference itself becomes of limited relevance.

In many ways, Liking’s novel provides a more complete exploration of the issues surrounding cultural interaction than many of the more ‘realist’ texts we have looked at. The Orpheus myth gestures towards Europe, but by virtue of its mythic status, it also raises questions about cultural roots per se. The choice of this particular myth is not, of course, an innocent one. The myth of Orpheus encapsulates a semiotically volatile triangle of love, death and art. It can be seen to represent the power of art to transcend death and by extension the triumph of culture over nature. Within this framework, it does not seem too far-fetched to read the Orpheus story as an affirmation of identity as cultural artifice, or choice, perhaps in the sense of Foucault’s ‘esthétiques de soi’ (1984), over identity as a natural determinant, or a site of ontological fixity. At the same time, however, we must recall that Orpheus ultimately fails to save Eurydice and so the myth can also be read as an assertion of the inevitability of death/nature. This ambiguity continues with Orpheus’s own death at the
hands of the Maenads and the subsequent oracular immortality of his severed head. We can see, then, that as a myth, the Orpheus tale poses the same sort of questions and dilemmas about the power of culture that Liking is keen to explore.

Within the body of Liking’s text, we see these same issues addressed in the various trials Orphée is faced with when he descends to the underworld to find Nyango. Irene d’Almeida has emphasized the importance of balance as a motif in Orphée Dafric (1994). It is certainly true that all the trials Orphée undergoes involve attaining some sort of equilibrium. This may be physical, as in the very first ordeal of all, where Orphée and Nyango attempt (unsuccessfully) to negotiate the river in their canoe. Alternatively, the required balance may be spiritual, as in the first test in the underworld where Orphée weighs his body against his ‘fardeau intérieur’, or emotional, such as when Orphée weighs love against desire, or jealousy against trust. Most importantly of all, however, Orphée’s tests involve the attainment of a form of intellectual balance, especially in the later ordeals. Orphée learns how to reconcile his own desire for progress with the folk wisdom of his father.

In his final ecstatic vision, Orphée realizes that love alone, however powerful, is insufficient to effectuate change: ‘mon amour disparaît pour toujours parce qu’il a manqué l’efficacité: il n’a pas su ramener l’équilibre’ (Liking 1981, 50). To succeed, love too must be balanced, regulated and held in check. It is only when Orphée has realized this that he attains ‘la conscience de l’absolu’ (Liking 1981, 53). He is now able to see that as a people: ‘il nous faut préparer sérieusement: nous devons redéfinir notre idéal, reformuler le progressisme sur des nouvelles bases’ (Liking 1981, 56). Politically speaking, this involves an end to the polarity of radical pan-Africanism and pro-western conformity. Spiritually, it involves addressing the manner in which ‘la matière a trop longtemps régné, l’emportant de plus en plus sur la vie intérieur’ (Liking 1981, 57). These things can only be achieved ‘si les hommes sont préparés, s’ils retrouvent et rétablissent l’équilibre entre le corps et l’esprit’ (Liking 1981, 57). In other words, it is by learning a process of balance and compromise, that Orphée is able to
negotiate political and cultural extremism and begin to create a better society. The equilibrium he achieves equates to the occupation of an interstitial location, which, with its inherent intellectual freedom, establishes the possibility of a new discursive space from which political empowerment may be possible.

Liking suggests that such a location may best be reached through the sort of ritual initiation that Orphée undergoes: "Il semble évident que les dirigeants doivent être les initiés" (Liking 1981, 56). Whether or not one agrees with this proposal, it remains a useful suggestion, as it will help us to see how the sort of process Liking describes extends beyond the narrowly political and has radical implications for the formation of subjectivity itself.

In Orphée’s vision, the subject re-enters a dynamic relationship with itself, in which intellect and spirituality are re-valORIZED as privileged modes of cognition. This dynamic state, in which the subject actively and independently (re)constructs itself, can only be reached, however, by means of an initiatory process. Orphée must undergo ordeals in which he learns how to formulate his identity. The emphasis on learning and activity is repeated throughout the novel. Orphée’s father advises him on how to govern his thinking, replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones: ‘Mon père disait que le meilleur façon d’enrayer une forme-pensée était d’en créer un autre plus forte qui puisse absorber la première’ (Liking 1981, 45). Similarly, Liking lauds a utopian pre-colonial society in which ‘le culte fut celui de savoir’ (Liking 1981, 23). In both cases what is stressed is the ability of the self to adopt a creative, mentally dynamic, attitude to itself and its place in the world. Again, we can see the move from an ontological fixity, in which the subject accepts a prescribed, monolithic identity, to a form of epistemological activity in which the subject comes to know and shape itself through the agency of its own reason and inventive energy.

If we were searching for a western theoretical paradigm in which to locate this idea, we might refer to Foucault’s conception of ‘les arts d’existence’ (1984) or even to an Aristotelian notion of ἀνθρώπου (living well/properly). Such a
gesture risks misunderstanding the nature of the subject as imagined by Liking. It is true that Orphée learns to interrogate and reformulate his identity, becomes, as it were, a self in progress. We should not, however, equate him with a post-Freudian subject, endlessly displaced by the process of signification and locked in an agonistic relation with that which is other to itself. Liking is more concerned with a rehabilitation of the values of collectivity: ‘J’ai mission d’utiliser les outils dont je dispose pour la défense de la collectivité’ (cited in Tagne 1989, 195). Where collectivity may be understood as both a political and a psychological entity. Orphée does not go through his initiation unaided. At every stage he draws upon the experiences of others: Nyango, his father, his ancestors and older wisdoms still, such as the book of Thoth – the Egyptian god of writing and learning. His education and development are mediated, not through a process of opposition to otherness, but through a co-operation with and incorporation of the other. Thus, although Orphée comes to see himself as the dynamic dirigeant of a better society, this is not by virtue of his status as a superior, differentiated individual, but rather through the balancing of his individuality with a subsummation to a locus of collective epistemological activity. Orphée experiences the ‘désir d’être moi et non tout un peuple’ (Liking 1981, 50), but he also realizes that ‘je suis le tout dans le tout’ (Liking 1981, 53). This interactive space between the personal and the collective is similar to the dramatic space Liking creates in her theatrical work.

We can see, then, that Liking advocates a form of dynamic subjectivity in which the subject creates and recreates itself, becoming an active agent capable of effecting change. However, this form of dynamism can only be built upon the stability that inheres to a subject that has successfully achieved equilibrium: between emotion and intellect, between competing ontological claims and, perhaps most significantly, between individuality and collectivity. Thus, although Liking’s strategies are a valorization of the individual subject, they also represent, to some extent, the effacement of that subject. It is from this quasi-transcendental state that positive change may proceed: ‘Il faudra une puissance supérieure pour régler nos problèmes, mais elle n’est pas d’ailleurs qu’en nous mêmes’ (Liking 1981, 58). Throughout this study we have focused
on the issues that cluster around cultural difference and the tensions between modernity and tradition. It is now, I hope, clear how these sort of problems could be negotiated, or even erased, within the sort of framework Liking proposes.

It is important, however, that we do not repeat the mistake of construing Liking's project as operating purely on the political/psychological level. It is also an artistic enterprise. Orphée's initiation is mediated through language. What he learns, is not just how to live well, but how to speak well, for language too is something that must be exercised according to the principals of balance and economy. The structure of the text, with its moves between prose and verse, reflects this concern. Furthermore, the effective use of language is seen as a tool that may be used to effectuate change. Speaking of a utopian past society, Liking says that, "'l'initiation de l'univers" basée sur la puissance de la parole, conduisait à la maîtrise de la "mot-force": poésie – philosophie – efficacité" (Liking 1981, 22). It is important to realize, however, that Liking's project is not artistic only in as far as it is concerned with the production of a new mode of language. (Which might lead to a new form of art.) More importantly, the type of dynamic consciousness we have described, is itself analogous to and derived from the artistic form Liking adopts. We have already noted some of the artistic features that distinguish Liking's text: its polyphony, the moves into verse and its emphasis on a particular form of cause and effect. We can now see, I hope, how these forms are structurally similar to the equilibrium and incorporation that Orphée learns to practice. Moreover, the ritual initiation through which Orphée acquires this education is itself, Liking believes, an artistic form. Through his insertion into this narrative of initiation, Orphée is able to acquire the values that are encrypted within it. It is through exposure to and participation in this artistic form that Orphée learns how to think properly. Thus the psychological attitude derives from the artistic form and not vice versa. Liking's text is a representation of this ritual, but it is also stylistically commensurate with it. It is itself that which it represents. So just as Orphée is educated through his experience of the ritual, so too the reader's experience of the text provides an analogous education.
Furthermore, there are hints throughout the text that the entire initiation may occur in a dream and these emphasize that it is the artistic practice, the narrative of initiation, rather than any real initiatory processes that is the crucial factor. Although Liking herself believes in the efficacy of ritual, we can see how her art, by stylistically reflecting the practices and functions of ritual, may itself serve an identical purpose.

What have we achieved by reading Liking in these terms? We have gained several insights into the workings of Liking’s texts. We have seen how they succeed in couching modern dilemmas within the framework of traditional art forms. Indeed, they show that such forms may always have been more suited to the investigation of topical problems than certain modes of critical thought have maintained. This gesture functions both as a rehabilitation of an African artistic tradition and as a proposal for a new artistic model. We have discussed how such a model would also be a psychological and a political one and how it is structurally homogeneous in all three aspects.

If, however, Liking’s texts propose a new way of writing, they also propose a new way of reading. This is the real value of the interpretative project we have undertaken. What a text like Orphée Dafric affirms, on every level, is the power of art, the ability of non-material culture to actively intervene in the material and psychological worlds. This power is not, however, located in political didacticism, but in the way in which a text’s rhythms and textures, its artistic attributes may gently alter our perceptions and encourage us to think in a more open and responsive way. The importance of this in the context of West African literature is tremendous, as it helps us to view African texts as the subtle, complex works of art they are, rather than as political tracts or pieces of exotica. What Orphée learns from his experiences and we learn from the text, is not a particular political message (though these exist), but the importance of thinking carefully and properly. This lesson is both communicated and facilitated by artistic practice. It is through art that people and the world may change for the better. In this sense the slim volume that comprises Orphée Dafric is an
enormously ambitious enterprise. It is also one of great optimism: 'tout doit sauter [...] tous les autres “coins piégés”' (Liking 1981, 57). Orpheus does not succeed in rescuing Eurydice, but Orphée does bring Nyango safely home and in this, Liking intimates, lies hope and purpose for the future of art itself.
Conclusion

Over the last few chapters we have examined the ways in which a variety of West African authors treat questions of personal and cultural identity. In chapters one and two we saw how West African writers of the colonial period express a high degree of cultural alienation and dislocation and some of the discourses that sought to address this. In chapter three I suggested some theoretical reasons why monolithic discourses such as negritude or nationalism need to be revised in favour of a more dialogic perspective. Finally, I have offered detailed analyses of how some contemporary writers attempt to do this. All of them take different approaches and emphasize different concerns. Moreover, all of these texts are strikingly different. There is very little formal similarity between say Une si longue lettre and Orphée Dafric. The question of how far these texts constitute a coherent tradition remains problematic. Some critics have worked explicitly on this question and the very existence of francophone studies as an institutional and publishing phenomenon implies a degree of coherence. Yet we must never forget that most of the writers we have looked at come from vastly different cultural backgrounds. The ritual theatre of the Bassa as incorporated by Werewere Liking comes form a very different world than the Islamic asceticism of Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Nonetheless, French colonialism and the subsequent histories of the independent West African states, do, I think, provide a set of common problems that I outlined in the first three chapters of this study. All of the writers we have discussed attempt in their different ways to respond to these issues.

Most importantly of all, when we look at the texts themselves we do see certain common features. All of the writers I have discussed mix local and external elements to create new, multiple cultural identities. These gestures may be performed on the levels of thematic content, ideological orientation or artistic form. What all these texts have in common is that identity is constructed in the interstices of a variety of ontological loci (nationality, gender, race etc.) and not by any single one of them. Identification replaces differentiation as the primary
determinant of subjectivity. Glissant’s theory of creolization provides a convenient vocabulary to describe the hybrid characteristics we find in these texts. New identities are derived from the interaction of a variety of discourses, what Glissant describes as ‘une poétique de la Relation’ (1996, 24), rather than by historical determinacy. In order for us to register this process, however, the text has to be read in a certain way. We must be attentive to the inflections of content, language and form that reveal a multiplicity of meaning; that manifest the slips and elisions of identity, articulating voices from outside or beyond the parameters of normative cultural discourse. To speak once again in loosely Derridean terms, the text demands identification with difference through an identification of its own différence. This is the sort of reading I have tried to perform.

For Glissant this sort of reading has an active moral force. We will return to this shortly, but before doing so I would like to note and respond to a couple of obvious objections.

Concepts such as hybridity, creolity and syncretism are increasingly popular critical tropes in the study of postcolonial literature. Because of the emphasis on authenticity or rootedness that we examined in chapters one and two these sorts of readings have been slower to develop in the study of African literature though they are now beginning to catch on (Harrow 1993). Even so there are very few studies that systematically examine the forms of cultural hybridity in West African texts. This thesis seeks to make good this gap. Nonetheless, the very popularity of these modes of critical analysis should give us pause for thought. Specifically, it gives rise to two related objections. The first is that these consciously anti-dogmatic readings risk becoming dogma themselves, reproducing in their opposition of singularity and plurality the type of binary hierarchies they sought to replace. As Christopher L. Miller puts it ‘this body of thought that abhors borders and limitations can itself be limiting’ (1998, 6). ‘It makes little sense to be either “for” or “against” either nationalism or hybridity in a systematic and absolute way since both are real’ (1998, 7). This is clearly true, but it mistakes, perhaps, the nature of hybridity in the African novel,
which does not oppose nationalism but incorporates it. Nationalist discourse is, as we have seen, simply one part of the polyphonic discourse of identity. It does exist and it is real. In certain circumstances it may even be determinative. It can no longer be seen, however, as the irreducible identitarian core of African literature. Miller’s objection also recalls, however, a methodological anxiety about the use of theory that we have touched upon at several points. Both questions are essentially about our respect for the specificity of the text. If we insist on reading texts through fashionable theoretical paradigms do we not risk ignoring what the text says, in favour of what we want it to say? Furthermore, if these texts are, as I have claimed, actually about issues of cultural hybridization, it is not immediately clear why it is necessary or helpful to apply theory to them at all. Should we not let the text get on with its own purposes, without imposing our theoretical preoccupations onto it?

In many ways these issues are reformulations of the perennially agonistic relation between theory and literature. In this case, however, where we are dealing so specifically with the imposition and negotiation of discursive power, these questions have a particular resonance. We have commented many times on the difficulties of applying western theory to African texts. In terms of the African novel, one might also argue that reading it purely in terms of a universal theory of cultural creolization denies it a distinct identity of its own. Moreover, the emphasis on hybridity may undermine the characteristics of a specific environment, which are, as Miller points out, particular and real.

These are certainly serious objections, but they can be resisted. As we have seen, the texts we have examined do concern themselves explicitly with cultural interaction and the negotiation between different modes of discourse. Given this, it does not seem inappropriate to place these texts in dialogue with other discourses. In this case, the juxtaposition of literary and theoretical texts allows us to develop and deepen our understanding of both. This reading might itself be described as ‘hybrid’ pertaining as it does to both literary and theoretical concerns. To read in this way does not demand that we ignore the specificities of the literary text, nor does a theory of creolization require us to ignore the
realities of the African milieu. Glissant points out that ‘la Relation vraie n’est pas du particulier à l’universel, mais du Lieu à la totalité-monde’ (1996, 105). One of the key things this thesis has demonstrated is that the forms of creolization we find in West African texts derive from the postcolonial situation, but also from the syncretic procedures of West African cultures. Terms like hybridity and creolization are appropriate in this context, not merely fashionable. In this sense theory simply provides us with a convenient vocabulary to describe what is already occurring. On the other hand, we have also seen that these texts occupy a self consciously interstitial position, mediating between ‘African’ and ‘Western’ whilst deliberately deconstructing, at least partially, this distinction. They thus form part of an international literary and academic discourse within which a great deal of theory is produced.

So we can read West African fiction with reference to theories of creolization, using this theoretical optic to help us describe the ways in which they construct, multiple, interactive cultural identities expressed through the medium of a creolized artistic form. It is still necessary to ask, however, exactly what we have gained through reading in this way?

On the simplest but, ultimately perhaps, the most important, level, we have succeeded in giving an accurate account of some of the processes at work in this sort of fiction. On another level we have re-established a mimetic relationship between the African novel and its socio-cultural context. This may aid us in understanding both. Obviously we must remain properly suspicious of this sort of literary anthropology. It would be foolish to take any of the novels we have studied here as transparent ‘ethnographic’ accounts of the societies in question. A fictional text is, in the final analysis, the product of an individual consciousness, though as we saw in chapter three the same point could be made about ethnography proper. Nonetheless, there is a dialogic relationship between texts and the cultures that produce them, albeit a complex one. We have seen how James Clifford argues that cultures themselves are effectively ‘textual’ phenomena and how ‘Representation and explanation – both by
insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence [of culture]' (1986, 19).
Stephen Greenblatt makes a similar point when he claims that

Collective social constructions on the one hand define the range of aesthetic possibilities within a given representational mode and, on the other, link that mode to the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole. (1982, 6)

We have seen how the West African texts we have studied attempt to tease out these sorts of complexities, exploring the interaction of discourse, culture and subjectivity. They reveal the sort of discourses that emerge from a given cultural context and the ways in which these discourses feed into the ongoing development of that culture. So while we should remain cautious about drawing any unsubstantiated conclusions from it, the type of investigation we have conducted does have a ‘descriptive’ value. It tells us something about West African fiction, about West African cultures and about the relations between them.

This descriptive function is perhaps the most solid contribution this thesis offers, but I think we can go further than this and in conclusion I would like to sketch out some of the ethical and political implications of this form of reading.

Most of the texts we have studied have a substantial moral thrust. They operate as critiques of abuses within contemporary West African societies, but they also point the way towards a reconfiguration of social values through their emphasis on inclusivity and identification. This is the reason I wish to invoke Glissant once again. I have suggested that the world view proposed by the novels we have looked at is analagous to that proposed in Glissant’s theory of creolization. For Glissant, acknowledgement of creolization involves a new way on comprehending the world. As with the novelists I have described, the crucial element of this transformed understanding is our awareness of cultural difference. The end result of this process is what Glissant calls le Chaos-monde, which he defines as ‘le choc […] les oppositions […] les conflits entre les cultures, des peuples dans la totalité monde contemporaine’ (1996, 82).
As we saw in chapter one, such a world is, or should be, characterized by inclusion and interaction: ‘Vivre la totalité monde [...] c’est établir relation et non pas consacrer exclusion’ (Glissant 1996, 67). This interaction of cultures can only be negotiated through a globalized system of cultural relations operating according to the principles, or non-principles of creolization. This produces a cultural landscape characterized by regeneration, mobility and unpredictability. Glissant refers to this as a ‘mélange culturel qui n’est pas un simple “melting-pot”’, but is instead ‘une condition temporelle du rapport des cultures (1996, 82). Like the complex rhizome root system, this rapport involves a potentially infinite set of affiliations, an impossibly complex nexus within which each and every cultural relation is equally possible and valid. So le chaos-monde seems to open up a wealth of intellectual, artistic and cultural possibilities. Furthermore, it has a significant political and ethical impact. Glissant says that ‘tant que nous vivrons avec l’idée d’une identité racine unique, il y aura des Bosnie, il y aura de Rwanda, il y’aura des Burundi’ (1996, 90), whereas the adoption of a rhizome identity makes impossible the forms of essentialized identifications (with ethnicity, nation etc.) that generate these conflicts. If cultural identity is produced through the interaction of diversely sourced influences, it becomes much harder to promote the sort of ‘us and them’ mentality on which such conflicts are based. We can see this enacted in several of the novels we have examined. Les Soleils des indépendances dramatizes the failure of a world view centred on a specific ethnic identity. Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez and other novels by Labou Tansi depict the struggle of cultural coalitions against hegemonic authoritarianism. In the works of women writers from West Africa we have also seen the ethical impact of constructing forms of identity that mediate between different cultural sites.

If this is the case, then reading in this way becomes in itself an ethical act, because it requires an attitude to the world that we ought to adopt, a surrender to the moral necessity of identification with difference. This provides a clear moral importance to the sort of reading of West African texts that we have performed.
Several key questions remain to be asked. Firstly, we might think that this all sounds rather grandly utopian. How is this ‘totalité-monde’ to be achieved? Through what political projects is it to be realized and what is the connection between them and practices of reading? Even before we address such practical issues there remains a significant theoretical problem with Glissant’s position which I would like to dwell on briefly. The structure of the rhizome insists on the identification with and valorization of difference and the validity of any and all cultural relations. This might prove ethically problematic. Morality operates through a system of approval and prohibition. If we are to have an effective ethical system then there will be some forms of difference which we do not wish to identify with or even tolerate (for example different cultural attitudes towards the taking of life). Within le chaos monde it is not clear that we can make these sorts of judgements. The assertion of one set of moral attitudes over another can only be seen, in this system, as an unacceptable act of cultural hegemony. We seem to be led inexorably to the adoption of a morally relativistic attitude.

I take this (perhaps controversially) to be an unequivocally bad thing. For moral relativism to be functionally meaningful, it must entail the belief that we have no right to interfere in alien ethical structures. The first point to note is that this proceeds from a contradiction, what Bernard Williams describes as ‘the logically unhappy attachment of a nonrelative morality of toleration or non-interference to a view of morality as relative’ (1972, 35). The second is that moral relativism thus effectively prohibits ethically motivated political action. Furthermore, It is unclear how we would designate the units that are to be free of our interference – what constitutes an ethically autonomous society? If we do not hold our ethical views to be in some general sense right, how do we determine the extent to which we may legitimately promote them? If morality is ultimately relative then must this not logically be true between individuals as well as between societies/cultures. In this case ethical statements become purely subjective utterances and inter-subjective moral judgements are not strictly speaking possible – your ethics being just as valid as mine are. The only way the relativist can avoid this total breakdown is by adopting a functionalist
position, that is to argue that an ethical code is applicable within a given society because it is ‘right for’ (i.e. functionally valuable for) that society. Whilst this proposition is undoubtedly tenable, though reliant on a non-ethical concept of good, it does seem to deprive ethics of the particular characteristics that seem to distinguish it from other modes of thought. This is the most na"̄ive, but perhaps the most damning, criticism of moral relativism – that it just doesn’t seem to correspond with the way we perceive ethics.

So moral relativism seems to be logically and emotionally flawed, but what is the alternative? The belief that moral values are in some sense universal (which may or may not include the belief that they are objective) also raises a number of difficulties. How are we to ascertain what these values are? It is a fact that different people, not to mention different cultures, have significantly different, even contradictory moral outlooks. How can we adjudicate between these claims? There may not be a problem if one has a religious faith, or a strong attachment to some philosophical principle like Kant’s practical reason or Mill’s Utility (Kant 1788; Mill 1871). For most of the rest of us, however, these questions are likely to prove somewhat embarrassing.

This leads us into a familiar cul-de-sac of ethical thinking. Moral relativism seems to be ethically inadequate, yet a belief in universal ethical values seems to require a more sophisticated epistemology than we can currently call upon and risks completely effacing cultural difference. What we want is to be able to preserve elements of cultural (or individual) autonomy without being forced to accept that any and all ethical positions are equivalent. How can we do this? Essentially, this is another instantiation of the fundamental question underlying this study and the texts we have focused on. How do we negotiate a viable relationship between the local and the universal?

At one extreme we risk exactly the sort of cultural atavism we have been trying to avoid, at the other a bland homogenisation that completely erases specific cultural identities. At the end of one of the papers collected in Introduction à une
Poétique du divers, Glissant is questioned about this problem and replies that ‘la standardisation est certes un danger, mais l’idée même de Tout-monde contribue à combattre ce danger’ (1996, 98). He admits that taken to its furthest conclusion ‘l’au-delà de la créolisation serait en effet le non-identitaire’, but claims that ‘il y a le Lieu qui nous maintient’ (1996, 99). This emphasis on specific locations is, as we have seen, of primary importance. ‘La Relation vraie n’est pas du particulier à l’universel, mais du Lieu à la totalité-monde’ (1996, 105). There is an attempt here to shift from abstract notions of particularity and universality to a more concrete focus on the relations between given localities and ‘la totalité-monde’ which for Glissant is a real and discernible system of relations. The intention is to side step the difficulties of theorizing these relationships by concentrating on perceivable examples of them, but a number of issues remain unclarified. We may still legitimately ask how we are to demarcate what constitutes a meaningful place in this context (precisely the question in fact which appears to be at the root of many political or territorial conflicts). Moreover, it is unclear that ‘la totalité-monde’ is itself anything more than an abstract ideal. Most importantly, Glissant fails to offer any guidance on how exactly we are to maintain this relationship between location and a globalized system of créolized or rhizomatic cultural relations.

The move from abstract to concrete together with the vagueness of Glissant’s answers seems to signal a limit to the work that theory can do here. Yet the texts we have looked at show precisely these sorts of process in operation. In Labou Tansi, Beyala or Liking’s novels we do find a respect for ‘le Lieu’ co-existing with an openness that can be described as créole. The novels provide us with concrete examples of how creolization might actually work, both in their depiction of such identities and in their own créolized nature as cultural artefacts deriving from variety of traditions. So theorizing runs into trouble, but the novels, by their very existence, demonstrate the possibility of créole thought. They perform what theory struggles to describe. Glissant, himself a novelist, encourages this perspective, arguing that, ‘c’est dans les œuvres littéraires, et non dans la tentatives théoriques que l’approche de la totalité-monde se dessine d’abord’ (1996, 104). The texts we have studied seem to
confirm this insight through the ways in which they create a mode of representation that captures the complex and ongoing processes through which cultural identities form, change, and interact. In doing so they sketch out a way of thinking about these issues which is non-exclusive and which preserves the unique character of individual locations whilst placing them in a dialogic relationship with broader cultural contexts.

Significant questions remain of course, as to how all this relates to the ways in which people actually live their lives in Africa. As we have seen authors like Labou Tansi and particularly Werewere Liking claim a functional value for their work. Nonetheless, it would be presumptuous and naive to claim that literature can have any direct transformative power for those whose lives are lived in conditions of poverty or oppression. These are only books after all. Books moreover whose readership is in general small and in West Africa even smaller. We have noted the ambiguity of the readership addressed by many of these novels and I have argued that in many cases a specifically non-local reader is invoked, as in Kourouma’s ‘vous n’êtes pas malinké’ (1968, 141). Nonetheless, it is striking that the vast majority of the texts I have discussed and the vast majority of francophone African fictions in general, are published in Paris. Ironically, a text like Une si longue lettre which was published in Dakar by Les Nouvelles éditions africaines, is out of print in French, though its popularity in American universities ensures the ready availability of the English translation. In West Africa issues of linguistic competence, literacy and simple economics keep literature beyond the reach of most people. During a visit to Senegal in late 2001 I was able to find most of the texts I discuss, as well as a fair amount of secondary material, in the library of Cheikh Anta Diop University, but outside a small section of the urban bourgeoisie their dissemination is extremely limited. It is possible to purchase most of these texts in Dakar bookshops, but at the time of writing their price is the same as in Paris or London. In many parts of the region the situation is even worse.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to suggest any solutions to these very real difficulties. What it does demonstrate, however, is that we do find in these texts
a treatment of real issues that arise from contemporary West African culture and its relation to an international context. The innovative and progressive approach to the formulation of cultural identity adopted by these novelists, makes the study of their work, in Africa and elsewhere, an urgent and necessary task.
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