# Rethinking Exile: The Imaginary of the Return in Caribbean and African Francophone Literature

by

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This dissertation explores the ways in which 20th-21st transnational writers from the Caribbean and Africa reimagine experiences of exile and diaspora in light of contemporary forms and routes of migration. Echoing the utopian visions of critics such as Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr, along with writers such as Alain Mabanckou, I argue that representations of the return in Caribbean and African literary texts offer new sociopolitical conceptualizations of exile that not only deconstruct older paradigms of loss and rupture, but also suggest the possibility of renewed participation of the diaspora and immigrants in their homelands. The imaginary of the return, therefore, provides a different intellectual and literary reflection of the postcolony in terms of mobility by illustrating a West-towards-South movement characterized by the return and active participation of African and Caribbean exiles in their homelands. Through close reading of four different texts–Khadi Hane's *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* (2011), Malika Mokeddem's *L'Interdite* (1993), Alain Mabanckou's *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* (2018), and Dany Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau* (1996) –, this dissertation examines the peripheral existence of African and Caribbean diaspora as well as the political discourse around migration, belonging and integration that characterizes their presence in the West as a crucial moment that leads to the idea of alterity and return. The imaginary of the return holds that the experience acquired in exile is an adequate springboard for exiles to revisit their lands of origin as lands of possibilities. As such, exile is a constructive experience that translates into a sociopolitical participation in the return.

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## Preface

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# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Exile and Return: A Different Critical Stance

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, African and Caribbean literary production witnessed various publications that articulate the idea of the return from exile. These narratives of return are inscribed at the periphery of the literary theme of exile and offer a different perspective of the exilic experience in the West. This dissertation, by analyzing the imaginary of the return, provides an alternative to what constitutes the "theory of exile" in contemporary African and Caribbean literature. The new critical stance that builds up the study is an attempt to deconstruct former ways of identification and representation of exile in Francophone African and Caribbean literature and insert it (exile), through new readings, and new considerations, into the search for a new construction of the geographical spaces of Africa and the Caribbean.

The common representations of exile suggest that it is a very difficult experience at the level of one's spiritual and physical wellbeing. Among the many books to theorize exile in the last two decades of the twentieth century, Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* remains one of the most celebrated examinations of the conditions of exiles and migrants. In Said's experience exile obliterates people's subjectivity and identity (137). As for the place of exile in the literary imagination, Said elaborates, "to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the loss it inflicts on those who suffer them" (138). The condition of exile for him, is, therefore, hopeless and can yield but sorrow and despair in the face of separation and loss. A few years, later, Said remained pessimistic about his

conceptualization of exile. “Exile,” he wrote, “is one of the saddest fates” (113). Said’s reflections resonate with Carlos Pereda’s vision that characterizes exile as:

> Experiencing your misfortune as a form of abandonment. Suffering a vague but persistent feeling of helplessness. Believing there is no place for you in society. These are the frequent companions of exile that lurk in the shadows. From this one might conclude, not without a hint of irritation and perhaps even disgust: ‘exiles represent a class of socially incapacitated individuals.’ (32)

The effects of exile on the subject, Pereda suggests, surpasses that of the loss to signify the crippling nature of disability. The exile is, then, in a situation where his/her capacities to effectively interact within the society is damaged.

Such pessimistic descriptions inform representation of exiles in Francophone literature, where writers like Fatou Diome, Isabelle Boni-Claverie, Leïla Marouanne, Sami Tchak. Among others, draw from their own exilic experience to depict a sense of loss far from their cultural and emotional bearings. For these writers, detachment, the sense of otherness, and the difficulty of assimilation into their lands of adoption constitute prime movers in their literary work. However, despite the pervasiveness of exile as a nostalgic and damaging experience, in African and Caribbean literatures, it also provides a different perspective through the return. The visions that writers like Alain Mabanckou and Dany Laferrière bring to their works illustrates the return from exile as an alternative that is conducive of a cultural and sociopolitical engagement in the homeland. Therefore, despite the difficulties that arise, exile symbolizes a place where subjects acquire the experience necessary for their contribution in their homeland. As such representations of exile cease to only convey the pessimistic images of an alienated subject no longer in tangible contact with reality and whose time is spent in mourning. Pereda recognizes that shifting nature of

exile. Focusing on the situation of detachment from the homeland and its consequences, he acknowledges that exile is a locus of resistance where the subject "recognizes one's ability to march faithfully into battle, enthusiastically and without fear" (43). Drawing from Pereda's analysis, one sees the degree to which exile is transformative of the ontology of the subject. Such important trait appears when words are no longer laden with nostalgia or traces of bitterness and are rather used to establish a social horizon (Pereda, 44).

The literary expression of the return and the analysis conducted in this dissertation participate in the contemporary discussion on the *devenir* of the African continent in particular and on the different nations and countries that relate to Africa in general. The presence of the African diaspora to the debates during Les Ateliers de la Pensée de Dakar illustrates the importance of the contributions of African descended intellectuals in the contemporary sociopolitical orientations of the continent.

### 1.2 Exile and Return in Context in African and Caribbean Literature

A look back on influential African and Caribbean novels and poetry recalls the return as a literary theme that not only frames the attachment to the homeland, but that also illustrates it as an active participation in social, cultural, and political changes.[1] Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneur de*

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[1] The term homeland used in this dissertation refers to the country of birth. Though the term may also refer to the land of exile, which gradually became home for first generation exiles and migrants and their descendants, it only denotes the original land where first generations were born before they left. As such, for Dany Laferrière, the homeland is Haiti, for Malika Mokeddem, the homeland is Algeria, for Khadi Hane, the homeland is Senegal, and for Alain Mabanckou, the homeland is the Republic of Congo.

*la rosée* and Aimée Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* are exemplary texts in this regard.[2] Both situate the exiles in their homeland while offering a different approach to the question of the return. Roumain's narrative shows that the return can be the basis for a practical participation in the homeland. As such, he highlights the ways in which knowledge and experience acquired in exile can serve the society in difficult times in the country of origin. Césaire, on the other hand, conceives of the return within the expression of the negritude movement. For him, the return is the expression of his attachment to his culture. To return, for Césaire, transcends the necessity of reconnecting physically with a land. It is a commitment to a social, cultural, intellectual, and political struggle for the awareness and place of Africans and African descended people throughout the globe. For that reason, critic Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, writing about Césaire, asserts that " C'est parce qu'il est habité par l'exil qu'Aimé Césaire entreprend dans le *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) une quête identitaire."

Though exile rose as a prominent literary theme in postcolonial literature in the last two decades of the twentieth century, it has a longer literary history. The development of African and Caribbean literature is in part predicated on the exilic experience of African and Caribbean intellectuals in France. As a result, the intersection of intellectual's presence in Europe and the awareness of the homeland and the identity of colonial subjects led to the Negritude movement. The literature of exile that developed in that period was not characterized by an expression of rupture but by the manifestation of the bond with Africa and the Caribbean. For Jacques Chevrier, depictions of exile in the period of Negritude never meant a denial of origins but rather entailed a return to the homeland immediately after the completion of studies (96). As such, exile and return

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[2] Jacques Roumain originally published *Gouverneur de la rosée* in 1944. He died the same year after he returned from a trip to Cuba. Césaire wrote his long poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in 1939. The publication of the poem coincided with his own return to Martinique where he started to work as a teacher.

were intimately linked in a relationship of beginning and end. As Steven A. Burr remarks, “Exile as demarcation allows interpretation as both end and beginning, as a closing of what had been and a simultaneous opening of what is now to be” (56). Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* symbolizes both the effects of exile and the necessity of the return. Though Césaire’s long poem establishes the return to Martinique as a physical reconnection to his native land, it is a metaphor to the return to a more Afrocentric culture and a call for a greater awareness of the place and subjectivity of the African and Caribbean in colonial times. Like Césaire’s Cahier, Leopold Sédar Senghor’s first book of poetry, *Chants d’ombre* (1945), reflects the severed bond with the native land. Written and published while in exile, *Chants d’ombre* portrays Senghor’s nostalgia and his desire to reconnect with Senegal. Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961) provides a more philosophical reflection on exile and return. In his book, Kane portrays the interaction between African and Western cultures. His conceptualization of exile centers around the idea of acculturation, while the return to the continent symbolizes a connection to one’s culture and identity. However, Kane’s narrative of the return externalizes the different cultural influences and confrontations the African subject faces since the arrival of foreign civilizations. As such, he exemplifies that exile is not just being abroad, but also being on an African continent that slowly undergoes a metamorphosis due to the presence of Western civilization.

With a great number of writers who moved to Western countries in the last quarter of the twentieth century, African and Caribbean literature experienced an important shift in the depiction of exile. Indeed, narratives of nostalgia and longing gave way to stories that focus

predominately on life in Europe.[3] Consequently, the relationship of a protagonist to the idealized representation of Africa and the Caribbean was replaced by narratives that illustrate the experience with the land of exile. As Nathalie Phillipe remarks : "et de quoi parlent ces auteurs ? De leur condition d'écrivain immigré, de leur identité littéraire, de leur rapport au monde et au pays d'origine" (32).[4] As such, one of the characteristics of African and Caribbean literature became the representation of exiles' relational problems with their lands of adoption as challenging. In an interview with SlateAfrique, Khadi Hane acknowledges that her novel, *Des Fourmis dans la bouche,* not only originates from her experience with exiled women in Paris, but also materializes her desire to reveal the other side of the French capital inhabited by marginalized communities. Such representations of the exile's life also transpire in Calixthe Beyala's *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel,* where she depicts the extent to which the intersection of social and racial identity categories becomes damaging in the relationship exiles attempts to construct with their societies.

These texts represent the damaging experience of exile not only in terms of relationship and belonging but also in terms relative to exiles'identity construction. Because exile in the second period, represented above in the works of Hane and Beyala, entails the presence of

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[3] Because African literature is mainly produced by writers outside Africa and does not focus on realities of the continent, critic Lila Azam Zanganeh finds that it is "une littérature qui trouve ses racines loin du pays natal" (a literature that finds its roots far from the native land." Kossi Efoui, on the other hand, asserts, "la littérature africaine est quelque chose qui n'existe pas" (African literature is something that does not exist). For Efoui, therefore, we must not characterize literature by African diaspora living in Western countries as African literature. Indeed, if we consider an important work such as *Penser et Ecrire l'Afrique Aujourd'hui* (2017), a work that reflects on African intellectuals' contribution to the development of the continent, we realize that all its contributors, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Celestin Monga, Séverine Kodjo-Granvaux, Rokhaya Diallo, Alain Mabanckou, Abdourahman Waberi, Dany Laferrière, Sami Tchak, Maboula Soumahoro have one thing in common: they don't live in the continent or in the Caribbean but have their primary residence in Western countries.

[4] Nathalie Phillipe. "Écrivains migrants, littératures d'immigration, écritures diasporiques. Le cas de l'Afrique subsaharienne et ses enfants de la 'postcolonie'." *Hommes et Migrations. Revue Française de Référence sur les Dynamiques Migratoires*, no. 1297, 2012, pp. 30-43.

descendants whose national bonds are oriented mainly towards their countries of birth – that is their parents' countries of adoption – it is defined in terms of alterity, racial difference, and a strong desire to belong to the nation. As a result, exiles and their descendants, whose real rootedness is expressed in relation to their countries of adoption, experience their presence in modes of opposition and conflict (Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas, 2014; Pap Ndiaye, 2008; Leonora Miano, 2012). Hitchcott and Thomas underscore the relational problems that characterize the existence of African and Caribbean exiles in Europe as "exclusionary models of identity-building, while also further accentuating sentiments of non-belonging among ethnic or 'visible minorities'" (8).[5] The embeddedness of African and Caribbean exiles in contemporary Europe is challenged by a nationalist discourse that is itself grounded in politics. Such discourses refuse to focus on the changes that result from the global opening of borders and the cultural and racial "métissage" that stem from it, and rather center on the question of racial differences. In his analysis of the presence of the Black diaspora in Europe, Paul Gilroy alludes to the difficult presence of Europeans of African descent. Gilroy writes: "they remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic – black and white. These colours support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of 'race' and ethnic identity" (1).[6] The binary construction of the European society is based on a racial division expressed as a multicultural rejection. Leonora Miano refers to such division in order to conclude that "le pays dit qu'on ne peut être que Noire ou Française. La pensée du pays est binaire polarisante Limitée Elle résonne comme une

[5] Dominic Thomas, and Nicki Hitchcott. *Francophone Afropean Literature.* Liverpool UP, 2014.

[6] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Harvard UP, 1993.

sommation. La Pensée du pays sent la fin de la confiance en soi la fin du pays la France ne sera pas La France si elle dit : Noire ou Française" (73).[7]

Narratives of return provide various reasons that sustain the need to reconnect with the homeland physically or symbolically. Dany Laferrière, Abdourahmane Waberi, and Khadi Hane, among many writers, provide different reasons that range from the desire to reconnect with loved ones to the challenges that stem from exile in order to explain the return from exile. In *L'Enigme du Retour,* Laferrière constructs the idea of the return from the importance of filiation. Windsor, the protagonist is informed of his father's death in New York. After driving to his father's place and meeting with the Haitian diaspora, he decides to return to Haiti to join his mother in the mourning of his father. Waberi predicates the idea of the return, in his novel *Transit,* to his protagonist's completion of education in France. As such, Waberi's narrative reminds the return from exile expressed during the negritude literature. Unlike Laferrière and Waberi, Khadi Hane explores the reasons of the return by referring to the intersection of factors such as the exiles' social condition, their peripheral existence, and their impossibility to relate to nations where their identity is constantly questioned and denied. To these aspects, she adds the importance of the new representation of the homeland, mainly in terms of possibilities. Hane's literary imaginary aligns with Mbembe's conceptualization of self-deportation.[8] For Mbembe the expression of alterity marked by the impossibility to belong is overwhelmingly predicated on everyday racial judgements and attitudes. As Mbembe explains:

[7] Leonora Miano, *Ecrits pour la Parole.* L'Arche Editeur, 2012.

[8] Achille Mbembe, "Nanoracism and the Force of Emptiness," *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid,* edited by Nicolas Bancel et al. Indiana UP, 2017, pp. 363-367.

> There are thousands of people exposed to racist injuries in Europe every day. They are constantly under threat of racist attacks by individuals, institutions, voices, and public and private authorities. They are constantly being asked to justify why they are here, asked to state how long they plan on staying, where they come from, where they are going, and of course when they will be leaving. These authorities and voices shock, irritate, and offend. And in many instances, they violate people. Indeed, they attack people where they are more vulnerable, intruding on what is most private. (364)

The exile's presence is undesired. And the many years as well as the positive social impact they provide to their nation does not prevent them from remaining constant targets.[9] The result, as Mbembe and Hane show, is their return to their homeland.

### 1.3 The Return as Afrotopia

With the many reasons that justify the desire and decision to return from exile, the presence of the returnee becomes, in many cases, a participative sociopolitical commitment in the homeland. As such the return contributes to the construction of an imaginary of development in what Felwine Sarr calls "Afrotopia." It provides a greater consciousness about the returnee's place in their home countries while opening unprecedented visions and possibilities for new social and political relations.

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[9] See Pap Ndiaye 48, especially on Georges Frêche's comment on French footballers of African and Caribbean descent.

The return as a participative social and political commitment to Afrotopia draws its strength from the existing link between exile and the act of coming back. As Olivia Bianchi remarks, “l’exil suppose toujours un retour” (8). However, the return is not void of the elements of the exilic experience. Not only the reason that leads to the return is predicated on that presence on a foreign land, but the sociopolitical commitment in the homeland also comes from that experience. Such an approach of the return resonates with Cristina Hurtado-Beca’s conceptualization : “le retour représente aussi l’espoir de réaliser un jour tous les désirs nourris au loin” (252). As such, Hurtado-Beca’s characterization of exile contrasts with that of Said. While the common image of exile is fraught with the impossibility to overcome afflictions and loss, Hurtado-Beca conceives it as an advantageous experience. Drawing from Hurtado-Beca, one sees that exile is a locus of learning and the return, a space of implementation. Mirline Pierre associates the desire to implement various projects conceived while in exile to the interest of the home community in general. Pierre’s idea of the return is a projection from a personal experience to a social involvement. She explains, “dans beaucoup de cas, le retour n’a-t-il pas un côté bénéfique ? Car il est dans certains cas, porteur d’un projet visant le mieux-être de la communauté, voire même de la société donc élément d’espoir” (88). Drawing from Pierre’s assertion, it is clear that exile is a place and a moment of transformation that builds not only a higher degree of awareness of unsuspected possibilities but also translates into a useful engagement in the return. Such a stance is stressed by Jean James Estephan : “Quand l’écrivain est en dehors de sa terre natale il est ramené à des évidences longtemps insoupconnées” (80). Because of its transformative nature, which expands into the community, the return actively participates in the Afrotopia (the fields of possibilities) in the Caribbean and in Africa.

Felwine Sarr defines Afrotopia as, "une utopie active qui se donne pour tâche de débusquer dans le réel africain les vastes espaces du possible et les féconder" (14). Sarr's conceptualization stems from the reflection, during a workshop in Dakar, where intellectuals from Africa and its diaspora began to think the future of the continent in terms of development. For Sévérine Kodjo-Grandvaux, the idea that guides Les Ateliers de la Pensée is "travailler à l'appréhension de l'Afrique et du monde à travers de nouvelles catégories et concepts plus adaptés aux réalités contemporaines." Mbembe puts it as "repenser les devenir africains en termes de potentialité et de contribution." Yet, the rethinking that situates Africa in a globalized and more transnational world does not only derive from individualistic or purely Afrocentric contributions as we saw with Hurtado-Beca and Mirline Pierre. It is a call to unity, a participation that envisions bringing together all African and African-descended intellectuals from around the world. Consequently, Sarr and Mbembe identify Afrotopia as "une nouvelle manière de construire qu'il faut donner forme. Pour y arriver, il nous faut non seulement ouvrir les frontières ; mais aussi rendre l'archive – toutes les archives – aussi lisible que possible" (9). Afrotopia is then not possible without the active participation of Africa and its diaspora. They add, "il s'agissait…de dessiner des perspectives nouvelles concernant la contribution du discours afro-diasporique aux débats sur le monde contemporain" (8). Mbembe and Sarr's perspective is, therefore, an attempt of co-participation that unveils the return as key to the future of Africa.

The imaginary of the return is, therefore, an element of the larger set of the sociopolitical, cultural and economic perspective of the continent that is itself predicated on an active intellectual partcipation. Expounding on the notion of "imaginaire," Claude Pierre Pérez writes that "d'ordinaire, sans surprise, 'l'imaginaire' fait équipe avec 'le réel' : on écrit le réel et l'imaginaire comme on dit le noir et le blanc" (105). As such, the imaginary

seems to oppose the real in that it remains an element of the spirit and is a word whose very nature is limited to human thought. In contrast, the real alludes to realization. This dissertation defines imaginary as an intellectual projection into the African experience. Thus, the imaginary of the return is an intellectual investigation of the place of the exile in the sociopolitical experience of his/her native land. As such it conceptualizes the presence and commitment of the exile in the Afrotopia. It is, then, a literary and intellectual exploration of the alternatives to exile but which results from the exilic experience. Consequently, this work is not just an analysis of the difficulties encountered in exile. Nor is it simply a study of the problems of identity that constitute a major interrogation in different narratives (Beyala, 2007; Isabelle Boni-Claverie, 2017). This work aims at proposing the return as a constructive move that is first predicated on the presence of the African diaspora throughout the globe. The return can be physical and is characterized either by the return of the author or a protagonist to the homeland. It can also be symbolic and is illustrated by the writers' commitment to the homeland through narratives. In both cases, the imaginary of the return is a projection into the postcolony and shows that exile is not an end but a rebirth.

### 1.4 Structuring the Study

The study is divided into four chapters that focus both on a different novel and on a specific aspect of the return. The first chapter, "*Un Ailleurs Connu:* An Open Door on the Return," focuses on the elements that trigger the decision to return to one's homeland. It is an exploration of the exilic experience in Khadi Hane's *Des Fourmis dans la bouche.* In this chapter, I analyze the desire to stay in exile when social, and economic realities, as well as racial differentiation constitute a serious barrier to integration. The study draws from

Hane's protagonist's experience, her memories of the homeland, and her ability to assess her presence in France as a moment that does not bode well. Hane’s narrative of Khadîdja’s life, her description of places such as the foyer Sonacotra – where many Sub-Saharan exiles live in complete destitution – contrast with the charming images of Paris. Through the subtle parallel she establishes between life in Paris and in Mali, Hane captures the exiles double belonging and their attachment to their homeland. In the novel, Khadîdja’s double belonging allows her to analyze her Malian and Parisian experiences and conclude that Mali also offers different alternatives to exile.

Chapter two, “Towards an Assertive Move: Realizing the Self,” is an analysis of Malika Mokeddem’s *L’Interdite.* It shows the returnee’s participation in the social and political experience of the homeland and represents the return as a moment of enlightenment for the whole community. Mokeddem’s novel follows Sultana’s path from France to Aïn Nekhla, in Algeria, where she returns to her land of origin. The narrative insists on her obligation to confront her past and establishes Sultana’s return as a catharsis without which her life will remain an endless interrogation. The victory over the past not only opens onto a coherent and successful confrontation against fundamentalism and practices that retain women in bondage, but also shows the return as a period that allows women to be aware of patriarchal and religious oppression. The chapter analyzes the return as a moment that serves to liberate and empower women. It also illustrates how Mokeddem uses the return as a meaningful platform for political criticism. Her dedication of the book to Tahar Djaout, followed by the inscription: “interdit de vie à cause de ses écrits” betray her embrace of Djaout’s rallying call to write Algeria’s sociopolitical realities. Indeed, the novel was published at an important moment in the history of Algeria – a time of conflict that opposed the government to diverse fundamental and religious groups. The analysis demonstrates that Mokeddem’s writing of

L'Interdite is a refusal to be silenced by fundamentalists. As such, to return to Algeria, either physically for the protagonist and symbolically for the author, is to side with secularism in the cause of a free society.

The third chapter considers Alain Mabanckou's symbolic return to Congo in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles*. It opens with a discussion of Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism, two important notions that shape the representation of the African continent. The analysis builds on Stephen Smith's and Axel's Kabou's pessimistic representations of Africa before situating Mabanckou's optimism for the continent. Written in 2018, after the publication of *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui,* and the first edition of "Les Atelier de la Pensée de Dakar," Mabanckou's novel is the materialization of his vision for the continent. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* illustrates the African continent with its woes and uncertainties. Mabanckou narrativizes the weight and accountability of the military and political power on the continent and links it to the failure of development. The chapter also draws the parallel between Africa's postcolonial and colonial situations to highlight the degree to which the postcolonial experience of African countries does not significantly differ from the realities they faced as colonies. This work considers Mabanckou's writing of *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* as a return that translates his new literary position vis-à-vis the continent.

Chapter four examines the imaginary of the return in Dany Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau.* It envisions the return as a *réapprentissage,* that is, an obligation for the returnee to relearn different cultural practices that he/she has forgotten during the period of exile. The analysis follows the paths of Laferrière's protagonist, Vieux Os, as he comes back to Haiti after an absence of twenty years. As Vieux Os is happy to reconnect with his homeland, he realizes that once familiar aspects of life in Haiti now escape him. In this way, exile is depicted as a place of acculturation where the subject unlearns his homeland's cultural practices while

adopting new habits from the land of exile. The chapter starts by revisiting Laferrière's novel through the perspective of disconnection and reconnection. However, the chapter evolves to show that, after the exile's reconnection, comes the importance of cultural rehabilitation. The imaginary of the return is, therefore, an active participation of the returnee in the cultural visibility of the homeland. Focusing on Jean Price-Mars vision of a Haitian literature whose objectives should evolve around cultural revalorization, the chapter maintains that Laferrière's exploration of the cosmogony of Haitian Vodou as well as Vieux Os' decision to write about it contributes to the country's cultural rebirth.

The conclusion situates this research into the current manifestations of Afrotopia, mainly on how literary and other intellectual activities such as Les Ateliers de la Pensée redesigned the relationship between France, Africa, and the Caribbean. It emphasizes the extent to which literary texts imagine for new sociopolitical relations within the continent.

## 2.0 Chapter 1: *Un Ailleurs* Connu: An Open Door on the Return

> L'histoire de la France et de son Empire reste à écrire. C'est en partie parce qu'elle a été mal écrite que nous éprouvons tant de peine à déchiffrer la 'nouvelle société française' au sein de laquelle nous vivons, et la puissante demande d'identité qui la travaille.
> –Achille Mbembe, "La République et l'Impensée de la 'Race'"

> Redefining identity, achieving coexistence and delineating the coordinates of a constitutive history will surely be extremely trying.
> –Dominic Thomas, "Afropeanism and Francophone Sub-Saharan African Writing"

### 2.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined the extent to which Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr construct Afrotopia through the important participation of African Diaspora and exiles. I explained that for Sarr and Mbembe, the African diaspora has an important role to play in the establishment of the field of possibilities. Consequently, the return from exile is for them a crucial foundation on which an imaginary – that rethinks Africa in term of development – is established. Such an imaginary sometimes emerges from the various experiences that shapes exiles' lives. The idea of returning to the homeland is, therefore, not only predicated on exiles' perception of their ongoing realities but also stems from the representations they have of their home countries. Khadi Hane foregrounds those realities in her novel *Des Fourmis dans la bouche*, making them salient, and firmly setting them as the main reasons for the return.

Focusing her book on her protagonist's Khadîdja's adventure in Château Rouge, Paris, Hane represents the many frustrations and disappointments that are characteristic of the presence of exiles and characterizes them as the trigger for the return. *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* comes as an alternative to Hane's first novel *Sous le regard des étoiles* (1998), where her protagonist Mada turns to violence when confronted to the difficulties to integrate the French society. In *Des Fourmis dans la bouche,* Hane proceeds with a narrative setting and protagonists that are nearly similar to the ones depicted in her first novel. However, rather than leading her protagonist to an impasse and to her death, Hane resorts to her return to her country Mali.

*Des Fourmis dans la Bouche* is the story of Khadîdja, a Malian exile living in Paris with her five children. Having a baby with Lenoir, the owner of her apartment, Khadîdja is unable to work and relies on external supports to live. Though she is in love with her landlord, and hopes to live with him, she quickly realizes that such an option is impossible; not only Lenoir is married, but also the derogatory social perception on mixed racial relationship prevents him from keeping his relationship with her. Khadîdja is also confronted with the judgement of the Malian community that sees her relationship with Lenoir as a form of prostitution. She feels alone in the vastness of Paris and considers her presence there as a failure. Consequently, she decides to return to Mali where there seems to be more economic and social perspectives for her.

Hane's narrative of Khadîdja's life reflects the different theories and conceptualizations on the Afropean experience. Indeed, for many postcolonial critics, the African and caribbean presence in the West is, at a larger extent, defined by a constant struggle for integration and recognition. This entails that for the French descending from the African continent and the Caribbean, the consciousness of belonging to the nation is primarily disputed by the racial fracture and its consequences. Therefore, assertions such as Fatou Diome's "la France est multiple, ses passions

successives, ses idoles innombrables, son identité lui ressemble" (19) seem to oppose the reality of the political discourse as well as the lived experience of the African diaspora.[10] Indeed, it is true that the multicultural nature of France is self-evident for the racial diversity that composes it today. Because of that plurality, Dominic Thomas holds that "a study of France that treated it as a monolithic entity would today be inaccurate and irresponsible" (16).[11] Drawing from Diome's and Thomas' conceptualizations of the French nation, it would seem more coherent for the French political discourse and social life to materialize diversity with a language of integration where different diasporic communities feel at home. Unfortunately, the reality is different. The French nation's racial diversity and cultural plurality does not de facto translate into the research of more inclusion and integration. As Pap Ndiaye notes in what he identifies as a paradox, "les Noirs de France sont individuellement visibles, mais ils sont invisibles en tant que groupe sociale et qu'objet d'étude pour les universitaires" (21). Ndiaye adds that the invisibility of the black population in France leads to the invisibility and neglect of problems that are relative to their identity and place (21).[12] Consequently, challenges that are specific to Afropeans, and which concern their integration in the national and social fabric, as well as the racial prejudices they face – what Mbembe coins as nanoracism – are generally ignored. Voluntarily or not, the African diaspora, finds itself at the periphery of the French nation, attempting to belong to their country of exile for some and to their country of birth for others. Hane's work captures the implications of that exilic presence and by locating Africa in France, Hane translates the numerous problems that illustrate

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[10] Fatou Diome, *Marianne Porte Plainte !* Flammarion, 2017.

[11] Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism.* Indiana UP, 2007.

[12] Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition Noire: Essai sur une Minorité Française.* Gallimard, 2008.

her protagonists' life on French ground. This results in a gradual understanding of Khadîdja's experience and a comprehension of the resignation that follows and which compels her to her decision to return to her homeland.

This chapter examines the social and political representations of the African Diaspora in Khadi Hane's *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* as the main factors that foster the idea of return. I argue that the impossibility to relate to one's nation through a sustained integration stimulates exiles' reflection on the representation of their countries of birth, awakening in them their double belonging. Exiles, therefore, enter a stage of confrontation where they compare their exilic experience with their past life in their homeland before the final decision to return. The realistic and fast-paced portrayal of Khadîdja's life in Château Rouge encompasses all the elements that leads to the return. However, what makes Hane's narrative unique is the image of the homeland that she conveys. In the comparison between Khadîdja's experiences in Mali and in Paris, Hane represents Paris as a failed "eldorado" and Mali as a place of new hope. It is important to reveal here that before her exilic experience, Khadîdja's ideas of Paris were mostly those of a city where riches abounded and were easy to grasp. Such a reverse of opinion and vision, which proceeds not from preconceived social beliefs but from her lived experience, partakes in the establishment of the fields of possibilities in the hometown because of the new representation that stems from it.

Hane's narrative of Khadîdja's numerous introspections, doubts, comparisons and decision to return resonates with the new order of mobility *Afrotopians* such as Mbembe champion in contemporary postcolonial Africa. Indeed, for Mbembe, "le désir d'Europe ne saurait en effet être ni leur horizon existentiel, ni le dernier mot de leur condition."[13] As such Mbembe, invites Africans

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[13] Achille Mbembe, "Les Africains Doivent Se Purger du Désir d'Europe". Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/10/achille-mbembe-les-africains-doivent-se-purger-du-desir-d-europe_5421762_3212.html. Accessed 15 February 2015.

to get rid of the desire to migrate to Europe. His call is relative to the necessity for a new African imaginary that sets the African continent as central in the manifestation of Afrotopia. Mbembe's reflection echoes Felwine Sarr's demand for an imaginary that is not borrowed but thought by African themselves. Sarr writes that "plus qu'un déficit d'image, c'est celui d'une pensée et d'une production de ses propres métaphores du futur que souffre le continent africain" (12). By portraying a protagonist whose final decision is directed towards Africa, Hane's novel participates in that reflection. The return, as she shows, is not simply the manifestation of a bond with Africa or the expression of an incapacity to find one's path in exile but is mainly the demonstration of the existence of new perspectives that only the African continent offers.

This Chapter follows Khadîdja's experience in Paris and examines the extent to which problems of assimilation, integration and belonging participate in carving a different representation of both the country of exile and the homeland while fostering the desire of return. The first part of the chapter is an exploration of the paradox of the exilic experience. It situates exile in light of African social perceptions of the metropole and represents the images of Paris as a "mirage." Khadîdja falls in that category and as a result discovers what Hane refers to as the other side of France. The second section investigates first generation exiles and their problems to integrate the French social fabric. It also considers the French political discourse on nationalism that mainly promotes assimilation rather than integration as a crucial factor of the peripheral existence of African and Caribbean exiles. Jean Faber suggests the correlation between the idea of assimilation and the different problems exiles encounter. Referring to immigrants and exiles, Faber asserts that "ils n'ont pas à renier leurs origines, dont beaucoup s'enorgueillissent à juste titre, il faut simplement que cela cesse d'être la source de leurs problèmes sociaux" (42). Section three is the study of women's experience in exile. the section holds that women's exilic conditions are

generally different from men's. It views women's presence as more challenging and shows that such a situation leads women to a faster assessment of their exilic presence. The fourth part which is an emanation of the second, analyzes the second generations of exiles, those who were born in France and who have no connection with their parents' countries of origin. Like the second, this section questions their double consciousness as well as their belonging to their country of birth.

### 2.2 Deciphering the Paradox of the Exilic Experience

In the opening paragraph of *Des Fourmis dans la bouche,* Khadi Hane leads the reader through an encounter between Mme Renaud, a social worker, and the homodiegetic narrator, Khadîdja, in a verbal exchange that highlights the social condition through which the narrative is built. The narration presents Khadîdja who enters the social worker's office with the hope of returning home with the staple food she needs for the five hungry mouths waiting for her at home. The encounter – which is the first in a long series of visits between both Khadîdja and Mme Renaud – is described as a painful experience for Khadîdja. She has been appointed to Mme Renaud's welfare services in order to benefit from the administrative support. However, for Khadîdja, being dependent on the generosity of the administration is a failure, a humiliating experience that is at odds with her Malian social background. Indeed, as we learn from the chief of the Sonacotra elders, Khadîdja is a Cissé, a member of a noble family who value their social status within the highly stratified Malian society and who are therefore characterized by their pride and research for honor (17-18). Ruminating her state of dependence and the loss of the values that nurtured her in her traditional Malian customs, Khadîdja is unable to refrain her disappointment, " j'avais troqué ma fierté contre le courage d'affronter le regard de cette inconnue aux lèvres déformées par la grimace

réglementaire des travailleurs sociaux" (1). Khadîdja knows that her living conditions in Château Rouge are not what she hoped for when she was coming to France fifteen years earlier. It is, therefore, an exasperated and desperate protagonist that sees her life as a failure and that finally realizes the existing gap between the imagined representation and the real Paris that Hane narrativizes.

By portraying a single mother of five, who does not work and whose battle moves from the moral responsibility of head of a family to the constant taming of her own fears and hysteria, Khadi Hane creates a de facto problematic narrative atmosphere and pace. The omnipresence of destitution allows Hane to attach to the story different subthemes which move from love to the presence of traditions on foreign lands, before the denouement that closes with Khadîdja's contemplation of a return. From the incipit – "premier jeudi de septembre Mme Renaud me salua comme une assistante sociale salue son cas social, d'une longue poignée de main" (1) – the reader is forced to question not only the existing relationship between the two characters, but also to investigate the use of the term "cas social". Hane quickly offers a response to the reader since she introduces him into her protagonist's daily struggles. She unveils Khadîdja's poverty, her inability to take care of her children and provide for their basic needs. She transports the reader to Khadîdja's personal room, exposing her love for Jacques Lenoir, her landlord who refuses to legally recognize their baby. Hane also presents a protagonist who is confronted with her own countrymen, her own family who still lives in Mali and who has the pretention to guide her morality and decide what she is entitled to do or not. The reader begins to grasp the self-doubt Khadîdja tries to keep at bay and feels her desire to escape from the harshness of the French life. Consequently, one discovers the relevance of the use of the term "cas social" and the importance of the incipit in the building of the narrative through Khadîdja's constant introspections.

Though the novel evolves around Khadîdja's experience, Hane shows that the story is symbolic of the experience of the African community in Château-Rouge. Indeed, most of the characters that surround Khadîdja – excepted Lenoir and Mme Renaud who are not Africans – experience a form of destitution. Such is the case with the Malian women living in the same neighborhood as Khadîdja and the men dwelling in the foyer Sonacotra. Hane's interest is, therefore, not circumscribed to the representation of a single protagonist, but expands into the portrayal of the people she names "Afro-européennes" in her first novel,[14] *Sous le Regard des Etoiles*.[15] As an Afropean writing, *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* outlines realities that can be common with exiles and immigrants. Thus, it is not surprising that Rosa Beer identifies it as an exploration of immigrants' life in France. However, an important aspect Hane alludes to in her Afropean exploration resides both in the contradiction between the representations before and during exile, and the inconsistency of the exiles' presence in France despite the difficulties they encounter. This section, therefore, explores those contradictions and inconsistency in the exile's experience as a paradox, that is, a discordance between the projected image of Paris and the reality.

The peripheral location of the African exile in France influenced the framing of francophone postcolonial literature today and determined its thematic approaches. Like Khadi Hane, Afropean novelists such as Bessora in *53*, Sami Tchak in *Place des fêtes*, Fatou Diome in *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, have portrayed the exile's positionality, exteriorizing the paradox of the exilic experience in France. Indeed, most of their literary productions illustrate exile as a

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[14] Khadi Hane. *Sous le regard des étoiles.* Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines du Sénégal, 1998.

[15] Leonora Miano uses the term "Afropéen" instead of "Afro-européen", borrowing it and conceptualizing it from David Byrne's "Afropea."Byrne coined the expression when working with Zap Mama's album, *Adventures in Afropea* (1993). In *Habiter la Frontière,* she explains that "si Afropea symbolise pour David Byrne, l'influence des cultures subsahariennes sur l'Europe, j'ai choisi d'utiliser ce mot pour explorer l'âme des Européens noirs. Mon lieu d'analyse est la France, mais ces problématiques peuvent être étendues à d'autres pays d'Europe" (85).

distressing experience, and in portraying the exile's life as a laborious moment, they convey a message that considerably differs form the Paris of economical and social success that inundate the continent. Among the novels that epitomize that paradox, one can mention Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* with Salie's experience in France and Mabanckou's first novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge* with masala Massala repatriation to Congo. Though those novels provide exciting narratives on the contradictions, it is important to refer to Abdelmalek Sayad's *The suffering of the Immigrant,* mainly on Pierre Bourdieu's preface to the book in order to understand the concept. In that preface, Bourdieu writes, "by looking closely at the tiniest and most intimate details of the condition of 'immigrants', by taking us into the heart of the constituent contradictions of an impossible and inevitable life by evoking the innocent lies that help reproduce illusions about the land of exile, he paints with small touches a striking portrait of these 'displaced persons…" (xiii). Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the paradox builds from the set of contradictions that develop between the exile's lived experience and the lies and illusions that govern the beliefs in the land of origin. Abdelmalek Sayad simplifies the contradictions through the perspectives of Mohamed A.'s narrative: "When I think now of all the running around I've done, all the things I expected, all the journeys I've made, all the people I've begged, you really have to be mad to put up with all that, just to be able to get to France" (12). From Mohamed's experience, one sees that the contrast between the images of France and the reality is not only immense but, unfortunately, can only be fathomed when it is lived.

*Des Fourmis dans la bouche* frames the paradox of the exilic experience through the perspective of the destitute exile. Thus, Hane makes the economic condition central to the effect of the exilic disenchantment, consequently relegating the problem of racism to a second level of narrative. First, Hane constructs on destitution by highlighting her characters' dwelling places. Her

allusions reminds Jean Faber's work on the peripheral existence of immigrants in France. In his book, Faber highlights the link that exists between being an exile, an immigrant and complete destitution. His work – which is a sociological study of contemporary France – shows the challenges of the French integration which he describes as a total failure. For Faber, exiled communities in France mainly live in squalor. Describing one of the communities, he writes that "peut-on vivre ici, loin de tout, dans la déréliction d'un quartier abandonné qu'on veut fuir ? Ils disent oui, leur joie de vivre est minée de tristesse. L'avenir relève de la survie, de la tentative, si l'on ne peut partir" (13). Hane's protagonist's description of her life is characteristic of Faber's analysis. From her encounter with Mme Renaud, Khadidja links her difficult life to her economic condition, "l'unique mal dont je souffrais et dont tout en moi montrait les stigmates: la pauvreté"(10). Though Khadîdja's assertion seems abrupt, the emphasis on the term "pauvreté," and the fact of isolating it from the rest of the sentence betrays the recognition of her own predicament.

In addition to that recognition, Khadîdja establishes the connection between her destitution and her dwelling place. She explains that "J'habitais au 13, rue de l'Inconnu, dans le quartier de Château-Rouge, dix-huitième arrondissement de Paris" (11). Khadîdja uses an address that does not match with reality. "Rue de l'Inconnu" is a metaphorical image of the residents of the building, their socio-economic conditions, and their subjectivity in French social life. In the description of her protagonist's dwelling place as the residence of the unknown, Hane creates an invisible character/subject whose very existence is meaningless and does not deserve further attention from the other residents of the city of Paris. This reference to the unknown also points up the social identity of those living in that address, their degree of social importance as well as their perceived

social engagement in the city. The term "inconnu" entails not only a lower social identity but also underscores an almost nonexistent social participation.

Khadîdja, provides more details on the population living at "13 rue de l'inconnu" when she adds :

> Notre vieil immeuble, même pas haussmanien, abritait une quinzaine de locataires, dont André, seul Français connu à cette adresse, vivant au rez-de-chaussée avec son caniche Kiki. Tous les autres étaient des Maliens, la plupart des foyers polygames et pauvres et pourvus d'enfants à profusion (11)

In this passage, Hane describes a space which is predominantly not a multicultural neighborhood. In addition, one sees that the residents at the '13 rue de l'Inconnu' live in underprivileged conditions. The parallel between the Malian exiles, the invisible bodies, and poverty sets the thematic construction of the novel. The resonance of poverty is not a national description that encompasses any citizen within the borders of Paris. Poverty as an attribute – lived or merely used as a descriptive trait – belongs to a selected class of people and as we learn from Khadîdja, those people include mainly the sub-Saharan immigrants in Paris. Hane, therefore, centers the sub-Saharan immigrants' exilic experience in an inhospitable milieu that leaves them at the periphery of life. Such conditions, that highlight the poverty-stricken and isolated African population, do not contribute to the myth of the successful African exile but rather allude to the squalor that characterizes their presence. The different references to the living conditions and the population that is linked to them partake in illuminating the contrast between the imagined and the lived experience of exiles.

Hane presents destitution as a consequence of her characters' origin and racial identity. Her description of Château-Rouge and the foyer Sonacotra not only illustrate that destitution is

characteristic of the African community, but also shows the extent to which those places remind the African continent. In his essay "Immigration, Littérature-Monde, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer", Alain Mabanckou gives a short description of the existence of the sub-Saharan community in France. . Expanding on the literature of migration and the relational experience the protagonists have as other, Mabanckou metonymically concludes on the presence of Africans in France not as a sparse community but as a whole entity that constitutes the reality of Africa within France. "Behind these fictional portraits," he asserts, "we discover not only another face of France, but another Africa located in the heart of France" (76).[16] Mabanckou's assertion implies that beyond the narratives on the immigrant, there is the reality of the existence of the African exile. The fictional portrait in the heart of France is thus, a reminder of the existence of another type of citizen that is identifiable in the French social and cultural landscape. The presence of Africa in France, as Mabanckou puts it, therefore, shows the reality of the integration of the African in France. For Diome :

> La France n'a cessé d'accueillir différentes cultures. Elle est donc dans l'inconscient collectif, à juste titre, une terre d'accueil. Pour ceux qui ont réussi leur intégration, elle est une formidable mère adoptive, pour les autres, ceux qu'elle marginalise et persiste à traiter en étranger – même lorsqu'ils sont nés en France – elle est une marâtre (35).[17]

Diome elaborates on the marginalized, those persistently regarded as foreigners in spite of their French birth. She names them "les identifiables de Marianne" and describes them as "les Arabes, les Noirs, et les asiatiques, ceux qui ne peuvent disparaitre dans l'anonymat de la couleur blanche"

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[16] Mabanckou offered a trenchant analysis of the African writer in exile in his article "Immigration, Littérature-Monde, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer. In his essay, he established that the literature of migration by African authors allows them to analyze and narrativize Africans realities outside of their continent.

[17] Fatou Diome, *Marianne porte plainte !* Flammarion, 2017.

(35). Diome pinpoints the problem surrounding their existence in France – which goes beyond the geographical origin – and brings in race as the main component of French citizenship. As such, she reveals the invisibility of Hane's characters and the destitution that is predicated on the failure of integration. The location of Africa in the heart of France elucidates the reasons that underlie Hane's choice of characters, the choice of the setting and of the protagonist's living conditions.

Khadîdja's destitution is also expressed in her daily prayers. Those moments reveal the extent to which her entire existence become subject to the search for sustenance. Her prayers and attitude towards her God are a time of supplication and of solicitation. They are moments of communion dominated by the expression and exteriorization of her poverty. She observes :

> Il ne s'agissait pas pour moi de quémander le pardon des fautes, ni la longévité sur cette terre qui m'avait taillé un costume de pauvreté, un dégradé de misère ton sur ton, plus miteux encore que celui que j'avais laissé dans mon village malien. Je n'espérais pas la fortune que tous les immigrés attendent de Paris. Le pain du jour, du lait, un peu d'argent suffiraient à mon bonheur. (14)

Her transcendental prayer reveals a moment of total abandonment and cuts short with the representation of herself when she is in front of other people, mainly when in the presence of the other Malian women. In the state of abandonment, which reflects her deepest desire and the possibility of being heard and supported, Khadîdja does not conceal her condition. She lets her inner desires talk and even insists : "Seigneur, poursuivis-je, je t'en supplie, donne-moi de quoi nourrir mes gosses" (14-15).

Throughout the novel, the moments of the expression of her needs are transformative of her traits. She then oscillates between two conflicting tendencies which are the exaggerated desire to conceal her situation and that of letting it appear without disguise. Hence, she becomes silent

and secretive, reserving the right to disclose her thoughts to the invisible.[18] In such periods she tends to equate the reader with her God, choosing him as someone worthy of knowing her life. Then, as she transcendentally communicates her poverty, she constructs a dialogue with the readers and makes them her confidants, telling them what she hides to the inhabitants of Château-Rouge. It is in such moments that the reader hears Khadîdja make an express use of the pronoun "je" without any reference or a direct dialogue with a character. Such moments are, however, important and contribute to the plot by explaining and intensifying her destitution. When she asserts, "je voulais le pain et le miel promis dans le livre, le lait qui tombe du ciel et une putain de paire de chaussure pour Ahmed" (17), one sees that the expression does not lie in a constructed dialogue with her neighbors of Château Rouge but is situated within a constructed aesthetics that elucidates and builds the plot while presenting her as the needy person she is.

Khadija's propension to conceal her problems adds to the paradox that surrounds the exilic life. Exile itself, or more precisely emigration to Europe and recently to America and Canada, was regarded as a significant guarantee of success that left no room to an exilic disappointment. As such, assertions such as Moki's, in Mabanckou's *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* that "Ici, nous sommes en terre étrangère. Le jugement dernier, c'est au pays. On nous attend là-bas, il n'est pas question d'y retourner les mains vides. Qui commettrait un tel crime?" explains the argument that sustains the hiding of failure. The result of such a perversion of reality which holds any presence in France as a success is the silencing of failure, as described by Hane. The concealing of the harsh reality, in turn, not only reinforces the myth surrounding exile, but also presents its paradox since the act of concealing is rather a secrete admission of failure. Abdelmalek Sayad presents the act of

[18] The reference here is the arrangement Khadîdja made in her apartment prior to receiving her Malian countrywomen. The dish she offered them and her sending the children in the rooms and forbidding her older daughter to come out with Jacques Lenoir's baby show that Khadîdja is concealing her real condition to her neighbors (93-96).

concealing the difficult experience through Mohamed A.'s affirmation, "No they never explained to us what France was really like before we got to know it" (17). Sayad himself writes that "the collective misrecognition of the objective truth of emigration is the necessary mediation that allows economic necessity to exercise its power. And the misrecognition is sustained by the entire group, by emigrants who select the information they bring back …" (26-27). Drawing from Sayad's analysis, one understands Khadîdja's effort to pretend to have no problems when she faces her Malian neighbors. Her actions emanate from the belief that the exile's presence is synonymous with an accumulation of riches and a change in social status. To conceal the truth, therefore, means to construct an image of a successful exile. However, the reality entirely contrasts with what she strives to exhibit. As such, the fact that she hides the truth to her neighbors proves that her experience in Paris is a failure.

*Des Fourmis dans la bouche* portrays the experience of exile as distressing and the exile as a troubled person when he/she is confronted with an unresolved situation of poverty. Vijaya Murali and Femi Oyebode analyze the impact of destitution on mental health, remarking that "Poverty can be intrinsically alienating and distressing, and of particular concern are the direct and indirect effects of poverty on the development and maintenance of emotional, behavioural and psychiatric problems" (216). The importance of Murali and Oyebode's assertion resides in the existing relation between poverty and human's emotional attitude and how this relation becomes evident through what they call the social causation hypothesis (218). Regarding emotional attitudes, Murali and Oyebode find that people with low-economic status are mostly prone to developing mood disorder. Drawing from their work, one grasps the gradual emotional degradation and the disturbed behavior of Hane's protagonist. One sees that Khadîdja's attitude and composure degenerate when serious difficulties in helping her family arise. In the culmination

of her troubles – which is marked by her rush to the cupboard in search of food and her realization that it holds nothing (128-129) – the narrative presents a rapid change of mood, "un vent d'allégresse soufflant dans mes veines, un fou rire s'échappait de mes lèvres. Je regardai les restes de la souris, je riais, je pleurais (129), which exacerbates Khadîdja's incapacity to solve her family's problem. The reader can recreate the reason why Khadîdja rushed in her kitchen by superposing Mme Renaud's previous veto to the imperative of finding something for the family. Her movement bears despair and hope at the same time and knowing the order – despair-hope or hope-despair – becomes a challenge to the reader. A crucial parameter in her attitude is the dejection that follows the despair, and which is characterized by an oxymoronic expression that mixes laughter and cries. Hane presents a Khadîdja that is overwhelmed by her problem and can't successfully negotiate her family's survival; as such she offers a rather conflicting image that does not align with the ideas Khadîdja had of France. Indeed, Khadîdja's former vision of France, as we will see, was predicated on various promises that painted France as the 'Eldorado' that would favorably respond to her economic needs.

The representation of France/Paris as "the eldorado" worked to heighten the presence of Africans in Paris and consequently strengthened the paradox. Long before the transnational and globalized era that drove the world population closer, colonial Africa was illuminated by the splendor of Paris. The French capital posed as a center of refinement and a place where the African could easily transition from a lower social condition to a higher one. Books such as Dominic Thomas' *Black France* effectively illustrate the influence of Paris and thus display the impact of the city on the African imaginary. It is, then, crucial to oppose the narrative of destitution to the representation and expectations of Africans towards Paris in order to highlight the exilic paradox that Hane cleverly narrativized. Citing Adèle King's *Rereading Camara Laye,* Thomas indicates

that African colonial literature itself served as a mediation between Africa and France, with some African writers encouraged by the metropole to focus on a certain "idea of France" (6). The idea of France that resulted from the French demand participated in constructing and reinforcing a better image of the metropole. It also served to forge an attractiveness that was as well sustained by the exhibition of the returnee's wealth. Mabanckou and Diome are such contemporary novelists, whose writing depicts the influence of the successful African returnee, while exposing what Ousmane Socé portrayed as "mirages de Paris" in his eponymous book.[19] Like Massala-Massala in Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge,* or Salie in Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique,* Hane's Protagonist, Khadîdja, realizes that France is not what it seemed.

The significant aspect Hane brings to her depiction of the African in Paris is rooted in the deconstruction of appearances. As such, her exploration of the exilic experience lies in making the paradox salient. Despite the perfect opposition Hane already creates between Khadîdja's expectations and the realities of exile, the fullness of the exilic paradox lies in the expression, "is not what it seemed". Although Hane does not focus on the images Khadîdja had of Paris before embarking for France, she illustrates such views through Khadîdja's sporadic assertions. In that context, we hear Khadîdja mention that "cette ville, sans le savoir, nous avait promis de belles choses. Nous avons quitté notre pays pour nous y faire une place que nous croyions au soleil !" (127). Khadîdja's presence in France, as she states it, is the consequence of the collective imaginary that sets Paris as the haven that offers what Africans can't get when at home. she holds the attraction that guides the decision to migrate as a "promise" made by Paris. The expectation to find a better life, therefore, derives from an implicit communication between the African and Paris;

[19] Ousmane Socé Diop is from the early generation of francophone African writers. *Mirages de Paris* was published in 1937 and dealt with Africans 'fascination with Paris and the problem of interracial marriages.

it is a communication mediated and peddled by the African who returns to the motherland. In the works of Diome and Mabanckou, we see that the influence of Paris is itself predicated on the display of attributes that emanate from the returnee. The use of "sans le savoir" in the personification of Paris shows that immigrants and exiles, like Khadidja, were not aware of some of the difficulties they could face once in Paris. More, Khadidja illustrates the extent to which Paris, as a metropole, was misrepresented, leading to the image of a city of fast and immediate economic success.

Hane provides more details of the built imaginary of France as a land of promise through the supposed vision Khadîdja's parents have about easy success and riches ready to be amassed, "en Europe, la fortune est censé être à portée de main, c'est du moins ce que l'on croit là-bas" (73). The narrative slowly contrasts that vision and is evidence of the central paradox of Khadîdja's life. Her destitution that Hane builds by opposing what *seemed to be or perceived* and what is *lived,* compels the reader to a reassessment of that imaginary. Khadîdja refers to the failure as a guilt, maintaining that "la culpabilité d'être pauvre en France me bouffait le moral, le physique et le mental, elle me rendait la vie plus dure encore » (73). Thus, she reaches a level of comprehension of what is described as "another Africa in France" through her own experience. And we understand that the mention of the "another Africa in France" transcends the mere presence of the African in France to mainly symbolize an unchanged social condition regardless of the geographical space. Thus, it becomes easier for one to grasp the paradox of the exilic experience in one of its simplest occurrences: destitution, and therefore repeat with Khadîdja that "mais il n'y a pas de soleil à Paris" (127).

### 2.3 Identity and Assimilation: Social Recognition and Peripheral Life in France

One of the numerous images that stay in the reader's memory after he/she has finished perusing the last pages of Khadi Hane’s *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* remains the problematic presence of the African community in the heart of Paris. While Hane’s portrayal of the Afropean community seems to center predominantly on the destitution and precarity that define her characters’ lives, the implicit message instead calls into question their place and identity in the French nation. Hane’s portrayal of the Afropean social experience, therefore, becomes a pretext to the analysis of social recognition through the subtle interrogation of contemporary sociopolitical discourses of French national identity. As such, we perceive in reading Hane that the desire to be accepted and the feeling of belonging – which transcend legal and administrative recognitions – remain challenging. Jean Faber analyzes that sense of belonging as an attachment that does not translate into a social behavior of opening and acceptance. More specifically, Faber frames recognition in the form of procurement of documents that neglects the consideration of social and racial diversity. Thus, he reveals that “ceux qu'on appelle encore des immigrés, et qu'on ne sait pas compter…sont des Français de papier: toujours et dans n'importe qu'elle situation sociale, le qualificatif d'immigré, comme celui d'étranger, décerné au vu des seules apparences, fera écran” (39). Drawing from Faber, we perceive the prevailing difference between being socially French and being French by legal decision. Hence, the presence of African exiles and immigrants in France poses a relational problem. Unlike the relationship, Edouard Glissant presents in *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, which centers on the very first encounters and the establishment of a relationship of domination between different peoples, nations, and groups, Hane's *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* develops a postcolonial interrelation that stages former colonized people within France.

Khadi Hane's representation of the African community in Paris is striking for the inauspicious images of juxtaposition that transcends the narrative. Her story comes after a long history of the African presence in France and as such portrays characters who, in spite of their attachment to Africa, consider themselves part of the French nation. Khadîdja refers to that presence as another Africa, "ici nous sommes encore en Afrique" (34), locating, therefore, Africa in the middle of Paris. However, in portraying that life, Hane exposes an important part of the French contemporary political and social system which is itself engraved in the identity of France as a nation, and which is reified through the omnipresent political discourse on multiculturalism, integration, and national identity.

Hane's portrayal of life in Château-Rouge illustrates the "distant" coexistence between people of diverse background. Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas explain such a juxtaposition by resurfacing the persisting political discourse on "insiders" and "outsiders", which "remains a common feature in the French political space" (1). *Des Fourmis dans la bouche*, therefore, raises important questions related to identity and which mainly range from assimilation/integration to recognition and participation in the relationship between African descendants and their land of adoption. Moreover, it reveals the extent to which negotiation between insiders and outsiders still poses a problem in the French sociopolitical landscape. A reading of Hane's novel, therefore, shows that sociopolitical concepts such as assimilation and integration cease to connote the same reality, and in the encounter between France and what Alain Mabanckou refers to as "another Africa located in the heart of France", assimilation and integration only become a metaphor to invisibility.

During the French 2016 presidential debate, François Fillon, one of the leading contenders, opposed the idea of a multicultural France, asserting that "la France n'est pas une nation

multiculturelle. La France a une histoire, une langue et une culture." In his vision of a monocultural France, Fillon was blind to the diversity around him. his assertion does not consider that contemporary France derived from a vast empire that stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the rainforests of the Congo, the Caribbean, and Indochina. As a colonial empire, France was a gathering of diverse cultures, nations, and peoples, and this legacy continues to shape and reshape the cultural and linguistic boundaries of the nation today. Patrick Weil reminds us that the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century marks a strong immigration movement from European countries to France but which quickly integrated thousands of North African immigrants through the Société Générale d'Immigration. Georges Tapinos discusses the nature of that immigration and the reasons supporting the need for immigrants. "C'est une immigration économique," he explains, "appelée par l'essor du pays et facilitée par le ralentissement précoce de notre accroissement naturel, l'allongement de la durée moyenne de vie masquant la baisse de la fécondité" (4). Thus, immigration was a necessity for the economic growth of France and, in turn, transformed French society by integrating those immigrants of diverse origins to the so-called "Français de souche."

It is crucial to remember that the centrality of France resulted from its position within that empire, making it a metropole. In addition, the presence of sub-Saharan and Maghrebi soldiers during the two World Wars is evidence of a common destiny shared by people of multiple identities. By accepting foreign European workers, by inviting African soldiers and workers, by decreeing family reunions and naturalization (Tapinos 1975; Weil 2004), France also received foreign cultures which partake, today, in the building of French cultural identities. Indeed, a shared history has long been established between France and its African colonies and that history thrived within the borders of each territory before later translating into a multicultural French nation that

Afropean writers, such as Hane, strive to portray. Analyzing the encounter between the South (African, Asian and Caribbean exiles) and the West (the French society) in *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* is a way to decipher the place of exiles in France despite the rejection of their contribution, of their identity as full citizens, deserving of respect despite different cultural backgrounds in the French national and social construction.

The more significant dialogue that Hane raises in her representation of the Afropean experience pertains to an ongoing common history that persists despite the waves of decolonization in the 60s. Achille Mbembe asserts in that logic that “la décolonisation n'a pas mis un point final à la question de savoir que faire des histoires partagées” (141). His idea derives from a serious analysis of geopolitics that mostly manifests between France and its former colonies. As such, discourses that emphasize a monocultural image of France, without regard to its diversity, continually unveil a troubling and compelling reality that shakes the national fundaments. By focusing on a monocultural nation, they unsettle the legitimate presence of the South in France and create a gap between citizens of diverse cultures and ethnicities. Mbembe describes it in terms of a racial relationship. “De manière tout à fait directe,” he writes, “le problème que posent le régime de la plantation et le régime colonial est celui de la race et donc du dissemblable, de ce avec quoi l'on ne partage rien – ou très peu – de ceux qui tout en étant avec nous, à côté de nous ou parmi nous, ne sont, en dernière analyse, pas des nôtres” (139). Thus, Mbembe conceives of the discourse on multiculturalism as a discourse on dissemblance and alterity. He considers that, alongside the promising *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, lies the idea of “une altérité radicale” towards Africa and Africans (141). Like Mbembe, Pap Ndiaye not only questions the place of Africans in France but also analyzes their ontology. While Mbembe describes such experience under the perspective of radical alterity, Ndiaye conceptualizes and theorizes it under the notion of “blessure

identitaire." For Ndiaye, the presence of Africans in France and the conditions surrounding it are problematic since they live in a constant social and political denial that exacerbates their experience. Ndiaye's use of "blessure identitaire" not only translates that sociopolitical denial but also substantiates the invisibility of the African minority. Consequently, Africans in France live an existence of "condition noire" that leads them to a significant problem of identity. About the "Noirs de France", Ndiaye contends:

> En tant que groupe social, ils sont censés ne pas exister, puisque la république Française ne reconnait pas officiellement les minorités, et ne les comptent pas non plus. On pourrait se réjouir de l'invisibilité des populations noires, ou en tout cas considérer que cela ne pose pas de problème en soi, si certaines difficultés sociales spécifiques qui les affectent étaient mesurées, connues, reconnues. Or ce n'est pas le cas. Aussi l'invisibilité plutôt que d'être la conséquence possible d'une absence de problèmes particuliers, peut être considérée comme un tort. (21)

Racial invisibility, as Ndiaye puts it, ceases to be a dedicated paradigm that opens onto a social acceptance. It rather complicates African's existential problems and obliterates all their effort to be part of a country they call theirs.

In *Des Fourmis dans la bouche*, Hane constructs on the problem of integration by blurring the frontiers between visibility and invisibility. She subtly exploits Khadîdja's infatuation for Lenoir to show the ambiguous integration of African exiles in France. The love that tied Hane's two characters develops around a mutual attraction before abruptly, ending with a rejection predicated on racial differences. Though Khadîdja loves Lenoir and wishes to build a long-lasting and more trustworthy relationship with him, her expectations are overturned. Indeed, Hane introduces a capital element that reshapes their relationship: the birth of their baby. Consequently,

instead of being a uniting factor, the birth of their child turns out to be the reason for their separation. Khadîdja deeply feels the insult when Lenoir refuses to acknowledge the paternity of their child. In addition to his rejection of the child, the language that Lenoir uses to allude to him is offensive and underscores his complete disdain for him. In one such passage, Lenoir questions, “qu'est-ce que tu veux que je fasse de ton chiard” (57), preferring the possessive “ton” to the possessive “notre” which would convey a sense of acceptance of the child. The attitude he develops each time Khadîdja wants him to discuss the paternity of the child, also, shows his lack of interest in the child. That attitude symbolizes a total deflection of the discourse to other subjects. The following lines illustrate the conflict between Lenoir and Khadîdja and how Lenoir ignores matters she considers essential:

> “Je veux que tu reconnaisses ton fils, c'est tout.”
>
> “Tu me fais chier, Khadîdja, avoua-t-il.”
>
> “Ses mains tremblaient, sa voix avait durci. Il desserra le nœud de sa cravate et, au bord de la crise de nerfs, brandit l'index sur moi.”
>
> “Bon sang, glapit-il. Pourquoi refuses-tu de payer ton loyer ?” (57)

This passage that opposes the recognition of the child to the fact of paying the rent shows that the parents no longer have the same vision, the same interest. While Khadîdja fights for the recognition of the child, Lenoir, on the contrary, fights on matters related to money. His attitude is pure negligence of the mother and the child and reveals that what they previously called love, no longer unites them.

The opposition between Khadîdja’s and Lenoir’s views is instructive of the meaning of integration and the necessity for social recognition. Adopting a social and moral philosophical approach to the question of respect and recognition, Axel Honneth makes a fundamental argument

about the link between social justice and social recognition. Honneth's analysis mainly considers the relationship surrounding inequality and the fight for dignity. For him, the evolution of contemporary social justice is no longer grounded on questions relative to the eradication of social and economic inequalities but rather on the achievement of dignity for all. Thus, he holds, "L'éradication de l'inégalité ne représente plus l'objectif normatif, mais c'est plutôt l'atteinte à la dignité ou la prévention du mépris, la "dignité" ou le "respect", et non plus la "répartition équitable des biens" ou "l'égalité matérielle" qui constituent ses catégories centrales."Advocating that economic justice does not represent the major component of social demand, he prioritizes a justice that favors social recognition, that is, an inclusion that focuses primarily on dignity. As such, Honneth conceptualizes the achievement of dignity through the eradication of "l'atteinte à la dignité" and "la prevention du mépris". Honneth adds, "pour ce qui concerne la théorie de la socialisation des sujets, nous avons de bonnes raisons de supposer que la genèse de l'identité individuelle passe généralement par des stades d'intériorisation de schémas standardisés de reconnaissance sociale."

Drawing from Honneth's articulation on dignity and social recognition, we observe that beyond Lenoir and Khadîdja's discussion resides a problem of social acceptance and recognition that is unfolding around their child. Nonetheless, the difference of views is not limited to what disunites them around their child; it is also illustrated through the differing visions of their future. While Khadîdja is making plans for her and Lenoir, Lenoir is not ready to envision a relationship outside Khadîdja's bedroom. For Lenoir, there cannot be any other type of commitment that surpasses the form of love they have adopted. On the one hand, he can't recognize the child that was born from their meetings; on the other, it was not possible for him to abandon his legal family to satisfy Khadîdja's wishes. The double impossibility implies that the relationship Lenoir

demands from Khadîdja is a concealed one. It is a relationship that cannot be exposed in daylight, one that will not exhibit his relationship with her. Though Lenoir replies, "je m'en fous" when Khadîdja informs him that his child bears his name (59), one perceives his desire for anonymity. It appears, therefore, that identity and social recognition are closely linked and are defined through a pattern of construction that makes identity dependent on social recognition. As Honneth explains, "l'individu commence à se percevoir comme membre particulier et à part entière de la société en prenant progressivement conscience de besoins et de capacités propres constitutives de sa personnalité à travers les modèles de réactions positives de ses partenaires d'interaction." Therefore, the reader grasp that Lenoir's action towards Khadîdja and her baby does not partake in the construction of Khadîdja's stable identity. His refusal can also be explained by the lack of social recognition that keeps Khadîdja in a lower social scale and, thus, does not contribute to creating the social condition for her emancipation and integration in the French society. If we consider the extent to which Khadîdja devoted herself to Lenoir and the consequences she had to face in her community and her family, it is evident that the Afropeans' personal efforts to integrate the French society is doomed to failure if social recognition does not actively partake in the construction of their identities. The French of African ascendance, therefore, become marginalized citizens whose effort to integrate their society is driven to the periphery.

Hane describes a peripheral existence that, in turn, illustrates recognition and national preference. The failure of Khadîdja in France is not the result of the way she lived but rather the absence of a social recognition that generally partake in the establishment of a more substantial adaptation and integration within the French society. Like Hane, Calixthe Beyala not only portrays the love between two people of different races but also depicts the impossibility of such a relationship due to the gaze of the French society. Fatou Diome, briefly, deals with the same

problematic in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* by narrating the family judgment, which leads to the divorce between her protagonist Salie and her husband. In all these texts, there is a line that sets the conditions of love in opposition to social reality. Calling into question the ways the discourse on national identity and integration are held in France, Jean Faber asserts :

> Depuis cinquante ans, la question du sort des immigrés que nous accueillons fait l'objet d'une double méprise. Nous n'avons jamais affronté autrement qu'en paroles le défi de l'élaboration d'une politique destinée à déterminer leur place parmi nous. Nous avons toujours substitué un débat sur l'immigration ou la nationalité à un débat sur l'intégration. (19)

The ongoing debate on integration is, therefore, nonexistent in France. Accepting that integration means to be part of a group, better still, to be accepted as one is, it becomes clear, as Faber holds, that it is avoided because what the French society does not want to acknowledge is the right to difference in its midst. Faber adds, "en paroles, la chose existe: mais quant à savoir le sens du mot intégration, l'idée qu'il exprime, la politique qu'il résume silence. Personne n'en sait rien" (21). Unfortunately, Khadîdja's experience with Lenoir foregrounds the impossibility to materialize integration within the French Society. Lenoir's nocturnal visits to Khadîdja, as well as his obstinate decision to reject his son, suggest the degree to which Khadîdja is not socially integrated.

In "The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States," Rogers Brubaker develops an argument on assimilation and its probable return in transnational and postnational spaces such as France and Germany. For him, assimilation encompasses two different meanings and actions that can be understood through the consideration of the transitive and intransitive character of the verb "assimilate." He writes:

> In the general and abstract sense, the core meaning is increasing similarity or likeness. Not identity, but similarity. To assimilate means to become similar (when the word is used intransitively) or to make similar or treat as similar (when it is used transitively). Assimilation is thus the process of becoming similar, or of making similar or treating as similar. (42)

Brubaker's definition leads us to consider the models of assimilation Khadi Hane displays in *Des Fourmis dans la bouche*. Treating similar or becoming similar are moments that show the confrontation that unfolds between the Afropeans, their desire to be part of society, and the response of the society to such desire. It is, thus, important to view Malick's story as well as the foyer Sonacotra as moments that defy or conform to the definition of assimilation, mainly in its most salient point: making similar/treating similar.

In the short passage concerning Malick, the reader learns that he is le vieux Jules's son; that he has been living in France for about twenty years; he is the father of Khadîdja's three children; and that he was repatriated to Mali after the French authorities refused to grant him the right to stay. What is at stake here is the degree to which one can be treated similar. In the narrative of Malick's story, Hane alludes to the construction of similarities that stems from the relationship between him and le vieux Jules in order to show the limits of being "treated similar." The first similarity is the existing link between le vieux Jules and Malick and the second one, the connection between Malick and France, which should derive directly from the one he shares with his father. Hane's narrative reveals that Jules – as a young man – was a soldier in "l'armée française" and that he fought "la guerre d'Indochine." By linking Jules to "la République," Hane insists on the fact that he is a French citizen even if the treatment he receives from the "République" is not up to the recognition he deserves. It is then surprising to note in the narrative that a former French soldier

residing in France has a son that is being repatriated to Mali. Although Malick is the son of a French national who fought for the republic, he does not enjoy the benefits of a son. He is treated differently from his father, who deserves to stay in France. As a result of that difference, the reader learns, “Malick venait de recevoir une lettre de la préfecture de Paris qui le sommait de quitter le territoire où il vivait depuis vingt ans” (139). The decision to repatriate denotes the involvement of the authorities at a high level. Furthermore, the refusal to naturalize Malick indicates the consideration the republic has for the French citizen descending from Africa. Not only was le Vieux Jules not treated fairly, but his son also paid for the inconsistency of the decision.

Khadi Hane’s description of the “foyer Sonacotra” demonstrates signs of problems of assimilation that impede on the dignity of its residents. The Foyer is primarily described by Hane as “une sorte de cave à immigrés” (109); as its name indicates, it is the dwelling place for exiles, mainly from sub-Saharan and North Africa. It is an old, putrid building, a poor dwelling space. Hane writes, “partout sur les murs, le temps avait laissé ses plaies, ébréchure de la façade, cicatrices sur le ciment moribond” (109). Pascal Blanchard describes the foyer Sonacotra as a temporary dwelling place that later transformed into a permanent one, “devenu de plus en plus des lieux d'habitat durables, foyers et cités de transit se transforment pour les célibataires en maison de retraite de pauvres” (194). Blanchard’s description underscores the social identity of the residents but also reveals that it was meant as a space of transit that slowly became a residence. Patrick Weil, in *La France et ses étrangers*, gives more details about the Sonacotra, asserting that the foyer was first built for the “salariés célibataires algériens” (91). About its nature as a place of transit, Weil points out the underlying political rejection of any form of reunion that can participate in the reception of migrant families, “l'objectif était que ces Algériens ne procèdent pas à des regroupements familiaux” (91).

It is in this foyer that the elders of the Malian exiles live a peripheral existence in the middle of Paris. Their existence itself is characterized as "absurd," and their daily life portrayed as being "aux couleurs de la misère" (112). Khadîdja, who compares her decrepit building to the foyer, finds it "un palais" compared to what she sees. What those images of the foyer Sonacotra and the refusal to grant residency to Malick – whose Father is French and has fought for the "République" – suggest is the absence of political and social decisions to better integrate African exiles and immigrants in France. Drawing from Brubaker's notion of treating similar, we see that the French ideology of assimilation poses a serious problem of adaptation and rather creates significant social dissymmetries. Hane's description of the Sonacotra, far from substantiating a similar treatment, displays forms of exclusion that are marked by a difference of treatment concerning the right for a father to keep a family member near him, the right of a son to live in the country of nationality of his father, as well as the exclusive living conditions encountered in the foyer. All this derives from a lack of social and political recognition of the presence of the Afropean with and among the French society. Honneth insists on social integration, which he associates with inclusion. He writes, "nous ne pouvons réprésenter l'intégration sociale qu'en tant que processus d'inclusion réglé par des formes de reconnaissance." The "formes de reconnaissance" which partake into the construction of the nation through social integration are not, themselves, offered to exiles. Their basic needs of recognition are met with a political discourse that rather refuses their very existence by negating their right to difference and by also refusing their right to sameness.

The image of the Sonacotra and its residents, which triggered le vieux Jules's observation on redistribution, is appalling in a modern society. Le vieux Jules remarks, "quand on n'est rien pour les autres (…) on se contente de ce qui est donné, même si on sait, au fond de soi, qu'on mérite mieux" (113). His discourse appeals to human dignity and social justice as a means of

combatting blatant discrimination against a category of people. The presence of Africa in France is strongly characterized by these attributes that question assimilation as similar treatment. This questioning is epitomized in Nancy Fraser's observation on social justice:

> Nous nous trouvons en fait devant une opposition plutôt improductive des termes constitutifs de la justice sociale. Nous ne devrions pas avoir à choisir entre redistribution et reconnaissance, entre lutte de classe et lutte identitaire ou entre multiculturalisme et social-démocratie. Ce sont des dichotomies trompeuses. L'idée de justice sociale requiert au contraire que l'on intègre à la fois la charge émancipatoire de l'un et l'autre paradigme à l'intérieur du même cadre conceptuel. (10)

In this passage, Fraser offers a way to conceptualize le vieux Jules's reflection. The "on n'est rien" and "se contente de ce qui est donné" recalls Fraser's alignment of "redistribution" and "reconnaissance" and points to the centrality of identity to social justice.

Though Fraser's and Honneth's theorization of social justice and "reconnaissance sociale" gives us a conceptual framework in which to understand how identity construction in human society works, they do not entirely uncover the reasons for the peripheral existence of the African in France. In fact, the centrality of their works moves away from the crucial question of racial and ethnic minorities in France. Thus, beyond the realities they describe, the crucial issue of the presence of the African exile and his difficult integration is an open question. In *La Condition Noire: Essai sur une minorité française,* Pap Ndiaye helps situate the African in France by conceptualizing and theorizing his existence as a French citizen living in France. For Pap Ndiaye that presence and the conditions surrounding it are problematic since Africans in France live in a constant social and political denial that exacerbates their experience. Drawing the parallel between identity and justice, Ndiaye maintains that:

> La question de la justice est donc tout à fait présente dans la demande identitaire, ne serait-ce que parce que la discrimination, en tant qu'obstacle à l'accès égal aux mondes sociaux et à la communauté politique, entrave la reconnaissance des identités non conformes aux mondes en question et représente en cela une forme de mépris pour ces identités et d'humiliation de celles et ceux qui les portent. (25-26)

Because the French Republic has decided to ignore minorities, it also refuses to acknowledge that certain social problems may be specific to them, that certain discourses and words that targets them can be offensive. Worse, it does not consider that certain rights such as employment, lodging and the ability to unite with one's family cannot simply be denied to them. The existence of the foyer Sonacotra and the repatriation of Malick are then symptomatic of the French monocultural nation.

Hane's depiction of Malick's return and the Sonacotra dwelling place exposes an important breach in the common history of France and Africa. Moreover, by grounding the novel in a love story without recognition, Hane revives the question of identity in France, situating it as a centerpiece in the encounter between France and the "Noirs de France" who partake, in this contemporary time, in its history, its social life, its political definition of a nation, and above all its multiculturality.

### 2.4 A Feminist Perspective of Exile

Khadi Hane largely succeeds in situating *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* at the intersection of several important themes which – alongside the questions of identity, assimilation, and the peripheral existence of African exiles in France – include the feminist attention to women in exile. The narrative of Khadîdja's life presents the implications of being a woman in exile who must

cope with imported patriarchal mores. Though the book encompasses the experience of men in exile, Hane's depiction of Khadîdja's socio-economic oppression reveals a matrix in which women experience exile differently. In a moment of introspection on the difficulty of raising Karim, her first born who was slowly moving towards a delinquent life in adolescence, and on past experiences in Mali, Khadîdja exclaims, "le dégoût me prit d'être femme" (130). This exclamation, far from being the expression of her failure to raise her son appropriately, not only materializes a complete disgust of her gender, but mostly demonstrates the degree of difficulties women face in exile. Indeed, Khadîdja's exclamation is the result of a long series of worries and the reader understands, therefore, the reasons why she imputes part of her failure and her incapacity to come to terms with her struggles to her gender identity.

Beyond the condition of exile, Khadîdja is located at the junction of several identity categories that make her vulnerable. Not only, the intersection of the variables exacerbates the oppression she lives but also acts as a location in which Khadîdja's place in society is predetermined. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, several feminist theorists have analyzed the social representation of women according to the various social categories that characterize them. Many of these studies interrogate the ambivalent position of women, concluding therefore that the domination exerted on them derives from the intersecting vulnerable identities that define them. In her essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", in which she articulates the now well known, if broadly applied, theory of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw insists on the difference of obstacles that women of color encounter on the way to subjectivity. In the analysis of different forms of oppression that target white middle-class women, and women and men of color, Crenshaw finds that each individual group does not face the same domination or the same obstacles. She argues

that for each minority group, the degree of subjectivity is predicated on the constitutive identity categories that form their identity (1246).[20] Extending her work on women of color, Crenshaw indicates that they are the ones suffering the more. For her, such a positionality is relative to both their racial and gender identities. Consequently, Black women are disadvantaged among women, but as women of color are underprivileged among Black people. In addition to these unfavorable categories, Crenshaw underscores the weight of maternal responsibility in the oppression of women of color, pointing out that "many women of color, for instance, are burdened by poverty, childcare responsibility and the lack of job skills" (1245-1246).

Fourteen years before Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality, the Combahee River Collective published a manifesto entitled, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," which decries oppression and demands liberation. One of the most crucial affirmations in the statement is the simultaneity of oppression across categories. As they write: "we also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual" (295). Drawing from Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective, it is evident that women's oppression and lack of subjectivity mostly depend on multiple unfavorable positions in what constitutes social identity. The more the variables that lead to oppression and domination multiply, the more their oppression and lack of subjectivity increase.

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[20]Kimberlé Crenshaw published, in 1989, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" in which she theorized intersectionality. In 1991 she published "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" where she brings an in-depth analysis of intersectionality. Thought primarily as a legal investigation her essays by developing around the existential problem of the black woman and of the immigrant woman quickly became a reference within gender studies, feminist studies, social science, etc.

Consequently, any position that women occupy ultimately symbolizes either an achievement of agency, of subjectivity, a means of emancipation or another oppression, and increased subjugation.

In addition to the intersection of identities, women are also defined and characterized according to the politics of location. The way they are perceived, and the social space allotted to them are already determined by their different identity categories. Adrienne Rich first conceptualizes that politics by first drawing on her own experience. Then, she situates her analysis not only on the experience of black women in the United States, but also on the realities of women in third world countries. Rich writes, "When I was carried out of the hospital into the world, I was viewed and treated as female, but also viewed and treated as white - by both black and white people. I was located by color and sex as surely as a black child was located by color and sex" (32). As such, the politics of location not only does not allow a self-determination to women but also maps a rigid control on their life according to gender and race. Rich also explains that being located in a body means, "the place it has taken me, the place it has not let me go" (23). In this way, "locating" Khadîdja means knowing how a set of identity categories determines her experience. Such a study of her location not only allows one to  understand the oppression she faces because of her intersectional identity in Paris. Though categories such as education and age are relevant to the analysis of Khadîdja's exilic life, the centrality of gender and her presence as an exile remain central elements for this study.

In order to grasp the implication of gender in exile, it is necessary to revisit Khadîdja and Lenoir's relationship. The narrative shows that Khadîdja's impossibility to work and the ensuing experience of poverty stem from her position as a mother of a newborn baby. She has no mobility and freedom to accept a job. Maternity can be characterized as a factor that impedes on freedom and as such, constitutes an obstacle to the welfare of the whole family. When Lenoir enquires

about the reason Khadîdja refuses to pay the rent like the other residents do, her answer is unequivocal: “je ne travaille pas” (57). The clarity of this argument, which also highlights Lenoir’s responsibility for her state and condition, does not, however, seem to move him. He responds cynically, “trouve un boulot, n’importe quoi, et règle les loyers, sinon je te fous dehors” (57). Lenoir’s reaction highlights the extent to which Khadîdja as a mother is vulnerable. First, Lenoir wants her to find a job despite her responsibility as a mother of a newborn. As such, Lenoir proves that he does not care for Khadîdja, nor for her child. His injunction to find a job worsens Khadîdja’s condition since it obliterates any possible help from him. This leads us to the second instance, constructed around his “je te fous dehors” which threatens to have Khadîdja and her family leave with nowhere to go. Lenoir’s pressures contribute to the torment Khadîdja already faces and accentuates the doubts she had about her presence as an exile.

Khadîdja is burdened by her responsibilities as a mother. Unfortunately, her duties within her family coupled with her doubts prevent her from fully exerting her subjectivity. In addition, Crenshaw’s assertion illuminates Khadîdja’s worries and interrogation of Lenoir’s request. When she is pushed to the corner, Khadîdja maintains, “comment veux-tu que je travaille avec ton fils dans les bras? Qui s’en occuperait ?” (57). Childcare not only limits her sense of freedom and subjectivity but also contributes to her poverty. Khadîdja is no longer presented as an exile whose desire is to change her previous condition in Mali for the better in France. Instead, her struggle to survive – because she has to face different problems that people like le vieux Jules or the elders in the Sonacotra do not have to face – make her presence as an exile and the experience that come with it completely different.

*Des Fourmis dans la bouche* shows that exile severely impedes on the subject’s agency. In a dialogue with Tante Néné, Khadîdja sees her conviction about her own way of life opposed.

Tante Néné opposes her choices of a white man and her not being married which, according to her, do not correspond to the values of Malian society. What is crucial, however, is Tante Néné's misconception of cultural variations in a different geographical space and how those differences reshape a person's way of life. Coming from Mali, Tante Néné's ideas about life, cultural values and marriage are tailored from what she was taught from birth. The exilic dimension and the consideration of new cultural values do not reshape her understanding of social values nor lead her to develop a different type of agency. Reflections like Tante Néné's – which stem from long expositions to patriarchal social values and which seek to remain unchallenged whatever the geographical space – are part of the ideologies Chandra Mohanty questions when she asks, "what is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are 'my people?' Is home a geographical space, an emotional, sensorial space?" (126).[21] Thus, the definition of home and its implications for people's identity determine the culture they abide by mostly. Tante Néné, unlike Khadîdja, does not consider home to be any other place than Mali. Her presence in France does not establish a connection between the host country and her Malian identity. Her cultural references are, therefore, composed of values that have not undergone the slightest influence by her place of residence. Khadîdja, however, refutes that way of seeing things. For her, the exilic experience is an opportunity to embrace other cultural values that are intrinsically different from what she has known since. As she explains, "si ma voisine et compatriote avait le pied ancré dans la tradition et refusait d'en sortir, moi, je n'avais pas fui le Mali pour en reproduire les schémas ailleurs" (28).

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[21] Chandra Tapalde Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, published in Duke UP, 2003.

Among the aspects of Malian life disavowed by Khadîdja is the "degré de soumission" which entails a blind respect of patriarchal mores. These mores are, unfortunately, the ones that drove Khadîdja out of her country of origin to find peace in her host country. A series of flashbacks let the reader grasp the reasons that justify the use of the verb "fuir". In those references to her past, Khadîdja opens to a world dominated by a male presence that oppresses and subjugates women whatever their age. Thus, we see Khadîdja, literally, offered to an old man who was already the husband to several other women. Khadîdja describes her marriage as a transaction between her father and her old husband. As she recalls, "revenu au village, le vieux pédophile avait acheté l'accord de mon père avec quelques sous et des présents de pacotilles. On me livra à lui, lavée, essorée, parfumée"(50). Getting married to the old man without consent constitutes a moment of desolation but also a moment of rebellion that shapes Khadîdja's identity. Many years after her divorce, she still did not come to terms with her former experience: "Je souffrais de ne pouvoir effacer le passé" (52). This experience of shifting home constitutes a moment of maturity for Khadîdja. Such an aspect of her life does not occur because she is freed from any domination and hegemony. It is predicated on her ability to see and interpret reality differently. Her geographical location therefore determined her location as a woman that better evaluates her culture and other cultures. Though this does not facilitate her exilic experience, it helps her – in the case of the elders' judgement – reconsider her own position as a subject and therefore object to the elders.

Khadîdja's exilic experience, then, develops in a binarity that opposes her life choices to her culture and the representatives of that culture in France. Her life is scrutinized not only by her parents in Mali but is also questioned by the elders living in the foyer Sonacotra. Hane opens that narrative with a letter sent to her family by le Conseil des Sages de Paris and which states that Khadîdja has become a prostitute. "Une lettre circulait au pays," she acknowledges, "selon laquelle

je me prostituais en France" (39). Based on the letter, the Conseil des Sages receives permission to admonish her and ask her to come back to traditional values. Those elders become the new faces of patriarchal oppression that impose a male hegemony on her. Consequently, while they ignore the slightest details of her suffering and the torment of her family, they constitute a barrier to her quest of subjectivity and self-determination. The effort to control Khadîdja's life through what she can do or not with her body as a woman highlights the presence of patriarchy – which is defined by Bene Madungu as "a system of male authority which legitimizes the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious and military institutions" (670) – in African women's life in Paris and shows how African male supremacy continues to dominate women in exile. The efforts Khadîdja deploys to survive become the reason for a solemn convocation where Khadîdja learns that her actions also influence the elders' peace. The *chef des Sages* uses all his authority to make it transparent to Khadîdja, telling her that "Nous t'avons fait venir ici, Khadîdja Cissé, parce que tu nous tortures! Dieu est témoin que tu nous tortures ! Je peux avancer sans me tromper qu'aucun de nous n'a fermé l'œil, depuis qu'on nous a rapporté ta conduite" (117). As is usual in such traditional communities, the question of honor overshadows existential realities and, in the case of Khadîdja, such reality is worsened by the geographical location of her community, the new existing social policies that govern the society, and, especially, the fact of the import of traditions in a space where they are in conflict with socio-economic and political laws. By using the pronoun "nous" to generalize and own the affront, the *Conseil des Sages* requests the right to interfere in Khadîdja's life – and this no longer by proxy as the narrative presents it in the beginning of the problem – but as the first concerned.

The convocation, as well as its justification and administration, exemplify what happens in the matrix that defines the relationship between men and women. It puts in relation power,

supremacy and control, which are symbolized here by the men of the Conseil des Sages, to powerlessness, subjugation and blind obedience epitomized by Khadîdja. The very words that constitute the foundation of the discourse used by the chef des Sages, as well as his use of injunctions, are motifs that exteriorize an exaggerated practice of power. In this overuse of power, the elder holds, "nous ne pouvons tolérer qu'une des nôtres se comporte comme tu le fais" (118). The elder's order is followed a few moments later by another's command, "ferme ta bouche, femme!" (121), which betrays the reason for the convocation. Indeed, in this context, "femme" is not just a word; it is loaded with traits attributes such as "inferiority" and "subordination". R. W. Connell reminds us, however, that "there is no description without a standpoint" (69).[22] Thus, the position from which the word "femme" is used lets the reader understand that it is built in a male dominated custom that does not favor female voices and which makes the expression of male power the center from which social life, and social interactions are constructed.[23]

Khadîdja's exilic experience is characterized by gender-based vulnerability. Vulnerability as portrayed in Hane's book does not encompass psychological or mental conditions but rather develops around financial scarcity and the need to survive. Hane elaborates on women's

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[22] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities,* University of California Press, 1995.

[23] Diana Kay examines that practice of power on women during exiles. After researching the influence of exile on both men and women and by using a Chilean sample of women divided into two different categories, those with a private sector background and those with a public sector work experience in their country of origin, she concludes that "they were subject to a much cruider version of *maschimo* from working men, had less room for manoeuvre and fewer opportunities for letting steam off' (10).[23] It is important to note that the working men are also exiles from the same country as the women. Diana Kay's analysis sheds light on what the existence of women like Khadîdja is in the hand of people that call themselves countrymen. Like the sample Kay used in her work, Khadîdja also navigates an exiled life of powerlessness when confronted with her countrymen. Kay accentuates women's problematic exilic experience by differentiating the state of difficulties women and men face. She adds, "women's experiences of loss and deprivation differed from men's. Given the different social location of women before exile, there were two contrasting sets of experiences. Both groups of women experienced a change for the worse in their situation" (6). The convocation and the male dominated interaction that characterized it does not contribute to helping Khadîdja come out of her predicament. Worse still, it allows frustration to build and disarms her from the strength she needs to face her daily problems.

powerlessness in front of sexual predators when confronted with harsh economic conditions. She presents Khadîdja in a situation where she has nothing to feed her children and has to resort to the indulgence and mercy of the shopkeeper. Hane situates the narrative in a period when Khadîdja hardly finds any money to provide to her family's breakfast, "le jour avait fini de se lever. Sali se tenait derrière moi. Il n'y avait plus d'argent sur la table de la cuisine pour le petit déjeuner" (18). The lack of money and food leads her to the shop where she can purchase on credit. The shopkeeper takes advantage of that state of destitution to extract what he *wants* and his produce become a means of exchange. Giving credit is not therefore guided by the women's capacity to reimburse but on physical appearance. Khadîdja puts it simply, highlighting the "freshness" of the debtor, "lui seul parmi les épiciers du quartier acceptait parfois de faire crédit à certaines femmes qui lui paraissaient plus fraiches que son épouse" (20). Another criterion is the women's willingness to comply to his desires. Thus, being beautiful only represents the first step of the transaction.

Hane constructs Khadîdja's identity at the intersection of several variables. Among the most salient categories that shape Khadîdja's inferiority in the matrix that determines her actions and decisions are her gender, social class (characterized mainly by her economic condition), motherhood, and most importantly, her location as an exile.[24] Drawing from Adrienne Rich's politics of location, we understand, then, that gender and race build her existence, and the penalty and privileges that characterize her are derived primarily from these variables. As such they constitute a location, a way of being situated and defined by category identities, that influence her

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[24] Patricia Hill Collins develops the concept of *matrix of domination* alongside intersectionality in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* She describes the matrix of domination as a locus of identities where people characterized by certain identity categories dominate over others but are also dominated by people with dominant variables. Thus, she explains that "The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and, for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges" (234).

life. Such politics of location aptly frames Khadîdja's experience of exile. We can therefore argue that exile itself constitutes an identity category in Hane's protagonist's life by defining her identity and by allowing characters such as Ali and Jacques Lenoir to locate her. The experience of immigrant women allowed Kimberlé Crenshaw to sharpen her concept and theory of intersectionality. When exploring the influence of the US Immigration and Nationality Act on immigrant women's life, she comes to the conclusion that battered immigrant women do not disclose the violence they undergo for fear of being deported. Furthermore, Crenshaw adds that, even when Congress softened the Act by allowing a waiver that would prevent deportation in case of conjugal violence, many immigrant women would still remain silent. "By failing to take into account the vulnerability of immigrant spouses to domestic violence," Crenshaw finds, "Congress positioned these women to absorb the simultaneous impact of its anti-immigration policy and their spouses' abuse" (1249-250).

The dimension of exile as a place of women's vulnerability becomes evident and is presented as an influential moment on women's life. Khadîdja fights a lot of battles: poverty, her responsibility to take care of her family, her traditional values of Malian patriarchy, the representatives of that tradition, the French welfare service, her love, and each of these situations represents a condition that makes her existence as an exile unbearable and denies her agency and subjectivity while also denying her dignity in an exilic world.

### 2.5 Double Consciousness of the "Ailleurs"

Khadîdja's extended stay in Paris does not sever her ties with Mali. As the narrative unfolds, Hane strives to keep her protagonist within two worlds: a world that is directly presented

to the reader and which is loaded with her daily endeavors to generate better conditions for her family, and a world of memory, filled with past experiences. As such, Hane creates a sort of back and forth movement where images of Paris often give way to the Malian narrative. Hane uses these flashbacks as explanative and contrastive moments that help situate and elucidate problems that her protagonist encounters. Khadîdja's interaction with Tante Néné is one of those moments where we see a clear contrast between two experiences that are carried out in two different geographic spaces. She reminds her countrywomen, "je n'avais pas fui le Mali pour en reproduire le schéma ailleurs" (28). Though the contrast in Khadîdja's statement is not built from a straightforward narrative of a flashback, the reader grasps the opposition that is alluded between living in Paris with its required and normal way of life and living in Mali within a patriarchal society.

The development of Khadîdja's life in Paris – the choice to relinquish some of the values that characterized the society she is from, as well as her adoption of new values specific to Paris – sets her at the intersection of two cultures, of two different worlds. Her life is, therefore, characterized by the doubleness of her identity, a phenomenon misunderstood by both the Conseil des Sages and her family in Mali. Hane's representation of Khadîdja is, then, predicated on two aspects: the fluctuating geographical spaces and the double consciousness of her protagonist. Khadîdja's identity, thus, symbolizes the very existence of Hane's Afropean experience, which intersects two identities and is described as "Franco-sénégalaise".[25] Khadîdja, like Hane, is a "Franco-Malienne" who navigates two worlds, two different realities that shape her existence and lead her to the discovery of challenges in Paris, as well as the possibilities left untouched in Mali. The constant introspection and questioning of her Parisian life, together with the careful understanding of the opportunities that her land of origin represents, therefore, dictates her decision

[25] See "Qui êtes-vous Khadi Hane ?" on www.slateafrique.com.

to return. Like Hane, other Afropean writers, especially Isabelle Boni-Claverie in *Trop Noire pour Etre Francaise*, build on that geographic fluctuation to describe their protagonist's double consciousness by accentuating a sense of double-belonging. Part of the critical apparatus of the novel, notably that concerning the existential definition of the doubleness of Khadîdja's identity and that of the kids in Château-Rouge, poses a problem since it encompasses different concepts of double-consciousness.

As mentioned above, Hane primarily focuses on geographic spaces that situate Khadîdja. As such, Khadîdja retains a strong attachment to Mali and is even disturbed at times by her reminiscence. The two spaces, Mali and Paris, are often juxtaposed in the narrative and shows the opposition that defines Khadîdja's life. A moment that highlights such an opposition reads :

> La poitrine de Sali se soulevait en même temps que la mienne et nos corps vibraient à l'unisson. La voix d'Oumou Sangaré, vedette de la chanson malienne, remontait aux secrets des aïeux, dans un chant de gloire à l'honneur des Cissé. Je me sentais vivre. Couchée à côté de ma fille, que je serrais contre moi, je respirais l'odeur de ma terre. J'étais heureuse, même si Paris annonçait une fois de plus une journée de disette. (75)

Such evocation of "home" and the happiness that derives from it as well as the contrast with life in Paris, reveals what Steven Vertovec articulates as the "diaspora consciousness," which is marked by a dual or multiple identifications (5). For Vertovec, "there are depictions of individual's awareness of de-centered attachment, of being simultaneously 'home away from home', 'here and there' or, for instance, British and something else" (6-5). Drawing from Vertovec, we see that location goes beyond the physical presence in a place to encompass the awareness of being part of a multiplicity of mental or reified places. In the narrative, Khadîdja exteriorizes that notion of 'here and there' by situating herself simultaneously in two different spaces. Moving from one present

narration to the immediate resurgence of her past, her sense of de-centeredness, however, is multifaceted. At times, it is characterized by a strong attachment to her home country, revealing the joys and the happiness of being part of the cultural identity she left. At others, it presents itself through the recollection of the difficulties faced while still in Mali. Moments of happiness, such as the dance she performs with her daughter on Oumou Sangaré's melody, arise from the same vivid memories of belonging to that culture as well as moments where she desperately questions her existence in the village. Narrative passages of her early and forced marriage, her first pregnancy with a man she loved but who was not her husband, in addition to her sister's arranged marriage highlight her consciousness of home but are themselves rooted in narratives that show her attachment to her host country. The expression of such de-centeredness where evocation of Mali and the narrative in Paris combine to foster her double consciousness is present in passages where Madame Renaud's visit is quickly transformed into a period of recollection where once again Mali resurfaces, "le cou de Madame Renaud parut s'allonger quand elle déglutit sa salive. C'est vrai, je ne lui facilitais pas la tâche. A chaque visite, le même cirque. La bonté fusait d'elle, de moi sortait le pire. Des souvenirs ressassés auxquels j'avais attribué la cause de mes galères, depuis le Mali" (49). Despite the mention of Mali in Khadîdja's reflection, which already shows her mental connection to both geographical spaces, the narration that follows, "tout avait commencé avec mon père, chef de village coiffé d'une tiare, qui me céda,…" (49), immediately continues with her trajectory when she was thirteen years of age. Hane, therefore, reinforces Khadîdja's identity by subtly bridging past and present. By refusing a narrative linearity, and by referring to her protagonist's different moments of life in a way that blurs the frontier between past and present, despite the evidence of their diachronicity.

Khadîdja's complex and difficult life can be read as a depiction of double consciousness. What differentiates this expression of double consciousness from the one analyzed above is the portrayal of Mali as a place of better possibilities and opportunities that were not apparent while Khadîdja was still there. It appears under the form of an overwhelming and problematic Parisian experience. Such a narration of her life contrasts with the former vision she had of her home country as well as the image of Paris that unfolds before her. It is crucial to underscore that such a new vision emanates from her experience in Paris. As a result of the comparison she makes, her representation of Mali changes, "le Mali m'apparaissait comme un pays de cocagne" (130). As a consequence, that reality – which reflects, more or less, her Parisian identity – appears like a mirror through which she apprehends her life and place in the society. However, beyond her understanding of her position as a vulnerable exile in Paris, Khadîdja successfully deciphers the fields of possibilities in Mali, that is, the opportunities she may be missing.

Theorists and critics developed the concept of double consciousness as a framework that elucidates the relational existence of African minorities. W. E. B. Du Bois conceives of it in *The Souls of Black Folk* as the consciousness the black person builds of himself through the gaze and opinion of the other. As he explains,

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others… (3)

Du Bois ultimately differentiates the consciousness of the self, which is not mediated from the consciousness that stems from the retrospective image one perceives from alterity. Double consciousness, as Du Bois conceptualizes it, mostly underscores the construction of the identity of

the African subject. It is, therefore, a moral and mental (re)consideration of one's own position within others.

Fanon develops the notion of double consciousness by conceptualizing bidimensionality and attitude change. For Fanon, double consciousness in colonized territories is marked by a change of attitude that is based on space and the group of people with which Africans interact. He observes, "the black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man" (17). His analysis of the African's attitude implies that double consciousness is aware of itself and navigates according to its environment. As a postcolonial critic, Fanon raises against such manifestation that he classifies as hypocritical. Worse, he sees that double consciousness is but the illustration of a recurrent complex.

Unlike Du Bois and Fanon, who establish the African identity in direct contrast with his world, Paul Gilroy sets a central position between what he calls "to be both European and black" (1), while analyzing his hybridity around the Atlantic. Hane's narrative does not center on the hybridization of her protagonist, but rather positions her double experience in contrast. Drawing from Fanon and Du Bois, we can assert that France becomes the mirror that allows a better assessment, a sharper image of the value of the hometown. The reader, then, gets the full meaning of Khadîdja's declaration : "J'avais aussi levé l'oeil sur Paris et manqué ce que le Mali aurait pu me donner que je n'aurais jamais ailleurs" (144). Khadîdja's assertion emphasizes the influence of Paris over her life in Mali. In other words, the encounter with Paris brings her to the recognition of what she could get from Mali. By building a consciousness of Mali and Paris, she comes to the realization that her home country – a place she knows, and which builds up her identity – offers more than she had previously imagined.

Hane's narration of Khadîdja's life creates the double projection of Khadîdja's profound thoughts in order to make the social contrast salient. In building on that contrast, the narrative reconstructs the idea of belonging and place. In the section on the encounter between the Global South and the West, I analyzed the place of African exiles in Paris. I examined the geographic as well as the social peripheral existence of Khadi Hane's characters in Paris, showing that Khadîdja's relationship with Jacques Lenoir, the repatriation of her children's father and the living conditions of the elders at the Sonacotra exhibited problems of integration. However, Hane's novel does not limit its quest to those relational issues. It problematizes French nationality and belonging by exposing the particularity of a decentered identity through the acceptance and rejection of the frenchness of exiles' descendants, thus raising a multilocal perspective of their presence.[26]As such Hane's *Des Fourmis dans la bouche* narrativizes 'multilocality' as conceptualized by Margaret Rodman in "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality". Rodman examines place, and its changing meaning for people, establishing that unlike what some anthropologists think of place as unproblematic, being just a location or simply "where people do things" (640), places "are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions" (641). One of the multiple definitions Rodman retains of multilocality is the reflexive relationships with place, understood as a dislocation from the possibility of local identity (646-47). Rodman's anthropological idea of dislocation – which is tied to the concept of multilocal

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[26] The term exile refers to French nationals born in France from immigrant parents. Gathering them under the term exile is due to their immediate ascendance to exiled parents. The following paragraphs better articulate the issue.

belonging – recalls Hane's deterritorialized characters.[27] Multilocality, in *Des Fourmis dans la bouche,* is made salient through Khadîdja's reflection on the identity of the children living in Château-Rouge and is intensified by the questioning of their hybridity. Their birth in France from parents in exile strongly influences their place and acceptance in French society. Watching the children play in the streets, Khadîdja wonders:

> Qui étaient-ils? Un panachage raté de deux cultures qui les feraient cavaler derrière ce truc indéfinissable qui manque à ceux qui n'arrivent pas à se situer sur une échelle familiale désormais régie par un code inconnu. Peut-être ces enfants grandiraient dans le moule français sans qu'on ne les bassine avec leur identité. (29)

The uncertainty that characterizes Khadîdja's thinking illustrates the difficulty to belong to a French system that ultimately categorizes its citizens not according to the nation's ideals but in terms of the origin of the parents. Khadîdja's apprehension for the future of the children anticipates difficult living conditions as well as nearly impossible social integration in France. The use of "peut-être" does not entirely correspond to their identity characterization within the French social system. Moreover, it suggests that they could be the end of the African patriarchy system in France. Nonetheless, Hane links that responsibility to their real acceptance in French social life. As such,

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[27] The idea of changing, or several residences that defines the mainstream definition of multilocality subsumes a migratory movement that leads certain populations to move periodically because of a job necessity (trade, research, etc.), or for better living conditions. It is also a movement that translates an economic achievement where second home becomes synonymous with financial comfort. Rodman's definition allows a strong and broader conceptualization of multilocality that differs from most other definitions. Indeed, the concept was often referred to in its more reduced sense of having multiple residences, or keeping a second home (Axel Borsdorf, 2013; Knut Petzol 2017; Lauranne Jacob 2018), or to the dispersion of the members of a family in several geographical locations (A. Benz 2014).
For further reading on "multilocality," see Axel Borsdorf's "Second Home in Tyrol : Growth Despite Regulation" (2013) ; Knut Petzol's Mobility Experience and Mobility Decision-Making: An Experiment on Permanent Migration and Residential Multilocality (2017); A. Benz's "Mobility, Multilocality and Translocal Development: Changing livelihoods in the Kakakoram (2014); and Lauranne Jacob's "Réformes Territoriales et Modification des rapports Ville-Montagne dans les Alpes-Maritimes" (2018).

Khadîdja presents the consequences of their lack of integration in their communities as their return to their parents' culture. Such an assertion, therefore, suggests a dislocation of the children in Chateau-Rouge from the possibility of a local identity. This entails an endless interrogation of their existential experience and a quest for their identity on lands they barely know, and which is supposedly their home. Fawzia Zouari, in *Ce Pays Dont Je Meurs* emphasizes the consequences of such dislocation by narrativizing the absence of attachment, the inner exile and the death that can follow. Hane refers subtly to the constant questioning of these children's origin by using the term "bassiner" which not only implies the continuity of the interrogation, but also denotes a negation of their belonging to their society. Despite the mitigation of that dislocation, which is manifested by "peut-etre" and the use of the conditional "grandiraient," the problem of integration of the children and the interrogation of their identity still resurfaces. Not only does she put it in terms of action by exploiting the sense of "cavaler derrière," which shows the effort to embody that identity, but she also defines the dislocation in terms of the incapacity to figure out exactly what that identity is, "ce truc indéfinissable qui manque".

The interrogation of the identity of these descendants of exile creates a dislocation that not only prevents them from referring to a unique and precise identity, but also keeps them from adequately participating in the socioeconomic life of the nation. This cleavage from French society, resulting from the lack of acceptance of the local identity of the French citizen with a sub-Saharan ascendance, helps explain the rise of Afropean literature, which predicates its works on the presence and experience of the African diaspora in Europe. Such dislocated identity of the French of African descent in France is the object of the study that Pape Ndiaye carried out. In his analysis, most of the people from sub-Saharan ascendance he interrogated insist on being part of the French nation. However, a minority believe that their identity as French people is combined

with another origin (47). It is important to note that accepting thoroughly one's identity as French depends on one's degree of integration. As such the way one perceives one's role, one's place, and one's importance in the society becomes crucial. Consequently, belonging to the nation starts with a relation with one's immediate society. The dislocation – that results from the failure of integration – becomes relational. Thus, identity is not limited to one's own perception but mainly resides on the possibility of belonging, that is, the probability of being accepted. In his work, Ndiaye transcribes the thoughts of Alou – a French person of sub-Saharan descent – to exemplify that dislocation from the possibility of local identity, adding, "de toute manière, si t'es noir, déjà, tu n'es pas vu comme français. Si en plus t'as un nom pas catholique, alors là… On va te demander d'où tu viens" (47). The problem that accentuates the dislocation resides in the questioning "d'où tu viens". We understand that the local and the national have characteristics that cannot encompass a certain number of races and names. Race and name constitute, then, the prime elements that determine the exile's identity in France. As Ndiaye explains, "les Français noirs d'aujourd'hui et d'hier font l'expérience d'une identité française contestée" (47). As such, the idea of multilocality as expressed by Rodman becomes an imposition on subjects whose belonging to a land is questioned and even denied at times. Those questioning and denials, therefore, externalize the extent to which the battle for one's identity and claim for a place of belonging is crucial. The dislocation and endless construction of the identity of the exiles's descendant is portrayed by Miano as follows:

> En France, les Noirs ne sont pas nommés d'une manière qui inscrive leur trajectoire dans celle de leur pays. Lorsqu'on les mentionne, c'est en indiquant qu'ils viennent d'ailleurs. Ainsi, une personne qui descendrait, par exemple, d'un soldat subsaharien ayant combattu pendant la Grande Guerre avant de décider de s'établir en France comme certains le firent,

> reste des décennies plus tard, considérée comme issue de l'immigration. Dès lors qu'il s'agit de ces populations descendantes de colonisés, le décompte des générations ayant vécu sur le sol Français est sans fin, les gens pouvant donc être des immigrés de troisième génération : nés en France, de parents eux aussi nés en France, mais toujours pas Français. (79)[28]

Miano eloquently goes beyond the idea Hane develops in her book. Her analysis of the recurrent mode of designation of the sub-Saharan descendant exhibits a deterritorialized French citizen. Drawing from Miano's inquiry, we see that Khadîdja's mention of "panachage raté de deux cultures" could also reflect the idea of "panachage refusé," which largely expresses a human desire to build walls between citizens of the same country. To Hane's narrative of the problematic identity of the exiles' descendants in France and the clarity of the politicized, culturally relative and historically specific nature of place, and to her question "qui étaient-il?", Miano responds, "il est donc normal que les Afropéens s'inventent un ancrage pour ne pas sombrer" (86). For Miano, this "ancrage" is grounded in the concept of Afropea, one that she links to the experience of the French citizen with sub-Saharan ancestors. Miano's answer to the impossibility to belong to local identity focuses on a mental reconsideration of self and place. She writes, "Afropea, c'est, en France, le terroir mental que se donnent ceux qui ne peuvent faire valoir la souche francaise. C'est la légitimité identitaire arrachée,…" (86). Although one can find the solution of a mental location worthy of interest, the fact that it does not end the continuous struggle against dislocation and rather presents identity as "arrachée" still poses a serious problem to the Afropean's presence in France.

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[28] Leonora Miano, *Habiter la Frontiere.* L'Arche, 2012.

Unlike Miano, Hane opens the door to another "ailleurs." Throughout the narrative, the call to reconsider the "ailleurs" illuminates Khadîdja's mind. She portrays Khadîdja with a series of introspections that lead her to a reexamination of her presence and indirectly to the presence of her children in Paris. The introspections derive from a range of experiences, from poverty to the difficult integration of the people around her, and finally to the dislocation that she observes. Although Khadîdja highlights in the narrative that "les plus vieux disaient qu'on savait quand on arrivait en France, mais qu'on ne savait pas quand on en partait" (55), she admits that the harshness of the conditions most exiles face imposes the question, "comment rentrer chez nous ?" (55).

*Des Fourmis dans la bouche* presents the idea of return as dependent on two important aspects of Khadîdja's life. First, as we saw with the self-interrogations Khadîdja has of her experience, she develops the possibility of the return by being aware of the difficulty she encounters and the impossibility to change them. The revision of these difficulties is an admission of failure but constitutes a desire to continue the quest for a better life elsewhere than in exile. The clarity of her affirmation emanates from her realization that "retourner au Mali, ce n'était pas qu'une parole en l'air. L'idée me trottait dans la tête depuis quelques années déjà. J'avais fini par me lasser de Paris, de ses habitants grincheux, de son bruit, de son caquetage et par-dessus tout de ses promesses jamais tenues" (138). By mentioning "les promesses jamais tenues," Khadîdja confronts the received idea of Paris as a place of abundance, where the possibility of making one's fortune and living a better life than is possible in poverty-stricken African countries. She presents a tangible reality that contrasts with the stereotyped image of Paris.

The second aspect is relative to the new representation Khadîdja has of her hometown. Mali appears differently to her, becoming a place of possibilities that she had never previously thought about. This stems from the contrast she constructs between life in the two geographical

places. This does not mean, however, that Khadîdja is ignorant of the difficulties in that "ailleurs" of Mali. She refers to it at times through its harshness but hints that the difficulties in Paris counterbalance the arid life in Mali, adding, "là-bas, c'etait si rude que les gens se serraient les coudes pour survivre dans une fraternité simulée. Je me sentais prête à y retourner » (130).[29] This sense of solidarity opposes her current situation where she largely battles alone. Khadîdja's decision to return becomes evident when she evokes solidarity as a crucial element that is lacking in her Parisian life. Nonetheless, she throws in the perspective of missing something in Mali due to her absence and her life in Paris, "j'avais levé l'œil sur Paris et manqué ce que le Mali aurait pu me donner que je n'aurais jamais ailleurs" (144). Hane concludes her novel by excavating the link between the lack of solidarity with Khadîdja's ultimate decision to return. She also relates it to her relationship with Jacques Lenoir, who refuses to let the mother of his child live for free in his apartment. Khadîdja ironically alludes to that love in a moment where her very presence in the apartment is questioned, indicating : "sur le côté du lit où j'avais humé son odeur, mon nez enfoncé dans son aisselle, était placée l'injonction de libérer son appartement. Peut-être était-ce le miracle que j'espérais voir surgir pour me décider enfin à retourner au Mali" (150). Leaving the apartment becomes synonymous with leaving Paris and returning to Mali. The injunction to vacate first means the end of love and solidarity, followed by continued hardship in Paris. As such the decision to equate the leaving the apartment to the leaving Paris becomes clear and remains the sole wise decision Khadîdja could make.

[29] The reference to "pays de cocagne" symbolizes better living conditions in Mali, where destitution is absent and where there is abundance of wealth and food. The antilogy that emerges from the image of a wealthy Mali and the idea of harshness that is conveyed by terms such as "rude" and "survivre" mainly contrast the harshness of Khadîdja's present life. It also helps understand the importance of solidarity in Mali.

### 2.6 Conclusion

Khadi Hane's writing of the Afropean experience raises important questions around social cohesion as well as well as exiles' belonging to French society. The reflection she brings in concerning the presence of African exiles and the future of coming Afropean generations demands tangible answers that transcends Miano's allusion to a "terroir mental" that will act as a secure refuge. To the question "why return?", Khadi Hane draws from her own *Afropeanity*, and from the lives of real people she worked with in France in order to narrativize the multiple motivations that trigger the desire to return. Hane's portrayal of Khadîdja's life moves from the many physical and mental battles her protagonist has to fight to the realization of the identity as other in France. As such, not only, she represents the exilic experience as a paradox – since the lived exile differs from the imagined one – but also depicts it as a constant battle for acceptance. What Hane does in her work is then to focus on the contrast between how the African presence is envisioned and what it really is.

The dramatic portrayal of Khadîdja, therefore, participates in calling into question both the desire to migrate to Europe and that of staying there despite the difficulties one encounters. As a result, Hane does not limit her narrative to the evocation of the problems that emanates from exile. She shows that exile is itself a locus that develops a particular relationship between exiles and their country of origin. Such a relationship stems from the awareness of the economic and social potentialities the exile can grasp in the country of origin. As Hane shows with Khadîdja, the construction of the imaginary of the return symbolizes the new vision of one's place there. To return not only entails the act of claiming one's place in one's homeland but transcends that aspect to become the beginning of a new era of participative commitment to one's land.

## 3.0 Chapter 2: Towards an Assertive Move: Realizing the Self

> Revenir, c'est tuer la nostalgie pour ne laisser que l'exil, nu. C'est devenir, soi-même, cet exil-là, déshérité de toute autre attache.
> – Malika Mokeddem, *L'Interdite*

### 3.1 Introduction

A study of Malika Mokeddem's writings unveils a complex writing about the self, an exposure of hidden aspirations and the literary translation of a cultural and social life marked by daily binarities. The sociopolitical period of her work is marked by a tense opposition between religious fundamentalism and the desire for a secular Algerian republic, important hostilities around tradition and modernity, as well as women ongoing battles for more subjectivity and representation in the society. Mokeddem's work – which is mainly narrativized in relation with the realities of the Algerian socio-political life – is, therefore, the depiction of a quest for identity that generally transcends simple personal hopes to embrace the larger community's expectations.[30] As such, though Mokeddem's novels are mostly autobiographical and generally stem from her personal experience, they rise above the narrative framework to align with what constitutes the common and tangible experience of the Algerian people. Thus, her novels are ideologically fraught while being intertwined with the population's desire for a social and political liberation.

[30] See her other novels, *Les Hommes qui Marchent* (1990), *Le Siècle des Sauterelles* (1992), *Des Rêves et des Assassins* (1995), *La Nuit de la Lézarde* (1998), *N'zid* (2001), etc.

Like Mokeddem, Algerian writers are characterized by their role in their society and how that role translates into an active social participation. For her and her Algerian counterparts, writing, therefore, becomes an act of commitment and an expression of solidarity with the Algerian people. This supposes that though many Algerian intellectuals live different realities because of their transnational or exilic positions, their works are inscribed in the broader ideology of social and political cohesion. In her preface to Anne-Marie Nahlovsky's *La Femme au Livre: Les Ecrivaines Algériennes de Langue Française*, Beïda Chikhi observes,[31] "chaque corps féminin qui entre dans la langue française avec une mémoire algérienne, lui imprime de nouvelles métaphores" (10). Chikhi suggests that francophone Algerian women writers not only master the French language but also transforms it into a tool. Writing for the Algerian woman, mainly, in the period of the Civil War presupposes the use of an aesthetics and an adequate narratology that paint the numerous cruelties, oppression and resistance to fundamentalism in a more subtle accessible way.[32]

Mokeddem exploits that power of language by resorting to a polyphonic narration that blends direct and ingenious criticisms of Algerian society. For Chikhi, it is in the depiction of the various feelings and emotions which singularize the writer's own imaginary that language acquires what she calls "its density". Chikhi mentions emotions that are typified by their binary characteristics "Plaisir ou joie, amour ou passion, douleur ou regret, nostalgie ou mélancolie" (10)

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[31] Beïda Chikhi is a professor of French and Francophone studies. Her most recent position as a professor was at Paris IV Sorbonne. Her essays focus mostly on North African literature and include among other, *Assia Djebar: Histoires et Fantaisies* (PUPS, 2006), and *Littérature Algérienne: Désir d'Histoire et Esthétique* (L'Hamattan, 1998). - you don't need to include biographical information in the note unless it's somehow important to your argument. A good rule of thumb – keep notes simple.

[32] Naming the Algerian sociopolitical situation was itself a source of fight that translated into a mediatic and diplomatic battle. James D. le Sueur clarifies that "The French quickly used the term 'Civil War' while Algerian officials objected and used the term 'war on civilians' and as one between the forces of order and the terrorist organization" (6).

in order to illustrate the extent to which Algerian literary themes functions by opposition. In the Algeria of Civil War, such binarities gradually find their ways in the various literary publications. Consequently, the Algerian literature of the end of the twentieth century is symbolized by paradigms that directly questions the writers'very existence within their communities.

Though Algeria's history of domination and subjugation in periods of colonialism and Civil War reflects the general desire of affirmation and liberation of both men and women, Algerian women more than men yearned for a form of freedom that could make their subjectivity more assertive in the cultural and religious sense. Critics like Trudy Agar-Mendousse consider the existence of Algerian women as a double subjugation[33]. For her, women in Algeria undergo a twofold oppression which is materialized by the domination exerted by the legacy of the colonial power, and by the Algerian tradition (15). Recognizing that same temporal division of the social place of women in Algeria, Anne-Marie Nahlovsky alludes to their existence by referring to a gradation between uprooting, confinement and domination, stating therefore that "le colonialisme les avait coupées de leurs racines linguistiques et de leur filiation historique. L'indépendance les renvoie à leur foyer et dans l'enfermement de leur maison, sous la domination de leur père, de leur frère et de leur mari" (13).

The social position of women in postcolonial Algeria, however, remains an element of complete incomprehension. The role women played during the eight years of the Algerian revolution contrasts with the place that is generally allotted to most of them. As very important subjects who actively participated in the revolution not only as combatants in the battlefront, but

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[33] The term Agar-Mendousse uses is d*ouble colonization.* However, the idea she develops shows a domination that stems from the colonial system as well as the oppression that is observable in modern independent Algeria.

also as heads of families,[34] the Algerian women became, with the independence of their country the citizens whose liberation still remains a political, cultural and religious stake. Known for her participation in the country's revolution and for her research on women during the revolution, Djamila Amrane puts forward the figure of about eleven thousand women who willingly joined the mujahidin to fight for the liberation of their country (59).[35] Unfortunately, that active contribution in the revolution did not provide women with a decent social position. Relegated as the keepers of the traditions, Algerian women were simply subjugated and refused the right to equality. As Dalila Arezki writes:

> On semble ignorer le rôle qu'elle tient, au péril de sa vie, dans les guerres de libération. Pilier de la vie familiale, elle a de surcroit les capacités d'être présente active sur plusieurs fronts, de cumuler avec efficacité, succès bon nombre de tâches aussi diverses et variées soient-elle. Pour ce faire il faut qu'on lui en donne l'occasion, qu'on ne la tienne pas écartée de tout et de tous, recluse dans son gynécée" (35).[36]

Such a position was exacerbated during the Civil War with fundamentalists laying more religious burden on women.

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[34] In households where men were absent due to the call to serve in the revolution, women became the heads of families.

[35] See Amrane Djamila. "Les Combattantes de la Guerre d'Algerie". *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps,* no. 26, 1992, pp. 58-62.
The figures don't represent the precise number of women who really supported the war effort. Amrane recognizes this inaccuracy and points out that "dans le cas d'une famille recevant des maquisards, seule la responsable du refuge est considerée comme militante. Alors que l'ensemble des femmes de la maison, souvent aidées par les voisines, ont activement participé aux activités d'accueil "(59). Marnia Lazreg highlights that the impossibility to provide accurate statistics on women is due to the fact that many women's deaths were not reported and those who survived failed in obtaining certification (112).[35] Susan Ireland underscores the oblivion that characterizes women's social emancipation after independence as a failure, adding, "although women participated in the fight for independence, national liberation and the emancipation of women have not gone hand in hand" (172-173).

[36] See Dalila Arezki, *Romancières algériennes francophones : langue, culture, identité.* Séguier, 2005.

Though the Algerian Civil War brought in a new order that drew a marked line between the social struggles of the time and the reality of the conflict, it is essential to acknowledge that it just exacerbated an already existing social fracture. Algeria, as a nation, was already experiencing, under the influence of the FLN and socio-religious fundamentalism, a social divide that was characteristic of the Maghreb world. Matters related to women, their place and identity within the society, as well as secularism and the language to use in daily life added to basic economic problems. Dividing the whole history of Maghrebian literature into two phases – the colonial and the postcolonial period –, Mildred Mortimer, points that the postcolonial era, is characterized by narratives of the "negative factors that erode Maghrebian society today" (4). The reality described by Mokeddem in her novels, *L'Interdite* and in *Des Rêves et des assassins,* draws from the negative factors Mortimer references. As such, North African postcolonial literature keeps a close connection with the sociopolitical occurrences in the region. The link between literature and the society, also, represents a North African writer that has a strong social commitment. Echoing Fatima Mernissi's thoughts on Algerian society, Agar-Mendousse reaffirms that existing link between the Algerian individual and his community in terms of commitment to the tribe, "l'Algérie est une société où l'individu doit être solidaire de la tribu" (13). As such the writer is no exception; he/she is therefore characterized by his/her role in his/her society and how that role translates into an active social participation. Drawing from Mortimer and Agar-Mendousse, this chapter underscores the scial dimensions of Algerian postcolonial literature.

In the Algeria of the 1990s, however, violence directed towards the military and the civil population quickly targeted the Algerian intellectual. Writers and journalists were murdered because of their engagement against fundamentalism and their call for a more secular country. Their writing was disturbing mainly for the fundamentalists and the objective was to silence them.

Analyzing Algeria's history in this period, mainly through the perspective of the country's failure to install a democratic state thirty years after its independence, James Le Sueur writes, "violence boomeranged to become a creative cultural force in Algeria" (192).[37] According to Le Sueur, rather than being a stimulant for fear, violence acted as a catalyst for a literary rebirth, leading to an increase in cultural production by the very writers it was supposed to intimidate. Like her contemporaries, Mokeddem understood the importance to engage in the ideological writing compelled by the urgency of the situation. Lila Ibrahim-Ouali analyzes Mokeddem's book as an interrogation of the Algerian society in a period of conflict.[38] More specifically, she asserts that *L'Interdite* "développe des themes variés, et, à partir du microcosme qu'est Aïn Nekhla, la romancière brosse un tableau complet de la société algérienne, de sa violence et de son inttolérance. Sont évoqués et proposes à la reflexion des sujets qui concerne la politique, l'éducation, la tradition et le progrès" (13). Thus, the need to narrate the prevailing sociopolitical and religious situation surpassed the chance of violence and murder.

The Algerian Civil War quickly revealed the importance of literature and the writer to political and social discourse. During the war, literature proved to be one of the most effective media that related Algeria to the rest of the world. Rather than offering incessant figures of attacks and deaths, writers built strong narratives about the realities on the ground. The suffering and oppression of the population were made more visible and tangible in the form of stories. Tristan Leperlier's *Algérie: Les Ecrivains dans la Décennie Noire* focuses on the role of writers during the Civil War. His essay offers an elaborate study of intellecual life during this period. For

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[37] See James Le Sueur, *Algeria Since 1989 : Between Terror and Democracy.* Zed books LTD, 2010.

[38] Lila Ibrahim-Ouali, "Ce quotidien 'aux odeurs de violence et de mort' algeriennes sur le champ de bataille." *Francofonia,* No. 43, 2002, pp. 5-26.

Leperlier, “plus largement, il convient d’observer la manière dont la littérature travaille le ‘discours social’ de son époque, consciemment ou non, voire comment elle contribue à sa formation en ‘cadrant’ la réalité, et constitue un mode de ‘connaissance pratique’” (29). Leperlier suggests that literature provides a path to an authentic transcription of Algerian social life. Writing, therefore, speaks as loud as images do in newspapers. However, Leperlier finds that the role of the writer does not limit itself to the narratives and retelling of Algerian social life. For Leperlier, the writer is “le paragon de l’intellectuel, et en particulier de l’intellectuel critique” (38). Hence, beyond the narratives, a key component of writing during the Civil War is to denounce and serve as a voice for the population. Leperlier’s conception of the Algerian writer’s position at the vanguard of criticism and denunciation explains why fundamentalists quickly targeted writers.

Mokeddem’s writing of *L’Interdite* is a contribution to “la literature de l’urgence.” Her depictions of her protagonist Sultana’s return to Algeria and the ways Sultana represents her country after an exile of fifteen years provides a realistic portrayal of a divided nation. Mokeddem, therefore, resorts to the return from exile of her protagonist, Sultana, to engage in the Algerian resistance.[39] Her work explores the oppression of women and the consequences of a possible reign of fundamentalists over the Algerian population. Analyzing her work through a feminist perspective Arezki establishes that “Malika Mokeddem s’insurge contre les tabous, les préjugés de son pays. Cette tendance au non-conformisme l’amène à transgresser les interdits sous quelques formes qu’ils se présentent” (86). Mokeddem’s *L’Interdite* is then a writing that attempts to break the chains of the Algerian woman by interrogating her tradition. Through the return of Sultana, Mokeddem notes the decrepitude of the Algerian society and the absence of individual freedom.

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[39] The urgent literature started as an intellectual participation in denouncing the numerous atrocities, murders and oppression committed during the Algerian Civil War. As the name indicates, it was felt as moment of important contribution from Algerian writers. It was also a period that witnessed the publication of many first novels.

Sultana's presence in her community marks a revival of women's existence. With her presence, women become aware of the oppression that is prevailing upon their existence.

Mokeddem, thus, builds women's disobedience and resistance to fundamentalism by offering a tangible example in Sultana. However, she does not limit her story to women's liberation but alludes to a national one by including the whole population of her community in the battle. She portrays the solidarity of men who deep within themselves do not agree with religious fundamentalism but openly fear opposing it. Mokeddem's questioning centers on individual awareness and the possibilities to move towards a more liberated nation constructed on social and religious equality. She builds her story from the perspective of an imaginary which is dependent on the desire to oppose tradition and resolutely move to modernity. As a result Mokeddem, explores the return of her protagonist as a moment of awakening that is predicated on the renewal of a collective vision. To return from exile, as Mokeddem narrativizes it, is a sociopolitical commitment in one's country of birth. Through Sultana's engagement in Aïn Nekhla, Mokeddem shows that the return contributes in shuttering the walls of obscurantism and fosters a resistance against oppressive groups. This chapter therefore analyzes Sultana's return to Aïn Nekhla as a social commitment within her community. Focussing on Sultana's calling into question of social and cultural practices and the community changes that derive from them, I, therefore, argue that the return is transformative of the population consciousness and becomes a liberating tool through the driving force the returnee brings.

This chapter, therefore, discusses the ways Mokeddem exploits Sultana's return from exile in order to enter the intellectual resistance in her country. It seeks to interrogate solidarity from the perspective of the return. The first section analyzes Sultana's fragmented identity while showing that the return is not a straightforward continuation of one's former life. As a person that is coming

back to reunite with her past life, Sulatana is confronted with her past experience in Aïn Nekhla. She discovers that the traumatic experience she lived at the death of her mother still persists. As such, exile does not mean a complete erasure of her trauma. Drawing from Cathy Caruth's analysis of trauma, the section presents the return as a encounter with former fears and trauma. As such, it is a battle against one's own past and a desire to end the internal and moral wounds, which despite their immateriality, influence the returnee's experience in his/her motherland. Through Mokeddem's narrative of Sultana's experience in Aïn Nekhla, it appears that an advantageous contribution of subjects that comes back to their homeland is possible only when they successfully negotiate their return in their societies. This implies an acceptance to revisit old family problems and personal trauma. The second section discusses the return as a literary space that allows Mokeddem to assert her intellectual dissidence and her voicing against fundamentalism. This section argues that Sultana's return is a literary periphrasis to Mokeddem's alignment to Tahar djaout's call for an intellectual implication in Algeria's sociopolitical life. Consequently, the return as narrativized by Mokeddem is a trope for her participation into the Algerian intellectual engagement in Algeria. In the third section, I examine Sultana's presence as an awareness of patriarchal oppression over women. The section analyzes women's relationship to their community in Aïn Nekhla and holds that domination and oppression, at a certain extent, have been naturalized in such a way that rather than being perceived as a social construct that is continually fanned, they are viewed as a normal enactment of cultural practices. Mokeddem builds on Sultana's return to demonstrate that the confrontational contribution of the returnee allows the breaking of long-existing traditions that hinder normal social and political progress in Africa. The last section is an investigation of the return as a construction of social resistance that leads to a complete reconsideration of power. It is presented as a normal result of the population's awareness

of their possibilities in their society. Indeed, since the return is a sociopolitical contribution in the homeland, in Sultana's specific case, it leads to a physical confrontation that demands more secularism and a greater expression of equality.

### 3.2 Fragmentation and Catharsis

Mokeddem portrays Sultana's return to her native village as an imperative to reunite with her past. Yacine, her friend and lover, when she was still in Algeria, is dead and for Sultana the only way to pay him a tribute is to be present at her funerals. However, alongside that necessary return, Mokeddem portrays the need for her protagonist to reconnect with her family's troubled life. A child, when her family was being dislocated with the death of her mother and her father's "self-banishment," Sultana experienced the rejection of the inhabitants of Aïn Nekhla. As the narrative shows, Sultana never came to terms with her traumatic past. Indeed, her fifteen-year exile in France did not wipe out the effect and consequences of her childhood experience. As she notes, her return does not derive from an established plan, condition of intense desire to reconnect with her homeland as a powerful and indomitable force, "Quelque chose d'insoumis a brutalement surgi d'une longue léthargie. Mes pensées, en partance, ont submergé ma nausée, attisé le mal du pays. Tramontane dehors, vent de sable dedans, mes résistances ont lâché" (13). It is, therefore, a protagonist whose life is marked by trauma and the unconscious desire of reconciliation that Mokeddem narrativizes.

In his review of *L'Interdite,* Jean Déjeux remarks that "Malika Mokeddem est sans concession dans ce récit à vif, fruit de la souffrance" (56).[40] Like Mokeddem, Sultana's life is woven in a series of pains and violence. Rather than being a moment of healing and comfort, exile exacerbated her condition. Yolande Helm remarks that "for Mokeddem's protagonists, to leave one's country in order to take refuge in a land of exile results in the splitting of the self" (207).[41] What Helm refers to as split protagonist is the traumatic manifestation of an existence that develops in two distant geographical spaces in Sultana's life. In those circumstances, though she may enjoy a radically transformed life, her past experience remains an obstacle. Her previous trauma, therefore, resurfaces at times, preventing her from fully engaging in her daily life. In addition to the past, the physical presence in France and the mental presence in Algeria act as a second hindrance. Edward Said alludes to such a condition when he asserts that "the exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half involvements and half detachments" (114). As such, when Sultana asserts that "je ne suis jamais vraiment partie" (11), she undoubtedly knows the extent to which her entire existence remained enclosed in her past and mainly in Aïn Nekhla. As a result, coming back to Aïn Nekhla implies a confrontation between Sultana and her trauma. It is an ultimate quest for the reconstruction of the self and a way of claiming her wholeness.

The notion of trauma has been at the center of an extensive literary examination by critics. Cathy Caruth is one of the well-known critics whose work on trauma, memory, narrative and history still generates a great attention in the field. For Caruth, trauma is much more than a

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[40] Jean Déjeux, Review of *L'Interdite. Hommes et Migrations*, no. 1169, 1993, pp. 55-56.

[41] Yoland Helm, "Malika Mokeddem: A New and Resonant Voice in Francophone Algerian Literature". *Maghrebian Mosaïc: A Literature in Transition*, edited by Mildred Mortimer, Lynn Rienner Publishers, 2001, pp. 195-2011.

pathology, “it is always the story of a wound that cries out” (4).[42] Trauma is, then, a communication between the inner person and the outside world in order to materialize an affliction that is not repressed adequately. Mokeddem’s description of Sultana’s experience not only reflects Caruth conceptualization of trauma, but transcends the fact of being cried out or repressed. As Sultana holds, “distance conjuguée au temps, on apprend à dompter les pires angoisses. Elles nous apprivoisent. De sorte qu’on finit par cohabiter la même peau, sans trop de tirallements” (12). Thus, Sultana’s trauma is presented as a never repressed nor cried out pain. And as she explains, she not only lives with it, but has surrendered her existence to its power.

While Caruth mentions that the manifestation of trauma mainly illustrates an unperceived truth or reality, she adds that the “truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our actions and our language” (4). The specificity of trauma, therefore, resides in its link to a reality that is not expressed because the subject ignores it. Such a manifestation of trauma appears in the narrative at a later moment. However, though Sultana knows the traumatic action that occurred in her life she completely ignores the degree it impacts her life. As a result, she refers to fear as the consequence of what she faced in her childhood, “je me revois adolescente quittant la contrée pour l’internat d’un lycée d’Oran. Je me rappelle le context pénible de ce depart. Ensuite, de fuites en ruptures, d’absences en exils, le temps se fracases. Ce qu’il reste? Un chapelet de peurs, bagages inévitables de toute errance” (12).

Mokeddem insists on the transformative effects of trauma on Sultana. Her return does not work as an immediate moment of recovery, and the narrative elaborates on the recurrence of

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[42] See the introduction to her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) for an expanded definition.

trauma on her. This poses the question of knowing who Sultana is since she is characterized by unstable traits. At times, Sultana appears normal in the sense that her inner battles don't transpire, and her composure remains calm. However, she warns "je m'enroule avec prudence sur mes Sultana dissidentes, différentes" (16). She is aware of battle between the two personalities that emerge as a result of her trauma. Moreover, she is able to pinpoint the difference and specificities of each of her natures. The first Sultana is described as a person filled with grief and sorrow. From her own words, we learn that such a nature "n'est qu'emotions, sensualité hypertrophiée. Elle a la volupté douloureuse, et des salves de sanglots lézardent son rire. Tragedienne ayant tant usé du chagrin, qu'il se déchire aux premiers assauts du désir" (16). She is presented as a being of feelings and mainly shows signs of weakness. The second Sultana unveils signs of a strong personality built from her determination. We then learn that this second nature of Sultana "n'est que volonté. Une volonté démoniaque. Un curieux mélange de folie et de raison, avec un zeste de dérision et le fer de la provocation en permanence dressé" (17). Consequently, the opposition observed in her double personality prevents her from her subjectivity.

Sultana's double personality and the opposition that derives from it in her daily life prevents her from adequately relating to the external world. Her description exhibits an emotional nature of "sanglots" and "chagrin" detrimental to her whole being. She confesses, "si je lui laissais libre cours, elle m'anéantirait" (16). That Sultana is thus an enemy to herself. By building on sorrows, she remains attached to her past griefs which constitutes a moment of vulnerability and weakness and a period of questioning of her own feelings. Paradoxically – her desires which are directed to the external world – are defined by a destructive power, "une furie qui exploite tout, sournoisement ou avec ostentation, à commencer par les faiblesses de l'autre" (17). As such Sultana's actions in her community, instead of being contributive, are revealed to be either

negative or crippling. Her presence during the procession to the cemetery and the burial of Yacine is a moment of defiance that shows her will to go against the established social norms. However, instead of being a moment of rebellion which opens onto a rational investigation of social practices and the redefinition of the place and actions of women in Aïn Nekhla, it turns to be negative. Sultana's incapacity to master her personality and pacify her emotions weakens her chances to lead an active life in Aïn Nekhla, to the extent that Salah is surprised by her attitude: "tu travailles à dresser tout le village contre toi! Où veux-tu en venir?" (189). Sultana's trauma is then prejudicial mainly because as a pathology, it leads to dissociation and confusion, and also because it makes her an easy target for fundamentalists. Her first steps in Aïn Nekhla do not favor solidarity with other inhabitants. The manifestation of her trauma prevents her from having a coherent interpretation of the resistance she wants to lead. Indeed, her lack of patience, which she expresses on the day of her arrival already makes her a target in her community. As she describes herself, she is "une femme d'excès" (65), a person whose in-between position is not marked by a momentum that is itself predicated on rationalized decision and actions. She apprehends that herself while recognizing the mental opposition that is unfolding in her:

> Je suis plutôt dans l'entre-deux, sur une ligne de fracture, dans toutes les ruptures. Entre la modestie et le dédain qui lamine mes rebellions. Entre la tension du refus et la dispersion que me procurent les libertés. Entre l'aliénation de l'angoisse et l'évasion par le rêve et l'imagination. (65)

The excess in which she situates herself in both sides does not allow her to envision a strategic action within Aïn Nekhla. Indeed, her condition impacts her relationship with the inhabitant of her village and does not allow Vincent and Salah to provide the support she needs. Her inability to relate to others is a materialization of her traumatized nature. As Marilyn Charles explains, "trauma

interferes with our ability to form and sustain links with one another" (46). Charles also highlights that the inability functions "through the overwhelmingly affect that ruptures our sense of going-on-being in the present, thereby divorcing self from self and self from others" (46). The first to endure Sultana's divorce from others is, unfortunately, her friend, Yacine. Sultana is described as the person that made the decision to stop their relationship. Despite Yacine's determination to stay with her or maintain a contact with her, she never tried to reconnect with him. As Salah puts it, "Tu n'as jamais daigné lui render visite ni même répondre à son courrier" (30). For him, Sultana is "compliqué," and her attitude towards their common friend may have hastened his death.

Mokeddem does not represent Sultana's return as a moment of immediate traumatic recovery. Consequently, Sultana's reconnection with the desert, with Aïn Nekhla and its inhabitants does not end the tension that is present in her. The encounter with the natural elements, however, serves as a painful contact that reminds her of the persisting struggle and the compulsory need to exorcize her past. To Salah's question, "Est-ce que tu parviens à raconter ton enfance maintenant ?" (65), she gives a negative answer, highlighting, thus, the prevailing influence of her childhood trauma on her adult life and the fact that it still weighs on the present. Her traumatic childhood experience constitutes an obscure zone that she does not want to expose. Worse, that part of her seems to not respond to her desire for a normal life. Sultana knows it and then asserts that "une zone de mon cerveau me demeure muette, comme déshabitée : une absence me guette aux confins de mes peurs, au seuil de mes solitudes" (116). Her mention of "peurs" informs on her nature as a person on a constant lookout, while the evocation of "solitude" shows the extent to which her experience left her with a void that is still troubling her. As such, it becomes easy to grasp her use of the metaphor when she asserts to Salah that "c'est en nous que sont les abîmes" (35). Her dialogues with Vincent illustrate her own incomprehension of herself. She expresses it

while focusing on her lack of cohesion due to the broken aspect of her person, "peut-être par la constante de l'inacceptable et de quelque chose de cassé en dedans. Vous en perdez votre cohesion. Vous devenez plusieurs êtres insaisissables…" (149). Sultana is a victim who while attempting to free herself from the negative manifestation of her traumatic life ignores that her actions translate a desire to be healed from her past.

Though the weight of Sultana's past permeates the novel, Mokeddem slowly factors in her misfortune by gradually bringing to the surface the tragedy that shook her when she was but a child. The narrative rebuilds that traumatic past by elaborating on different dialogues Sultana has with Salah and Vincent, but also by building on Sultana's uncertainty regarding the real reason of her return home. Though one of the reasons Sultana puts forward to explain her return is the death of her friend Yacine, she recognizes that she can't really apprehend the justification of her presence in Aïn Nekhla: "j'ignore encore la ou les raisons exactes de mon retour" (178). From the incomprehension of her return to Aïn Nekhla, Sultana concludes that her return is far from representing a real return. For her, "insidieuse, cette sensation d'impossible retour, malgré le retour. L'incapacité de retrouver cet 'espace perdu' vous expulse du présent et de vous-même" (193). Whether consciously or unconsciously, Sultana recognizes that her return is founded on a desire to reconnect with her past. Her unsuspected motive when coming back is therefore to revive her past and reunite with herself. However, she is incapable of directly connecting with that previous life. This results in the sense of "impossible retour" which may be perceived as the impossibility to resuscitate the elements of her past. As such the return, as Mokeddem puts it, is not an instantaneous reunion. Mokeddem presents it as a gradual process which finally leads to the complete acceptance of the self and others.

Mokeddem chooses the moment of Sultana's healing to unveil her tragedy. She stages the catharsis itself in two steps, the first one being Sultana's encounter with the place of her tragedy. Consequently, Sultana returns to the ksar she inhabited with her family. Describing the conditions in which Sultana is found, Vincent asserts, "elle est assise au milieu des décombres. Ses yeux grands ouverts sont d'un vide terrifiant, hallucinant" (120). The rest of the scene depicts a motionless Sultana who, despite the cold night, seems not preoccupied by her immediate surrounding. Her presence in the Ksar suggests a moment of reunification with her past, an instant of acceptance of the family tragedy as well as a dialogue with her own life. As a child of five when the tragedy happened, Sultana was incapable of apprehending the loss of her whole family. Marilyn Charles reminds us that when it comes to trauma, "whatever we ignore still persists" (46). Sultana's life whether in France or in the first moment of her return was lived with the persistence of the famililly dislocation. Charles adds that the symptoms "serve as reminders of whatever has been excluded from conscious awareness" (46). Recollecting memories of the tragedy and telling them for the first time constitutes the second step Mokeddem uses to lead her protagonist to a total healing. This comes as a confession and is represented as a voluntary opening of the past. Sultana relives the inception of her trauma by evoking her father's fight with her mother:

> Il s'est jeté sur elle. Ils se sont battus. Coups de poing, griffes, vociférations… Tout à coup, ma mère est tombée, la tête sur la meule en pierre. Elle ne bougeait plus. Il s'est abattu sur elle : 'Aïcha ! Aïcha ! Aïcha !' Ma mère ne répondait plus. Le temps s'était arrêté dans ses yeux. Une rupture la séparait désormais de nous. J'ai crié : '*Oummi ! Oummi !*' Il la regardait puis me regardait en silence et ses yeux me disaient : 'Je ne voulais pas ça ! Je ne voulais pas ça ! je ne voulais pas ça ! Il la regardait en silence et ses yeux pleuraient. J'ai cessé de crier. Deux gouttes d'eau, détachées du seau pendu à la poulie, se sont écrasées,

> l'une après l'autre, au fond du puits. Il s'est levé. Il nous a encore fixées, ma mère allongée et moi agrippée à elle, puis il est sorti. Je ne l'ai plus revu. (223)

This statement illustrates the weight and mental suffering Sultana was bearing from a very young age. It not only presents the extent to which she was affected by her mother's death, but mostly narrativizes the dislocation of her family, with a dad, full of remorse, that left the house to no longer appear. At that age Sultana was cut from love but was to exist with a memory that witnessed the tragic event that destroyed her family.

Mokeddem builds on that loss by situating Sultana in a zone where she is geographically, mentally and socially decentered. Sultana alludes to that situation by asserting her lack of reference, "un souvenir hagard qui ne se reconnait aucun repère" (117). It is often admitted that rural and traditional communities have a better social organization that favors a greater integration of people. Mokeddem, however, deconstructs such belief by bringing in a new categorization of the Algerian society which, under religious and political influences, underwent a deep social transformation that did not favor social belonging. She exposes such a social construct by detaching Sultana from the social support she could expect from the village. The manifestations of hatred and disdain that follow the tragedy contribute to accentuating her fragmentation. First her family is labelled a cursed one, then nobody wants to get near her. And to make matters worse, Sultana had to identify herself as the rejected one, "quand je marchais dans les rues, les enfants se sauvaient à mon approche…pour échapper à cela, je me suis dotée d'une sonnaille : pendant quelques jours, j'ai trainé derrière moi, attachée à une ficelle, une boite de conserve vide" (224). That social separation which is mainly exemplified by rejection shaped the young Sultana. The social rejection which accentuated her mental separation from others and from reality resulted in her fragmentation and her incapacity to easily identify with her traditional mores.

Mokeddem's narrative of Sultana's return to Aïn Nekhla is revealing of the struggle that awaits the returnees to their home countries. The return, as we learn from Mokeddem, is therefore not always a pleasant reconnection with a land and loved ones. It goes beyond that affective link to rather mean an encounter with the same problems that justified exile. As such, coming back is first a willingness to face that previous reality of social strife, overcome it in order to impose oneself to an environment that proved hostile. For Hutardo-Beca, the return from exile, in many cases, entails a struggle to reconnect with the home country. She refers to that return as a second exile for the difficulties that arise and the fact that the returning subject may return to a hostile society. Sultana's moment of return illustrates both a connection that is not severed and a second exile. Her return from France is done in a time when social and religious laws did not evolve. The same patriarchal rules that exacerbated the tensions in her family remain intact, worse they are taken to a dimension where they intertwine with politics. In addition, she fails to integrate – even morally and mentally – the way of life in Aïn Nekhla. As such, though Aïn Nekhla is her village, she lives at the periphery of of the rules that govern it. It is, therefore, no surprise that the narrative of her return presents her as an ostracized person. The difficulty underlying and explaining the compulsion and desire to exile oneself may still exist, waiting for a possible return to simply resurface.

In Sultana's case, returning means reuniting with her defunct family to finally accept herself. When Salah complains about her coming back to Aïn Nekhla, she replies, "je le devais. Depuis quelques années, il ne me reste de mes parents que des silhouettes, des fantômes sans visages. Je n'ai aucune photo ni de l'un, ni de l'autre. Encore un autre morceau de moi qui me renie et m'abandonne" (225). Sultana's reply to Salah reveals an important quest for her own identity. The loss caused by the absence of her loved ones could be surmounted only by her

presence in Aïn Nekhla. It is then not surprising that Mokeddem leads her on her family's compound to perform her catharsis. The symbolism of her going to that compound as if she was going to her family's tomb denotes a mourning and therefore suggests the exorcism necessary to set herself free. This however does not relieve the weight of memory and the past that affect her life. Sultana has to confront the social establishment that rejected her. Of that social ostracization Sultana still keeps the memory of "des ricanements, des insinuations et des insultes" (225). Like the loss of her family, this greatly impacted her life. It is therefore a healing confrontation that justifies her return. Sultana willingly accepts that confrontation knowing that it is the only way to get rid of the omnipresent and crippling memory when she states, "cela me sauve des jugements manichéens, m'exorcise des perversions de la rancune" (225). This assertion indicates that she has a perfect knowledge of the effect of the catharsis on her liberation from her trauma. Consequently, she can be herself only if she makes peace with her own past and this by accepting to do away with her bitterness towards the population of Aïn Nekhla.

*L'Interdite* plays on the importance of tears to reconstruct and empower Sultana. This act of shedding tears entails the breaking of the visible and invisible barriers that can still maintain Sultana in a nostalgic and unhealed life. Mokeddem, therefore, breaks Sultana, shuttering her last resistance to exorcize her past. Sultana consequently lets herself follow her new character and this is expressed by her sobbing that Vincent describes, "Brusquement, elle éclate en sanglots. Elle pleure comme on pleure de joie avec un visage radieux" (230). Sultana, also, contributes in narrating her healing, highlighting that crying led her to happiness, « j'ai pleuré hier soir. C'est la premiere pensée qui me vient, dès que j'ouvre les yeux. Elle me gorge de bonheur. Comment, pourquoi, tout à coup un hoquet hasardeux a-t-il trouvé une retenue de larmes ? Dans quelle contrée perdue ? Délivrée, j'ai sombré dans le sommeil" (231). After the dislocation of her family

and the pain that resulted from it and from her social ostracization, Mokeddem portrayed Sultana as incapable of crying.

The act of crying symbolizes a deliverance for Sultana. The relief that results from her tears can be seen as a liberation from her past, and an emancipation from her fears. However, the most pertinent interpretation that suits her new state is a rebirth and the beginning of a happy life. This rebirth finds its direct application in the change of mood that transpires in Sultana. As a result, she comes out prepared to live and not ready to "m'abandonner ni à la mélancolie, ni à l'inquiétude" (231). Such a transformation of Sultana means a rather different way of apprehending life, mainly in Aïn Nekhla. Thus, in addition to reconnection and healing, the story focuses on the reshaping of the returnee's mentality. In Mokeddem's depiction of her protagonist's confrontation with her trauma, this happens with the mourning of her parents and her agreement to get rid of the destructive rancor she had for Aïn Nekhla. The rebirth is not a condition that is constructive for Sultana alone. It entails a different type of relationship with her village and a new social contract.

Mokeddem's portrayal of Sultana alludes to the common experience that characterizes the return from exile. Building on her protagonist, Mokeddem articulates a rather different concept of return which she narrativizes as not just a joyful reconnection with the homeland. She describes the return as a healing from the fragmentation and dislocation that characterized life before exile. As we will see, Sultana's healing serves as a prerequisite to the representation of the return as a sociopolitical commitment. For the exile, returning, therefore entails a confrontation with the reasons that sustain and force exile in the first place. Sultana redefines the return, reducing it to her very experience, "revenir, c'est tuer la nostalgie pour ne laisser que l'exil, nu. C'est devenir, soi-même, cet exil-là, déshérité de toute autre attache" (115). The reasons that leads to exile may be varied and range from socio-political harassment to economic paucity. However, as we see with

Mokeddem, to leave does not mean an end to the problem. The return, therefore, engages the returnee into an opposition with one's past. It is, thus, an encounter with the self, with past fears and past unresolved traumas. Overcoming them, surpassing and getting rid of them, prepares for a real social reintegration within one's society.

### 3.3 Resisting Silence, Writing Resistance

Like many of her contemporaries, Mokeddem joined the intellectual call to side against fundamentalism during the Algerian civil war. Despite the national tragedies and the pervasiveness of violence in the 90s, Algeria witnessed an important literary production from Algerians on both sides of the Mediterranean. Adding their voices to the already audible ones at home, writers from the diaspora including well known Assia Djebar, expressed the need to narrate their love for their country and the rejection of terror over the Algerian society. Thus, literature, as produced in the dark moments of the Algeria of the 90s, provided a crucial narrative and an important analysis of the religious, social and political environment.

Caught between their position as intellectuals in a conflict-ridden society and their desire to live, Algerian writers proved, by their resistance to fundamentalism, their attachment to their country. Reflecting on that difficult in-between condition, Tahar Djaout observes, "le silence, c'est la mort, et toi, si tu te tais, tu es mort, si tu parles tu es mort. Alors dis et meurs".[43] This stance by

[43] Tahar Djaout was part of the first Algerian intellectuals killed for their opinions on how Algeria needed to reassess its social, political and religious realities. As a journalist Djaout was an outspoken critic of fundamentalism. And as a novelist and poet, he offered an unfiltered narrative that voiced his concerns about extremism. He was killed in June 1993. His last novel, *Le Dernier été de la raison,* published in 1999, six years after his death summarizes his vision of an Algeria freed from extremism and obscurantism. It is a clever critique of the rise of fundamental Islamism and a narrative of Algerian society under religious law.

Djaout, which became a catchphrase whenever Algerian urgent writing is evoked, encapsulates the dilemma that characterizes the Algerian writer's work during the Civil War. It is, however, the reality of that dilemma, summarized here by the opposition – life or death – that dictates the necessity to write not only for the country but to write for one's own survival. Djaout's reference to the obligation of writing does not indicate a simple cultural manifestation of intellectual production. The underlying message of his assertion summarizes the Algerian writer's role and place. More specifically, it summons the committed Algerian intellectual to resist the denial of basic human rights in a period marked by countless atrocities. Finding ways to criticize a system of terror, sacrificing oneself to exposing the population's suffering, remain at the core of Djaout's call. His words resonate, therefore, with the refusal of silence, which in the context of Algeria can be understood as an amplification of the duty to write the country's sociopolitical and religious realities.

Djaout' work – even before the war broke – marks a point of departure for the abundant literary publication that characterized Algeria's intellectual activities. His death, which according to Julija Sukys was an attack on "democracy, freedom of expression, artistry, intelligence, modernity, Algeria Itself" (14), fueled a dramatic awakening to resistance.[44] Susan Ireland aligns her analysis of resistance with Djaout's conceptualization of the responsibility of the writer in Algerian literature. Centering her work on Algerian women writers who narrativized Algeria during the Civil War, Ireland conceptualizes their form of resistance as directed to both the

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[44] Julija Sukys, *Silence is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djaout.* University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

reigning political regime and the fundamentalists.[45] As such, she points out a shared accountability that does not spare the government in a moment where most writings focused on the responsibility of fundamentalists. Her vision of resistance is predicated on the abandonment of women by a modern government that failed to provide women with basic rights. Consequently, Ireland describes Algerian women writers in that period of war as "caught between two unacceptable poles" which oblige them to "speak out against both the government's and the fundamentalist's view on women" (173). These writers understood the urgent responsibility, Ireland continues, to side "with those who seek an alternative path that would be secular and democratic in nature" (172). As such, Ireland presents the intellectual's resistance in this dark period as an accusation of oppression and atrocity.

It appears, then, that resistance is not simply a demand to end the Civil War but also a call for a more democratic Algeria. For her part, Mokedem alludes to that state of democracy and secularism in "Geography for an Exile," an article that retraces her journey from childhood to adulthood, pointing out the different transformations and challenges that arose after the independence of her country. It is in the recollection of her school days that she remembers her female teacher's premonition that her war would "be waged first against her own people" (175).[46] If as a child, her teacher's warning did not seem to call her attention to any social predicament, Mokeddem, as an adult, recognizes the truth of her teacher's vision. Indeed, as an author of urgent literature and as a person who understands the stakes of the Civil War for her country, Mokeddem

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[45] Ireland uses the term "warriors with word" to symbolically name Algerian women who wrote Algeria in the "décennie noire". Her metaphor finds its "raison d'être" in the power of the different texts by the Algerian women writers and their social engagement during the Civil War. Threats against and murders of intellectuals reveal the extent to which these women were like warriors at a battlefront.

[46] Malika Mokeddem, and Alisson Rice, "Geography of an Exile." *Religion and Literature,* vol.3, no. 1, 2011, pp. 173-179.

observes, "I would understand all the pertinence and cruelty of this exhortation after the country gained independence. With the observation that we were far from individual freedom. This remained to be won in a battle with our parents, our tradition [...]" (175). It is true that the battle foreseen by her teacher against her own society's mores constitutes a dominant part of her writing. This however does not exclude the importance of the battle she waged since the 1990s in *L'Interdite* and *Des Rêves et des Assassins* during the Civil War.[47] Mokeddem joins Djaout in affirming the need to write. As such, she alludes to the fact that the Algerian writer's work transcends the search for a literary aesthetics. As such she is aware of the literary quality that emanates from the urgent writing period, "the same preoccupations monopolized our works, converting them into virulent pamphlets…" (177).

Mokeddem's conception of the role and responsibility of the writer during the urgent writing period, therefore, contrasts with that of some of her contemporaries, such as Ahmed Hanifi who, despite the urgency of the intellectual to voice and oppose violence in the 1990s, dissapproves of the choice of content over aesthetics. Hanifi holds that the responsibility that stemmed from the war cannot substitute or neglect aesthetics. His questioning, "La fiction est-elle un assemblage de mots dont l'horizon et la consistance n'excèdent pas les lettres qui les composent ; froids ou creux, fréquemment idéologiques ? Une écriture peu élaborée, à la syntaxe minimaliste, sans agencement, sans architecture ?", betrays his desire for aesthetics over social commitent.[48] Asserting that a great number of books published in that period are ultimately conspicuous by their lack of literary aesthetics, Hanifi dissapproves of the sense of resistance that does not bring together content,

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[47] Both *L'Interdite* (1993) and *Des Rêves et des assassins* (1995) are part of Mokeddem's active participation in urgent writing.

[48] Ahmed Hanifi elaborates more on that criticism on his personal blog, http://leblogdeahmedhanifi.blogspot.fr/. His official publications are mostly novels.

ideology and aesthetics. However important aesthetics is for literature, the period of writing of *L'Interdite* and the general intention that surrounds the intellectual activities in the urgent writing compel one to focus on how Mokeddem's depiction of Sultana's return refuses silence and inscribes itself in the literature of resistance.

Mokeddem's narrative of resistance is constructed from the perspective of the return from exile. As she does with her criticism of her society, it is through the rediscovery of Aïn Nekhla and Tammar that she voices her discontent and her refusal of the reign of fundamentalism in her community. Returning as an adult that suffered a difficult and traumatic experience during childhood, Sultana's first contact with her community calls attention to the peculiarity of the social atmosphere. Her first assumptions emanate from her encounter with the youth of Tammar. Sultana is shocked to see that the youth's way of subjugating women has not changed. By way of the repetition, "je n'ai pas oublié," Mokeddem highlights women's oppression in her community (18). Indeed, the passage, which offers an outline of the society Sultana is returning to, reads, "je n'ai pas oublié que les garçons de mon pays avaient une enfance malade, gangrenée. Je n'ai pas oublié leurs voix claires qui ne tintent que d'obscenités. Je n'ai pas oublié que, dès leur plus jeune âge, l'autre sexe est déjà un fantôme dans leurs envies, une menace confuse" (18). Though Sultana's words emphasize the youth's present attitude, the anaphoric term that punctuates her memory does not solely translate a past social praxis within the society of Tammar and Aïn Nekhla. What retains Sultana's attention is, therefore, a series of actions that were prevalent in the past and which remain unchanged at the moment of her return. Her description of the present situation, through her long tirade, mainly alludes to a persisting social behavior that plagues the society. Consequently, the benignity of the youth's actions upon her arrival does not prevent Sultana from sensing that the community to which she is returning reflects more dangers than it seems to suggest. Salah

illustrates the extent to which the youth's attitude is symptomatic of the whole Algerian society by revealing, "il n'est guère facile de se débarrasser des préjugés qui t'ont saisi à l'état de larve dans le giron de ta mère" (75).

Mokeddem uses this passage that describes Sultana's first moment in her village to set the scene of the story. In this narrative, Mokeddem conducts the first diagnosis of her community by using terms that are connected to her profession as a nephrologist. Her use of "malade" and "gangrenée" are much more a reference to the whole Algerian society than a simple characterization of the small community of Aïn Nekhla. This suggests that her village is just a pretext to construct a criticism that surpasses its narrow geographical space. Such a correlation between the youth's action in Tammar and the general situation in Algeria is illustrated in the moment of her separation from the youth. It happens at that specific time when one of the boys screams "putain!" (18). The impact of the word on Sultana reflects her preconception of Algeria. By asserting that "ce mot plante en moi l'Algérie comme un couteau", Sultana opens the story and its ideological implications to the level of the whole country. What follows in the narrative and which uses Aïn Nekhla as its setting is therefore a metaphor that designates Algeria in its entirety.

Mokeddem's construction of her resistance and her desire to respond to Tahar Djaout's call to action is characterized by a complex intersection between the narrator's voice and the narration itself. This is sometimes typified by a sudden break in the narration and the appearance of a voice that is different from the protagonist's. At such moments, *L'Interdite* suddenly offers a criticism of Algeria that, despite its relevance with the ongoing narrative, moves away from the narrative thread, "Si l'Algérie s'était véritablement engagée dans la voie du progrès, si les dirigeants s'étaient attelés à faire évoluer les mentalités, je me serais sans doute apaisée. L'oubli me serait venu peu à peu. Mais l'actualité du pays et le sort des femmes, ici, me replongent dans mes drames

passés, m'enchainent à toutes celles qu'on tyrannise" (228). The resisting voice is often found in a series of dialogues when Sultana, Salah, or Dalila portray their community or simply narrate part of their own life. Mokeddem's resistance in those moments becomes an ideological criticism that relates to the ongoing social and political situation of Algeria. Yolande Helm highlights this commitment by asserting that Mokeddem's "hybrid writing lies at the junction of creativity and urgency, aesthetics and politics, pain and happiness" (195). However, Helm departs from the simple opposition that embodies creativity and urgency, aesthetics and politics, pain and happiness in order to engage in an significant analysis of Mokeddem's *L'Interdite.* Helm holds, therefore, that *L'Interdite* "written in ten months in a state of urgency, takes on the characteristics of a pamphlet; it is a plea against the violence of the Muslim fundamentalists who are persecuting people" (196). Helm's analysis situates Mokeddem's work within the social and political situation of Algeria. It also points out the role Mokeddem played as a writer in a moment of unrest when the intellectual voice was crucial in painting the difficulties of the country.

Mokeddem constructs on Sultana's fear and her departure to exile as a starting point to show the extent to which Algeria has changed. She opposes the desire to live and the impossibility to truly enjoy oneself in a country that was slowly moving towards the prevention of basic individual freedoms. Replying to Salah, Sultana summarizes the challenging moments that she experienced and which were the reasons for her leaving the country, "je venais de renaitre et j'éprouvais, tout à coup, une si grande faim de vivre … peu à peu, les menaces et les interdits de l'Algérie, me sont devenus une telle épouvante. Alors j'ai tout fui » (65). Sultana's reference to leaving the country describes the place and condition of the Algerian intellectuals and writers during the Civil War. Many writers who felt oppressed, threatened and in danger went to exile. Their position as thinkers and people who could side with the triumph of a government that

advocated secularism over religious fundamentalism put them in danger. Tristan Leperlier represents that moment as the “intellocide”, when Algerian intellectuals were mercilessly targeted. Leperlier goes so far as to assert, “alors qu’auparavant on étouffait l’intelligence, désormais on la tue” (244). Fear therefore grew among intellectuals, who, like Sultana, felt it impossible to relate to a country where individuals’ security was no longer guaranteed. As Leperlier adds, “un quart des écrivains algériens s’est exilé pendant cette période” (244). For writers and intellectuals, leaving the country was a solution that prevented them from being killed for their ideological positions. However, as Mokeddem portrays it with Sultana, the return from exile allows a stronger participation in the different problems that Algeria faces. Exile and return offer a contrast of the changes that occurred between the past and the present, but ultimately allows the exiled intellectual to realize the power of his presence/absence.

Mokeddem provides a realistic portrayal of a country plagued with divisions. Her criticism of Algeria often transcends the framework of narrative to become a discourse on the situation of her country. The mention of Algeria, of its capital city Alger or the reference to women’s treatment therefore uses the characteristics of a discourse and appears to be insertions to the narrative. Salah’s use of the wine metaphor exemplifies such recurrence, “l’Algérien ne boit pas, il se soûle. Alors il vaut mieux qu’il se rabatte sur une bibine quelconque … Nous sommes les rois, quand il s’agit d’auto-destruction et de régression” (71). It is obvious that Salah’s mention of “auto-destruction” and “regression” do not relate to the consumption of the wine, but is used as a parallel to call attention to the destruction and the regression that are typifying the Algeria of war and lack of individual freedom. Mokeddem indicates the parallel between Algeria’s auto-destruction and the necessity for writers like herself to break with silence. Her explicit references to the failure of her country, which are more of a realistic portrayal than a narrative, and her exposition of the

oppression signals her resistance. Like Tahar Djaout's own call, Mokeddem's analysis echoes with the "alors dis et meurs" that symbolizes resistance and subversion in Algeria.

*L'Interdite* is evidence of Mokeddem's desire to represent her country as it is, through the changes that oppose past and present. The juxtaposition that Mokeddem builds between the two periods has the power to recall the long walk of a country that embraced freedom from a long and deadly war to finally deny that same freedom to its own citizens. In Mokeddem's narrative, such juxtaposition that substantiates the difference between a period of relative peace under secularism and the battle that unfolds between fundamentalism and government is illustrated in the narrative of return. The return therefore leads to the retelling and exposure of changes. Writing about Sultana's return to Aïn Nekhla, Alison Rice highlights the divergence between what was before exile and what the return captures as change.[49] For Rice, Sultana's "country has moved, it has changed to such an extent that she is not at home there, that she is a veritable anachronism, a vestige of a period and a place that no longer exists" (141). However, Rice does not restrict her analysis of past and present to the simple aspect of divergence. By referring to the past as "what was" and to the present as "the incongruities of what the place has become", Rice points out the extent to which Algeria negatively changed. The disastrous transformation of Algeria results in Mokeddem's utilization of derogative adjectives to describe the city of Alger. To Sultana's question about life in Alger, Salah offers a rather troubling portrayal that does not spare the city nor the fundamentalists who operate within its borders. The mournful description holds that, "Alger a le visage sale et triste des orphelins. De plus en plus de barbes hirsutes et de femmes transformées en corbeaux ou en nones … Alger est un immense asile psychiatrique abandonné, sans soignant, au seul langage de la violence » (194-195). Salah's words are harsh and the

[49] Alison Rice. *Polygraphies: Francophone Women Writing Algeria.* University of Virginia Press, 2012.

representation of Alger they convey is more than troubling. However, Mokeddem builds on the dialogue and Salah's word to establish reality within the narrative. It is then a representation of Alger in that moment of crisis. The mention of violence and the physical transformation of people goes beyond the limits of the capital city to encompass the whole country. The allusion to "barbes hirsutes" which constitutes an image of the influence of religion over the Alger of the 1990s is explicitly indicated when Salah makes reference to the whole country. For him, "l'Algérie pullule de faux dévots et de prophètes de l'apocalypse. La violence et la cupidité se disputent le désarroi et l'insécurité » (216). His salvo is exemplary of the way that Mokeddem targets fundamentalism. Once again, the image that Mokeddem creates through Salah's interaction with Sultana and the trenchant words that characterize such depiction of fundamentalists reveal Mokeddem's desire to fight their dogmatic and authoritarian conception of life in Algeria.

The construction of an aesthetics of resistance through the contrast of Algeria's past and present entails the representation of a joyful past and the account of a steady degradation of the socio-political situation. Unfortunately, such a development is made impossible with regards to the past of her protagonist. Sultana's life, as we have already seen in the previous section is characterized by family and social difficulties. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the social representation Sultana provides in her narrative pertains mainly to the contemporary history of Algeria, she is aware of the evil that can emanate from her society. Talking to Salah, Sultana clarifies that side of her community, "je sais qu'ils sont capables de pire encore" (84). Mokeddem, therefore, resorts to other characters' memories and references to represent the extent to which her country ceased to provide social cohesion and peace. She uses Vincent's perspective and the unbiased analysis of the gaze of the stranger to represent a time of happiness, innocence and simplicity. The depiction presents Algeria as a country that had known all the qualities of a good

and principled life. Vincent finds that Algeria in Tayeb's attitude, "sa jovialité, sa simplicité, tout me réjouit en lui. Un visage bon enfant, serein, peut-être le vrai visage de l'Algérie » (165). The image of Algeria reflected by Tayeb is also the face of the importance of social consideration and understanding that translates into solidarity. The Algeria that Vincent captures from the simplicity of Tayeb's actions and attitude towards him mainly demonstrates the acceptance of all differences. Tayeb's opening to Vincent, his willingness to share his grief, as well as his desire to help him show that "vrai visage". Unfortunately, the dialogue between Tayeb and Vincent enhances the opposition between past and present regarding the sociopolitical development of Algeria. Algeria's evolution in time deprived the nation of its real trait. This entails that the "vrai visage" is no longer existing in the country. *L'Interdite,* therefore, represents another face of Algeria which is pervaded with a persisting unrest and a cinglant failure of its sociopolitical life.

Mokeddem's resistance is not solely built by just offering a dark portrayal of her country. Her deconstruction calls into question the contemporary Algerian reality by showing the other face of the country that once was bright. By doing so, *L'Interdite* interrogates the responsibility of Algerians, mainly intellectuals. It also questions the country's autonomy as an independent nation capable of relying on its own strength. As such it points out the country's accountability in its incapacity to establish a viable social community. Such interrogations are observed in moments when the text presents a steady degradation of the situation. One such moment is Salah's exchange with Sultana, where he holds, "nous n'avons cessé de tuer l'Algérie à petit feu, femme par femme » (72). Though Salah's assertion underscores the link between Algerian women's condition and the condition of the country, it entails a long process of deterioration caused by what he calls the "élites *Zaâma"*. In the passage, "les étudiants males de ma génération, les élites *zaâma,* ont participé au carnage" (72), Salah uses the term "élites *Zaâma"* to replace "nous" in which he points out the

responsibility of those who like him have studied at the university but who have failed to bring sustainability. Worse, his reference to the way of life that followed the completion of the university cursus, for the majority of Algerian men, raises a criticism of how the intellectual disrupted the Algerian social structure and the extent to which he is accountable for what is happening. In his condemnation of the intellectuals' actions he reveals to Sultana that "nous nous sommes installés dans la magouille et dans la schizophrénie…ensuite ceux d'entre nous qui n'ont pas supporté cette vie-là ont fui vers l'étranger » (72-73). Considering the way their past actions also contributed in the contemporary situation, Salah developed a bitterness against the intellectual that participated in the dislocation of Algeria. Sultana in the other hand, considers her country's responsibility in the establishment of the sociopolitical unrest. In doing so she acknowledges Algeria's autonomy to decide of its own orientations and future. For her, the entirety of Algeria as a nation is accountable for the "suicide". As a result, she refuses to view the fate of her country as a work implemented by a foreign government to annihilate any effort of cohesion :

> L'Algérie Archaïque avec son mensonge de modernité éventé; l'Algerie hypocrite qui ne dupe plus personne, qui voudrait se construire une vertu de façade en faisant endosser toutes ses bévues, toutes ses erreurs, à une hypothétique 'main de l'étranger' ; l'Algérie de l'absurde, ses auto-mutilations et sa schizophrénie ; l'Algérie qui chaque jour se suicide (114-15).

Her words mainly emphasize the importance to recognize the extent to which the dark period of Algeria was brought by Algerians themselves. Thus, while Salah supports the idea of an intellectual betrayal, Sultana underscores a general responsibility of the people of Algeria.

Mokeddem's writing of resistance in a period when writers and intellectuals were perfect targets for fundamentalists requires a strategic narrative of the prevailing social, religious and

political realities of Algeria. Her use of two factors which are the perspective of the rediscovery of Algeria through the return of her protagonist allows for a reality-based depiction of her country. Such criticism of the Algeria of the 1990s makes her a de facto dissident writer, whose intellectual work is characterized by a heroic siding with freedom and secularism over obscurantism. Her refusal to silence herself is exemplary of Leperlier's analysis of literary commitment, "non plus bavardage humain ou même solitude de la parole, mais un 'dit' transitif, faisant retour sur le monde et s'adressant à lui" (13).

### 3.4 Writing Women, Listening to Women

In *L'Interdite*, Mokeddem aims at decolonizing women by removing the structures of power that oppress them. Mokeddem not only depicts the return as a process of intellectual resistance, but she also exploits it to represent the influence of fundamentalism and tradition in women's lives. In doing so, Mokeddem cleverly narrativizes the oppression that Algerian women face both in their culture and in the hands of religious beliefs. Pinpointing the realistic narrative in *L'Interdite* and laying out the story's relevance with the Algerian's social life, Yoland Helm insist that the novel is "a bold denunciation of the Islamic fundamentalists' 'ideology', which is anchored in dogmatism, violence and an obsessive hatred of women" (195). Mokeddem successfully displays women's fragmented identity and establishes its links with fundamentalists' ideology and traditional praxes. She represents oppression under the form of women's growing demand for physical healing.

The return from exile, therefore, becomes a way of accessing women's unconscious and releasing such violence into calls for political liberation. Women's condition before Sultana's

return and her commitment to draw their awareness on the domination they live is characterized by silence. Unfortunately, that silence stems from the traumatic experience they live. The return as Mokeddem illustrates constitutes a force for women's emancipation in Aïn Nekhla. It is in her function as a doctor that Sultana discovers the extent of the suffering that overwhelms women in her home community. Her return in Aïn Nekhla becomes an opportunity for women to disclose their pains. Her presence is therefore revelatory of women's concealed trauma. In her, women see someone like them, someone capable of understanding their troubles and whom they can trust. Indeed, the narrative does not tell the reader whether women used to explain such problems to Yacine – the former doctor and Sultana's lover. What the narrative hints is not only the women's willingness to talk to Sultana, but also their desire to engage in a dialogue with her. Furthermore, the fact that many women have started to seek medical attention from her, apparently with the same pathologies, suggests that they did not open to Yacine. The arrival of Sultana and the strong opposition she deployed vis a vis the traditions and fundamentalists such as Bakkar and Ali Marbah seems to have triggered a wind of hope that is characterized by the exposition of their social troubles and traumas. Mokeddem employs the term "koulchite" to refer to the trauma that shapes women's mental life. Sultana defines the word koulchite as, "quand tout, en Arabe algérien koulchi, est douloureux, il s'agit de la koulchite, pathologie féminine tres répandue et si bien connue ici" (125). It is, thus, a disease that manifests itself through physical symptoms but which is deeply rooted in the trauma experienced by those women.

Such a portrayal of trauma is common in Algerian literature. Like Mokeddem's *L'Interdite*, Assia Djebar's *Ombre sultane* illustrates the extent to which oppression does not favor Algerian women's subjectivity but mainly works to maintain them in complete dependence. In Djebar's novel, the protagonist Hajila is forced to marry someone she has never seen and is mostly assigned

the role of a housekeeper. Consequently, the glimpse of victory that surfaces at the end of the narrative is but illusory since it denotes Hajila's mental torment. Wahiba Khiari, in her novel, *Nos souffrances,* which narrativizes the abduction of women during the Civil War, goes further to present a trauma predicated on the numerous abductions of girls. In Khiari's text, trauma does not manifest itself in the form of a *koulchite,* but rather as a series of hallucinations through which the protagonist continually sees the spectre of her abducted sister.

The specificity of *L'Interdite,* however, lies in the way in which Mokeddem makes use of the return to address women's trauma or *Koulchite* in Aïn Nekhla. As such *L'Interdite* differs from other Algerian stories of women's oppression. The obvious subjugation observed in *Nos Souffrances* does not occur through the lens of the return. And although Djebar, in *Ombre Sultane,* succeeds in showing the depth to which women are oppressed, the return of Isma to her country does not constitute a tangible contribution to the construction of women's subjectivity. Worse, Isma presents herself as the one who paved the way to Hajila's subjugation. This section therefore elaborates on Sultana's return as a moment of substantial help in the healing of women's trauma and expounds on Mokeddem's strategic writing of women. It is also a compelling study of the influence of traditions on women and of how Sultana's return and contribution in Aïn Nekhla helps Mokeddem interrogate women's suffering and place in the conflict-ridden Algeria.

Rather than directly materializing the subjugation of women through the exhibition of clear signs of oppression and trauma, Mokeddem constructs it through the experiences of Sultana and Dalila. The women in Aïn Nekhla enter the narrative mainly to show the consequences of the symbolic violence they have been subjected to. As someone who grew up in Aïn Nekhla, Sultana knows that her society is not shaped to emancipate and empower women. However, it is in her return as an adult that she feels the weight that cripples women's realization. Her discussion with

Ali Marbah, the taxi driver, is the first sign that strikes her and which shows some of the limits of women's subjectivity. As a woman, Sultana is not offered the prerogative to go to Aïn Nekhla without stating clearly the name of the person she intends to visit. Marbah's questions, "tu es la fille de qui?" and "il n'y a pas d'hotel à Aïn Nekhla. Comment peux-tu n'aller chez personne ?" rather situate women in a tense but subjugated relationship with men (15). In a tradition which is hijacked and made worse by religious fundamentalists, it is unconceivable that a woman is not linked to a man. For women, this poses the existential problem of the absence of free movement within and outside the village. The compulsory presence of men reduces mobility and makes women's existence problematic. Yet Marbah's interaction with Sultana does not just highlight the problem of women's free movement in Algeria, it also exposes their position as subordinate whenever in presence of a man. The position which is cultural and religious posits a masculine domination that is not based on family relationship but mostly on a gendered one. As such any man has the authority to give orders to women when it comes to traditional or religious observances. Marbah makes use of that authority when confronted with Sultana's objection to tell him where she is staying in Aïn Nekhla, "La fille de personne qui ne va chez personne! Tu me la joues ou quoi? Puisque tu refuses de parler, tu n'as qu'à porter le voile!" (21).

Anne Marie Nahlovsky suggests that such an oppression is the reason for the Algerian women's identity problems. The Algerian woman, she writes, "a perdu le pouvoir de parler, de circuler, de témoigner, conquis pendant la révolution et, consciente de sa vie et de son impuissance, subit une grave crise identitaire" (13). Because of its consequences on the identity of women and the degree to which it allows subjugation to come from different horizons, masculine domination ceases to be symbolic. Women's subjugation reinforces their trauma but at the same time prevents them from being able to link their condition to their silence. However, if on the one hand

Mokeddem's representation of women's subjugation does not illustrate women's profound understanding of violence and its consequences over their life, on the other hand it displays the force of resistance that can emerge when they develop an awareness of oppression.[50]

*L'Interdite* structures Sultana's path in her village in such a way as to highlight women's proscription from public spaces and their ban from important traditional ceremonies. One such moments occurs the day Yacine is buried, when after her long journey from France to Aïn Nekhla, Sultana is reminded by Khaled, a nurse, that she would not be allowed to attend the burial, "ils ne vous laisserons pas assister à son enterrement. Vous le savez que les femmes ne sont pas admises aux enterrements" (27). This remark proves crucial, for if Khaled talks in a friendly manner by merely explaining the tradition, the fundamentalists, who have become influential, resort to threats to maintain it. Bakkar, the mayor, who symbolizes the powerful and absolute power of the Islamic Salvation Front, does not miss the opportunity to show his acrimony and displeasure to Sultana.[51] The succinct narrative paints Bakkar's intention and feelings concerning a woman's presence at the burial as evocative of the existing tension between women, their place and the respect for tradition, "Dans le groupe de tête, un homme se retourne plusieurs fois. Le feu de ses yeux est sans équivoque" (31). The story immediately follows with Bakkar's reaction to Sultana, "madame, tu peux pas venir! C'est interdit!" (31). The fact of being upset by Sultana's presence and the express injunction Bakkar makes suggests a clear and impassable line for women within the society. Social life in Aïn Nekhla is, therefore, not only dominated by men, but it is also woven within an important number of proscriptions that determines the do's and don'ts.

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[50] I develop women's resistance to oppression and domination in the last section. Resistance comes after they realize that most of the physical pathologies they develop are but a language of their trauma. They were just a means of expression that their body uses to translate a mental trauma.

[51] Despite Khaled's warning Sultana is present at yacine's burial. See pages 31-34 for Sultana's reaction.

Mokeddem also returns to the image of childhood to question women's condition. She portrays childhood as a difficult moment of life because of the many social rules the child has to comply with. The child's life becomes harder when she is a girl. Mokeddem narrativizes that difficulty through the representation of Dalila – a little girl who attends school. Depicted as a hardworking and intelligent girl, Dalila prefers the silence of the desert to the noise and constant chores of her family life. Talking to Vincent about her brothers who continually use her as a housekeeper and who by doing so prevent her from studying, she exposes their attitude towards her, "tu sors pas! Travaille avec ta mère ! Apporte-moi à boire ! Donne-moi mes chaussures ! Repasse mon pantalon ! Baisse les yeux quand je te parle" (51-52). Facing that difficult family life, where her status of little girl is the reason for constant mistreatment, Dalila, though a child of nine or ten, seeks refuge in the calmness of the dunes. Her search for an escape is not limited to the separation from her family, she also lives in an imaginary life and connects with a virtual friend. For Vincent, who knows her more than Sultana does, Dalila "fuit un certain nombre de choses. Elle s'invente un monde et s'y réfugie" (110). The representation of Dalila highlights the origin of the acceptance of oppression. Indeed, by painting Dalila in the torments of traditions, Mokeddem shows how complying and obeying become natural in the adult woman's life. It is then not surprising to notice that she projects her female characters in a quest for their real world and their real selves. Mokeddem emphasizes the visible part of her characters' life as a prison in which they can't be representative of who they really are. Their actions are consequently limited, and they evolve in a daily frustration that prevents them from fully living.

The episodic appearance of Dalila and her interactions with both Vincent and Sultana show that the numerous restrictions do not help in the formation of subjectivity and barely partake in the construction of a sound adult. Already, as a child, Dalila is aware that women's lives are not only

shaped within the boundaries of the families. She knows that in addition to the family, the society, the government, religion also engage in silent subjugation. The numerous examples she witnesses when it comes to love are sufficient proof for her that women are *disliked.* In opposition to Vincent, Dalila refutes the beauty and existence of love as conceived by people from "LaFrance [France]". She goes further as to assign the reasons for such an inexistence to the government's actions, "l'amour, c'est joli, très joli. Mais chez nous, c'est comme les nuages, y'en a pas bézef. Chez nous, même le gouvernement a peur des femmes il fait des lois contre elles. Alors l'amour c'est la honte, qui est élue nationale » (207). She also understands how tradition structures the society through its influential tour de force on the fathers' pride. Dalila's story teaches that the threat that is led on women and the "necessary" oppression that is observed throughout north African patriarchal societies are not fortuitous acts. They are linked to the very existence of the father, to his place in his society. Dalila explains that "celle-là [la honte], avec la tradition, elle fait que menacer les filles. Elle fait tomber la figure de tes frères et de ton père qui deviennent des nuques brisées. A cause des filles et des femmes, beaucoup des hommes, ils sont que des nuques brisées" (207-08). In the same passage Dalila explains that the "nuques brisées" are the men that "peuvent plus aller dehors, devant les autres hommes, avec la tête droite" (208). Consequently, the oppression of women, and the fact of imposing them a much stricter code of conduct, primarily partakes in providing men with a social position. In one of her conversation with Sultana, Dalila comes to the conclusion that tradition and religion act similarly, that is, they lay more prohibitions on women's existence. She finds that like the desert and destitution, religion and tradition negatively impact people by limiting their possibilities.[52] Dalila, however, holds her ideas of restrictions, and

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[52] Dalila mainly refers to women and their capacity to navigate in their society. As a child she already understands the differences between men and women concerning freedom.

limitation from her sister, “elle dit qu’avec tout ce qui est interdit par le désert, par Allah, par les coutumes de nos mères, toutes les faims, toutes les soifs, les yeux ont la misère concentrée. Tout l’enfer dans la pupille” (143). For the reader, it can be shocking to notice that a little girl the age of Dalila can understand her existence, and beyond, the existence of women so well as to be able to link the different prohibitions and oppression of women’s existence to hell. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the extent to which Dalila herself attempts to escape such conditions by confining herself in her dreams and by isolating as much as possible on the dunes. *L’Interdite* therefore represents “un état des lieux de la désespérance” by exploring women’s life from the very first years of their existence (Nahlovsky, 14). Dalila’s strategy to get peace and forget the daily exhaustion which consists of restrictions and command may well be expressed through her physical and virtual escapes.

Though Mokeddem primarily presents Sultana’s return to Aïn Nekhla in terms of her contribution as a doctor and how this benefits people’s physical health, she quickly moves to a different kind of medical practice that addresses the perspective of trauma within the population. The Algerian woman’s representation that transcends the narrative is cogently that of a traumatized person that barely apprehends the mental dimension of her physical problems. For the women living in Aïn Nekhla and who are barely educated, the language of the mind which is translated into a physical wound and pain is not perceptible. Concerning the differentiation between trauma and physical wounds, Cathy Caruth indicates that “the wound of the mind … is not like the wound of the body” (3-4). Though Caruth’s differentiation focuses more on the pattern of recovery, an investigation of women’s reactions in *l’Interdite* suggests a lack of apperception of the wound of the mind.

*L'Interdite*'s first mention of women's traumatic experience presents it as a very common occurrence that spares no woman in Aïn Nekhla, "les femmes: 'Ma soeur, quelque chose me donne des coups de couteau ici et là et encore là et ici et là et là'. Elles m'indiquent le ventre dans sa totalité, la poitrine, les 'epaules, le dos, la tête, les jambes, les bras…" (125). Focusing our analysis on the pathology that Sultana's patients describe, we realize that it seems to emanate from no specific part of the body. On the contrary, the whole body is painful. Sultana clearly understands the implications that transcend the physical body. Indeed as she notes the koulchite, is "symptomatique des séismes et de la détresse au féminin" (125). Drawing from Sultana's assertion, there is no doubt that the traumatic condition that characterizes the existence of women in Aïn Nekhla is predicated on their social position, and the daily oppression they live in their patriarchal society. Caruth offers an interesting explanation of the relation existing between the bodily manifestation of trauma and its mental reality. She writes that trauma is, "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (61). Thus, women, as narrated by Sultana, hardly link the symptoms they display to their traumatic experience. They are not cognizant of the weight of their subjugation on their mental construction. Such ignorance can be blamed on their low level of education. Most of them have not studied and lack the basic understanding of the prevailing correlation between daily oppression and the occurrence of trauma. The relation between what appears normative, socially accepted and trauma is underscored by Marilyn Charles. "Trauma makes a cut into our experience," she explains, "forcing us to reconsider – or perhaps to consider for the first time – aspects of experience that had previously been hidden by virtue of their familiarity" (45). Bourdieu helps clarify the hidden effects of familiarity and how this affects people by conceptualizing it under two notions: symbolic

violence and naturalization.[53] For Bourdieu what appears familiar – that is tradition – is only a "deceptive familiarity" (3). Domination and oppression are first made invisible and then transformed with time into something natural. This entails the acceptance of oppression and violence over women as unquestionable acts through the dehistoricization of the very process that enabled it. Tradition, therefore, prevents women to seeing subjugation as part of the existential tribal process. As a result, the familiarity that marks part of the Algerian tradition constitute a barrier to women's understanding of their trauma. Arezki links the incapacity to understand oppression to the immutability of tradition. For Arezki, the weight of the past on the present shapes women's mentality. She explains, "dans toute tradition qui semble immuable, se trouve le moule des mentalités et les comportements y afférents, chargés de symboles, de mythes, de préjugés, de tabous…le passé demeure et régit le présent" (31). The past, which is symbolized by tradition, is then a barrier that prevents women from seeing reality differently. Their capacity to question and analyze is also crippled by tradition which does not allow the renewal of thought.

For Mokeddem, listening is a powerful tool that addresses women's trauma. As she opens the story onto other women's experiences and allows their silent trauma to find an attentive ear, she slowly restores their lives. In providing a space and time when women can freely speak, Sultana's interventions gain in importance and become a moment of repair. Charles emphasizes the importance of listening when it comes to healing trauma. She establishes that "the testimony of traumatic stories offers an opportunity for repair for both the individual who has been

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[53] These two concepts are elaborated by Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* and constitute the key terms through which Bourdieu explains how masculinity and the domination of men over women is perceived as normal among Kabyles. Bourdieu conceives of symbolic violence as imperceptible even by the ones upon which it is exerted (1-2). Naturalization in Bourdieu's own terms is "the transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural"* (2). We must therefore understand that naturalization is the normalization of social praxes that are themselves predicated on existential and not essential acts.

traumatized – and thrust outside of the social fabric – and for the witness…" (47). This healing process constitutes one of Sultana's most important contributions to the women in Aïn Nekhla. At a certain time in the story, Sultana herself becomes aware of her usefulness as a doctor. This pushes her to reject Salah's suggestion to leave the village for Algiers, "je veux rester à Aïn Nekhla quelque temps. Cela me donne une illusion d'utilité qui m'est nécessaire, en ce moment" (193-94).

Forging women's confidence in themselves, whatever the koulchite, reveals an extenuating work that proves necessary. Most of the cases Mokeddem narrativized show a connection with pride and a fear of tradition. But they especially represent women that are trapped within what constitutes their cultural beliefs, unable to break free. Sultana exemplifies women's social attachments and their fear by exposing a number of koulchites. As she records in one case:

> Je vois un enfant de onze ans avec un air hagard, terrorisée :
>
> "Je crois que mon visage a jauni."
>
> "Ton visage a jauni ? Tu n'es pas jaune. Tu as un beau teint bronzé, normal."
>
> "Non, non, proteste-t-elle faiblement, c'est parce que ma marâtre me dit toujours : 'Que Dieu te jaunisse le visage !' c'est-à-dire qu'il m'enlève ma dignité."
>
> "Tu veux dire ta dignité ?"
>
> "Oui. Elle me le souhaite si souvent, si souvent, que j'ai peur de l'avoir perdue, ma dignité, et que tous les gens du village, ils le voient sur mon visage qui jaunit." (182)

The passage is symbolic of the numerous traumas that populate Aïn Nekhla and which constitute most of the reasons why women visit Sultana. The standard of good women set by the society implies an abandonment of the self and a hiding in one's fears. In the aforementioned passage, the twelve-year-old girl is a victim of the beliefs that the patriarchal society taught her. Her anxiety

and fear suggest the importance of being a virgin in her society but ultimately highlights the trauma that results from the probability of losing it. Thus, the rules that silently compose oppression are deeply assimilated and healing with words becomes difficult to implement. Sultana recognizes that difficulty, “il me faut du temps pour rassurer et lui faire comprendre aussi que sa chasteté et son hymen ne risque rien » (182). For the women in Aïn Nekhla, the blind respect of tradition has become a tradition. As a result, bringing awareness of subjectivity becomes a very tedious activity. Arezki gives a crucial analysis of the symbolic violence that subjugates women. She links women’s incomprehension of what occurs in their life and their acceptance of what they live to the silence that is imposed:

> La personnalité de la femme est étouffée. On bloque son processus normal de développement psychologique : Durant l’enfance, sa crise de négativisme, son désir d’opposition, ses tentatives d’indépendance, ses besoins d’autonomie, sa soif de liberté, d’expériences vécues…ne peuvent s’exprimer. On n’écoute pas ses cris de révolte qui finissent dans des silences résignés. (32)

The silence and trauma that characterizes women’s life in Aïn Nekhla does not stem from a conscious desire of subjugation. It is mostly predicated on the absence of a sincere outlet and on the unavailability of an active listener. Though the manifestations of the koulchites seem to be personal and, therefore, hidden by the women that visit Sultana, it is important to mention that the problem goes beyond the individual. The pervasiveness of the issue demands the intervention of a higher authority in order to be considered a public issue. Drawing from Arezki’s analysis, that authority may be a person that is ready to listen to the women, a person that can allow their screams and cries to find an outlet.

If women's trauma derives from the internalized normative way of life that determines dignity and social acceptance, it manifests in different ways. Sultana cleverly classifies various pain and suffering in groups, creating a nomenclature of the Koulchites:

> Je vois une *koulchites* aiguë, une inflammation de l'âme et de l'être chez une jeune femme de seize ans. Elle vient de se marier. Je vois une *koulchite* chronique, cri muet et gangrène du quotidien chez une mère prolifique : onze enfants et le mari ne veut toujours pas entendre parler de contraception. Je vois une *koulchite* terminale, un cœur qui baratte du vide dans un corps d'argile. C'est une femme de quarante ans sans enfant. Je vois une *koulchite* hystérique…" (183)

References to the soul and being imply a suffering that women keep concealed deep inside themselves. As such, Sultana represents the ideal person in whom such important well-hidden cries and distresses find an outlet. The nomenclature not only connotes a perfect knowledge of the suffering but also illustrates Sultana's capacity to provide a remedy to the women's silent pain. Sultana's return therefore transcends the quest for her own identity to mean a quest for the identity of the women in the whole community.

The quest for identity in the feminist Algerian novel is not only characteristic of a battle against the oppression exerted by tradition and fundamentalism but also includes another factor: the battle against permanence. As specified here, permanence refers to the attachment to traditional beliefs, the strict observance of cultural praxes which leads to women's obligation to respect and abide by their assigned position. Laura Rice highlights the role of "gardienne de la tradition" that was conferred to women.[54] For Rice, postcolonial Algeria promptly designated women as the

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[54] See Laura Rice, "The Maghreb of the Mind in Mustapha Ilili, Brick Oussaïd, and Malika Mokeddem," in (name, ed.), *Maghrebian Mosaïc: A Literature in Transition* (2001).

keepers of the tradition; rather than creating a space of freedom, such responsibility, Rice continues, worsened women's subjugation by tying them to permanence rather than leading them to change (173). While permanence denotes tradition, fundamentalism, and subjugation, change marks a rupture that leads to modernity, subjectivity and free expression.

Mokeddem's representation of trauma under the form of *koulchites* signals her own desire of change as a woman writer but also as an Algerian intellectual who resolutely advocates an era of modern practices. It also indicates the desire of the common Algerian woman to open to a freer nation, a nation that respects their subjectivity and hears their silent cries and suffering. Mokeddem places such desire as a possibility that is expressed through Sultana's return and willingness to contribute to easing women's trauma. By representing a society where women barely recognize the correlation between the oppression lived through tradition, trauma and its manifestation as physical pathologies, Mokeddem appeals to intellectuals, asking them to reconsider their contribution within the Algerian society. In this regard, Helm summarizes Mokeddem's work under one word: solidarity. "In solidarity with all Algerian women," Helm writes, "Malika Mokeddem also expresses the urgency to combat the collective and ancestral silence of women" (208). Such combat belongs to the imaginary that can help tailor a better society for both men and women. And the imaginary itself, as Mokeddem conceptualizes it, is primarily shaped in the return of intellectuals to their land in order to contribute to change. Their presence among their people is capital as the women of Aïn Nekhla expressed it to Sultana "toi, tu es des nôtres. Toi, tu peux nous comprendre" (242). The return, as presented in *L'Interdite,* is a move that not only heals but also helps raise awareness of the possibilities that still are to be seized for a complete expression of freedom.

### 3.5 Writing Resistance: A Narrative of Solidarity and Liberation

Mokeddem ends her story with a display of resistance that leads to triumph. The final lines are hence a powerful demonstration of the various possibilities that emanate from the coupling of awareness and solidarity. Once again, she centers Sultana as the key person that helps raise that awareness and then lead to resistance and liberation. When in the previous lines of this study, we underscored that Mokeddem capitalizes on the return to express the Algerian women's distress and therefore support them through listening, the following lines offer a more radical expression of Sultana's presence, the possibility of refusing the hegemony of fundamentalists. As we will see, the refusal is not the simple utterance of a "no" but embraces the desire to get rid of the whole oppressive system that characterizes Algerian fundamentalists' actions within the different communities. As such violent resistance and frontal opposition to the representatives of fundamentalism in Aïn Nekhla remain the sole alternatives of liberation.

Mokeddem's writing communicates a demand for new perspectives for both women and men. Above all, it is a strategic search for a modern Algeria that characterizes her work. Mildred Mortimer, in her analysis of women's writing on the Algerian dark period, characterizes such an intense search for a new order – also noticed in writings by Djebar, Maïssa Bey, Leïla Marouane, Hafsa Zinaï koudil and others – as a defense of "cultural pluralism and women's rights" (10).[55] Manifested as a refusal of silence, the literature produced in the ten years of the Algerian war is an advocacy for a social plurality. The resistance that Mokeddem and the other writers engaged in

[55] Mildred Mortimer, *Women Fight, Women Write: Texts on the Algerian War*. University of Virginia Press, 2018.

started as a disagreement with the sharia law that fundamentalists projected as the only law of the country. In an interview with Sylvie Taussig, Sévérine Labat explains the genesis of the resistance :

> Dès la proclamation des résultats, les partis laïcs, les syndicats, les intellectuels se rassemblent pour former le CNSA (Comité national de sauvegarde de l'Algérie) et pour demander que le deuxième tour ne soit pas organisé…Il s'agit de l'ensemble de l'élite, francophone certes, mais aussi arabophone, qui n'imagine pas vivre sous le joug de la *sharia*" (115).[56]

Indeed, the silent oppression that Mokeddem portrays through the experience of Sultana, Dalila, and the women of Aïn Nekhla is but the narrative of the pernicious effect of fundamentalism and tradition. Labat's reference to the wide range of groups that opposed the reign of fundamentalists resonates with the characteristics of Mokeddem's characters that contest the attitudes of Islamists such as Bakkar and Ali Marbah. *L'Interdite* then builds the final confrontation between fundamentalists and *progressists* by uniting diverse forces – women and men – around Sultana who represents the gaining momentum for the rebirth of her society.

In the Algerian context, resistance to fundamentalism occurred as an inevitable response to the violence inflicted on the population. It also manifested as a rejection of the denial of individual freedoms observed throughout the country. Writing about the resistance, Séverine Labat holds that "il n'y a pas eu de déclic, mais plusieurs. Cela s'explique par la nature même de cette lutte. C'est parce que c'était une violence de proximité que la population a finalement pris les armes" (113). Labat's reading of the beginning of resistance in Algeria, therefore, highlights a moment when the population could no longer align with the fundamentalists' ideologies. Their

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[56] Severine Labat, and Sylvie Taussig. "La Résistance de la société contre les islamistes en Algérie". *Cités,* no. 17, 2004, pp. 113-120.

presence within the community was characterized by a series of violent acts which included strict and compulsory observance of Islamist laws, oppression and murder.[57] Labat's analysis echoes Sandra Laugier's theory on resistance and disobedience. Laugier underlines the link between the two notions while explaining that "la désobébissance est la solution qui s'impose lorsqu'il y a dissonance: je ne m'entends plus dans un discours qui sonne faux" (40). Violence under any form constitutes a serious dissonance, and the fact that the population takes up arms means that they considered it the sole solution. James Le Sueur uses the term "near enemy" to establish the connection between fundamentalists and the population. Indeed, fundamentalists were part of the communities they oppressed. The resistance that broke out was not, therefore, a resistance against a distant group of people that were difficult to apprehend. Resisting and disobeying in the Algerian civil war implied an opposition to forces living and operating within the different communities they were from.

The larger dialogue that Mokeddem attempts to bring to the surface in her novel engages the redefinition of cultural as well as religious practices in the Algerian society. Her questioning of both systems, which blurred their limits in such a way that they are intertwined and undistinguishable, is predicated on their becoming instruments of oppression for fundamentalists.[58] Such an oppression becomes pervasive because of the proximity that fundamentalists have with the remaining population. *L'Interdite,* therefore, presents the proximity

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[57] Later in her interview with Sylvie Taussig, Séverine Labat affirms that resistance to fundamentalists begins "quand la jeune fille katia est assassinée, parce qu'elle a refusé de se voiler – cette mort donne lieu à un moment de douleur collective – et d'autre part quand les islamistes lancent une fatwa interdisant aux gens d'envoyer leur enfants à l'école" (117).

[58] Labat adds, "ils [fundamentalists] ont plutôt islamisé la coutume, se l'appropriant de manière a créer un contre-ordre" (114). As such practices that were originally from Islam were seen as being part of the Algerian tradition. Conversely Algerian cultural praxes moved to be associated with Islam.

as a panopticon, which according to Michel Foucault, is a system that creates "a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).[59] Mokeddem's narrative of resistance sheds a light on the intrusive and pervasive watchfulness of the fundamentalists. By building on Sultana's return to Aïn Nekhla, Mokeddem ushers in a different system that escapes the control of the fundamentalists' panopticon. As such, Sultana symbolizes a different way of seeing, of understanding and behaving inherited from her long stay in Europe. While people in Aïn Nekhla show signs of subjugation to the fundamentalists' rules and silently partake in the expansion of oppression, Sultana rejects their rules. Her attitude towards tradition becomes a series of "remise en cause" which illustrate her "puissance de rebellion" and which ends in a violent resistance.

Mokeddem constructs a strong parallel between the beginning and the end of her novel. In the first passages, she already situates the story in the context of disobedience and resistance. The interaction between Sultana and Ali Marbah – which also represents the first contact between Sultana and her community – is portrayed as a moment of nascent tension. The opposition between her and Ali Marbah borrows from the different types of thoughts and ideologies they embody. While Mokeddem portrays Ali Marbah as a fundamentalist who profits from the Algerian unrest and traditions to control Aïn Nekhla, she depicts Sultana as a person that is detached from traditions.[60] As a transnational person Sultana not only knows what constitutes her tradition and culture but has the possibility to read them with different lenses. Her position as a person who acquired new knowledge through the discovery of other, different cultures prepares her to

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[59] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Vintage Book, 1995.

[60] Mokeddem implicitly presents education and Sultana's stay in France as moments of acquisition of a different vision. Sultana is, then, no longer in the grip of Algerian tradition but has a broader vision which, while encompassing the beliefs of her tradition, is enriched with new ways of thinking.

interrogate what is occurring in Aïn Nekhla. Ali Marbah, on the contrary, is but the continuation of tradition and the persistence of the rules of fundamentalism during the civil war. Sultana's interaction with Ali Marbah – a symbolism of the confrontation between tradition/fundamentalism and liberal/progressive thoughts - gives a foretaste of the resistance portrayed in the last chapter of the book. Her presence in the cemetery which immediately follows her interaction with Ali Marbah, also reveals the extent to which Mokeddem uses the paradigm of disobedience as an important counterreaction to fundamentalism.

Though Sultana's return and her disobedience to the traditional order in Aïn Nekhla exemplify the first moment of resistance, *L'Interdite* exploits solidarity to achieve a popular uprising. Women in Aïn Nekhla understand the need to unite in order to confront fundamentalism. For them, it is clear that "*une main seule ne peut applaudir"* (243). The saying which is pronounced by one of the women who thought during the Algerian revolution is directed to Sultana. This suggests that women in Aïn Nekhla have become aware of their strength to oppose fundamentalism. As such, it is clear that Mokeddem makes the concepts of solidarity and unity salient in the achievement of liberation. She emphasizes the importance of solidarity by opposing women's past incapacity to act to the burgeoning force that unfolds. Remembering the day when Sultana as a child confronted Bakkar before leaving for her studies, one woman notes, "nous n'approuvions pas tous la réprobation qui s'abattait sur toi. Mais nous n'avions aucun moyen, aucune influence pour intervenir en ta faveur" (251). The lack of means and influence that the women mentions entails that women at that period of time could not conceive the power that characterizes unity. However, the new moral space that prevailed in Aïn Nekhla upon the return of Sultana changed their conception of resistance. The woman adds, "lorsqu'on est acculé, on est obligé de riposter. C'est peut-être de là que nous viendra la force. Une par une, ils peuvent nous

asservir ou nous casser. Ils y réfléchiront à deux fois si nous nous unissons" (251). Consequently, for these women, resisting to fundamentalism implies forging a strong bond of solidarity.

Mokeddem's portrayal of solidarity centers around the reflection on a mutual need and a common vision. Whatever their determination to resist and fight, the women in Aïn Nekhla know they need Sultana's participation: "Nous les femmes on a besoin de toi" (241). They apprehend the implication of Sultana's presence in their community and how it impacts their ability to envision their liberation. As a result, Sultana's individual rebellion to people like Bakkar and Ali Marbah acts like a stimulant in women's consciousness. Her actions prompt a new courage that is crucial to the resistance that unfolds in Aïn Nekhla. However, Sultana's rebellion alone is incapable of leading to a real change in her village. The fact that the women waited so long to finally wake up with Sultana's return proves that the possibility of changing the order of things requires the arrival of new ideas and a different vision of religious and sociopolitical cultures. That mutual need is embodied in the sentence, "nous, on est avec toi. Nous nous sommes donné le mot pour venir te voir ensemble, aujourd'hui" (242). Mokeddem uses women's solidarity to allow them to narrate their grivances to Sultana. Rather than just being an addition to what the reader already knows about their suffering, the reiteration adds to the urgent need for resistance. This repetition naturally comes from women who question the legacy of their tradition:

> Quelle tristesse de réaliser que sa vie n'a été qu'esclavage et humiliations, dans l'impuissance continue! Alors comment transmettre une tradition que plus personne ne respecte ? Comment perpétuer un mode de vie qui ne nous reconnait plus aucune considération, à aucun moment de la vie? Il faut qu'on parle. Il faut qu'on se donne de la solidarité. (245)

Sultana understands the signification of such grievance. She also knows how each woman's tirade about their life works to create an atmosphere of courage. Mokeddem plays on the reminiscence of suffering and oppression – manifested in the numerous recounting – to embolden women. As such, she redefines a new balance of power through each intervention by showing not only the rising awareness of women power but by presenting disobedience and resistance as essential paths to change. Thus, the narrative shows that the public harangues developed around Sultana mostly ends in a request of resistance, "elles posent leur rebellion, leurs révendications, le feu de leurs yeux" (245). The chances that the women's gathering at the hospital degenerates into an uprising to end the influence of tradition and fundamentalism is high. Mokeddem's conceptualization of liberation emanates from that awareness of the power of solidarity.

Mokeddem adopts a feminist perspective when writing *L'Interdite.* Her writing of resistance aligns with the search for a national liberation from fundamentalism. As such, she abides by the reality of Algeria which is predicated on the fact that both women and men were subjugated and were attempting to free themselves from oppression. In this manner, Mokeddem brings in men's participation – which comes in solidarity with women but which mainly shows that no specific social stratum was spared by the reign of fundamentalism. As the story shows, a few men refuse the oppression that fundamentalists imposed on the population. Though they were also characterized by their silence and a passive observation of the limitation of their rights, these men heard Sultana's call to disobedience and resistance. Monique Gadant points out the slow awakening of some men during that period of unrest. Indeed, in her article, Gadant shows that women's situation in Algeria was almost accepted by most men. Addressing the nationalists' views on women, Gadant writes, "beaucoup d'hommes entre ceux qui se proclament « démocrates » pensent la même chose. Leur radicalisme féministe est très récent et il exprime avant tout

l'opposition au FIS, une manière de se distinguer à lui en se posant comme « modernistes » (28). As Gadant establishes it, men's opposition is mainly a resistance to the actions of fundamentalists before transforming into a defense for women. Their last-minute participation in opposing the group of fundamentalists guided by Marbah and Bakkar is crucial to the final act of resistance.

Mokeddem successfully substantiates the awakening of women in Aïn Nekhla, linking it to a growing exasperation. The fundamentalists did not only coerce women, they also subdued men, forcing the whole community to abide by their rules. The resistance of some of the men – which followed women's resistance – is, first of all, an exposition of their own grievance. As one of the men asks, "même aller chez le marabout ou chez le docteur est un péché à présent ? Où on va comme ça? 'ils' n'ont qu'à nous dire clairement : allongez-vous par terre et laissez-vous mourir!" (246). It is, therefore, possible that the coercion felt by men forced them to clearly interpret the suffering of women. Thus, despite the silence of the men in Aïn Nekhla, many do not condone the fundamentalists' abuses and cruelty. Their resistance starts with a rejection of the authority that fundamentalists represent, ""ils" ne nous commandent pas, nous, ces chiens !" (246). For Sultana, the evolution of the situation commands that men defend themselves first. To make her remark salient she uses the word "lâches" to better illustrate the standpoint of the men in Aïn Nekhla. Sultana's reaction causes their courage and desire for a new social and political order to surface. In doing so she leads their attention to resistance as a necessary path to liberation. The call is made without ambiguity and the men understand its implications, "madame, ne dis pas qu'on est lâches…Nous sommes prêts à nous battre contre eux pour te défendre" (246). These lines evoke men's awareness and their desire to oppose the reign of terror. Rather than just being a resistance for themselves, the narrative presents men's abandonment of their own issues to embrace

women's. By moving men's resistance to the defense of women's cause, Mokeddem implies their embrace of a more common cause.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In *L'Interdite,* Mokeddem actively participates in urgent writing by portraying an Algerian society that demands its freedom from fundamentalists. Her powerful depiction of life in Aïn Nekhla and Tammar communicates her desire to resist obscurantism and the violence that destroyed life in Algeria in the 90s. As Mokeddem engages in the battle for liberty for Algerians, and for the women who were the principal victims of the war, she presents the return from exile as a great moment of awareness. Such awareness, as Mokeddem conceptualizes it, begins with the awareness of the self, of one's own strengths and weaknesses. Mokeddem succeeds in representing the awareness of the self by showing that the return is first of all an encounter with one's own past and troubles. In *L'Interdite*, to return is to relive former traumas and to confront one's own fears. Moreover, to overcome trauma is also to empower the population and to lead a resistance in solidarity with them. The return is, therefore, not a desire to reconnect with a geographical space or people, it is an empowering gesture that unleashes a transformative power in the society through the awareness of the possibilities emanating from the society. In her novel, Mokeddem emphasizes the capacity that the return can open. Her representation of Sultana's experience in Aïn Nekhla challenges the ideology of fundamentalism, especially with regard to women. Indeed, Mokeddem portrays a protagonist who returns to her society with the capacity to rationally question her existence, the existence of people in Aïn Nekhla and more broadly, life in Algeria. As a result of Sultana's presence and action in her village, a new imaginary takes form. That imaginary is the

language of disobedience and resistance to the fundamentalists' subjugation: the people become aware of their own power to refuse the system that is imposed on them.

# 4.0 Chapter 3: Mabanckou's Underlying Optimism: The Author's Return to His Continent

> Aborder une pensée portant sur le continent Africain est une tâche ardue tant sont tenaces poncifs, cliché et pseudo-certitudes, qui comme un halo de brume, nimbent sa réalité.
> – Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*

## 4.1 Introduction

In the incipit of his essay, *Afrotopia,* Felwine Sarr writes about the prevailing misrepresentations surrounding Africa today, "Aborder une pensée portant sur le continent Africain," he explains, "est une tâche ardue tant sont tenaces poncifs, clichés et pseudo-certitudes, qui comme un halo de brume, nimbent sa réalité" (9). African postcolonial writings – both fiction and non-fiction continue to contribute to the construction of new representations of the continent.[61] Images of famine, war, and violence that abounded in the depictions of the continent whether in colonial or postcolonial literature have slowly given way to more optimistic representations. However, as Sarr explains, the distortions and caricatures about Africa makes it difficult to carry out a rational analysis about the continent. The conception that the African continent is historically, socially, economically, and politically doomed, with no other alternative but to exist as a perpetual

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[61] See among other works, Nicolas Bancel, et al, editors. *La Fracture Coloniale: La Société Française au Prisme de l'Héritage Colonial.* La Découvertes, 2005. Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony.* University of California Press, 2001. Ato Quayson. *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* Polity Press, 2000. Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara. *Afrique: Espérance.* L'Harmattan, 2011. To this very brief, it is important to add novels such as *Ville Cruelle* (1954) by Cameroonian writer Eza Boto; *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (1960) by Sembène Ousmane; etc.

underdeveloped region, has, therefore, been popularized after its independences.[62] "Depuis les années 1960," Sarr writes, "à l'aube des indépendances africaines, la vulgate afro-pessimiste a qualifié sans coup férir l'Afrique de continent mal parti, à la dérive ; de monstre agonisant dont les derniers soubresauts annonçaient la fin prochaine" (9). Focusing on a different perspective and using an approach that contrasts with the common dismal representations, David Gordon and Howard Wolpe argue that far from the perceived assumptions, the development of the continent is possible.[63] Gordon and Wolpe build their analysis on an optimism that derives from current representations and studies of Africa. "A quiet renaissance is slowly transforming the African continent," write Gordon and Wolpe, adding, "Africa is not, as it is so consistently depicted on our television screens, on the edge of an abyss of futility, and despair but at the beginnings of a renewal that, in many countries, is yielding a new sense of hope and possibility" (49). My work in this chapter, which is an analysis of Alain Mabanckou's *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* (2018), is situated in the intersection of the two opposing depictions of the African continent and the diverging analyses that arise from their differences. In his work, Mabanckou successfully blends narratives of pessimism and optimism. Though, his novel evolves around the social and political unrest that characterized post-independence Congo, it partakes in the contemporary utopian perspective that seeks to decipher the fields of possibilities in Africa.

*Les Cigognes sont immortelles* offers an intricate portrayal of postcolonial Africa of the 1970s. Mabanckou sets his novel in the family of the protagonist, Michel, who is described as a middle school student at the Collège des Trois-Glorieuses and who enjoys a peaceful life. An only

[62] Stephen Smith, in *Négrologie: Pourquoi l'Afrique Meurt* (2003), posits that the continent has unremittingly embraced a chaotic fate and consequently has no hope of being set on the path of development.

[63] David F Gordon and Howard Wolpe, "The Other Africa: An End to Afro-Pessimism". *World Policy Journal,* Vol. 15, no. 1, 1998, pp. 49-59.

child, Michel has a close relationship with both his father, Papa Roger, a front desk clerk at Hotel Victory Palace, and his mother, Pauline, a trader. Unfortunately, this familial harmony is disrupted by the military coup and assassination of President Marien Ngouabi in 1977. Though the putsch operates in Brazzaville, with no member of Michel's family directly involved, the repercussions reach Pointe-Noire and finally impact the city and the relative quiet enjoyed by the family. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is an historical narrative that describes post-independence Congo and shows how political and ethnic turmoil, including deaths and arrests, quickly upset family and social life, thus, jeopardizing national cohesion. However, despite the interruption of the national peace, and the pessimism that transcends his narrative, Mabanckou actively plays with an optimistic perspective concerning the future of Congo and the continent in general. This chapter takes up the larger question of the construction of optimism by exploring Mabanckou's criticism of the realities that weigh on the development of the continent. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* may seem to be a pessimistic novel for the social and political troubles it portrays. However, new intellectual vision and perspectives that are unfolding on the continent and to which Mabanckou belongs reveals a different reality.[64] His involvement in *Les Ateliers de la Pensée de Dakar* exposes the ideology that guides his writing of the novel. Such ideology is firmly situated in the idea of an African continent that thinks its place and future in the global through African experiences and the constructive investigation of its realities.

In his novel, Mabanckou provides a realistic assessment of the sociopolitical realities of the African continent. And though the principal narrative centers around Michel and his family's daily life, it quickly moves to a larger critique of the continent. Historical events and former African leaders that have participated in the post-independence experience are summoned with the

[64] Since 2016, Les Ateliers de la Pensée de Dakar aims at rethinking Africa in the global.

objective of relaying past and present. In this way, though Mabanckou envisions a representation of contemporary Africa, he subtly uses elements of the past that have remained unchanged in the twenty-first century. His reference to famine, conflicts and war, military power, corruption, and the lack of national unity constitute the main weaknesses the continent has known since the era of independence. While such descriptions may lead the reader to consider *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* as a work of pessimism, it is important, for this analysis, to interrogate the author's real objectives in narrativizing those negative factors. The analysis will investigate the extent to which Mabanckou's work contributes to the burgeoning African *renaissance.* Therefore, this chapter argues that there is an underlying afro-optimism even in such a seemingly pessimistic novel.

Mabanckou's narrative of afro-optimism in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is subtle. Indeed, his aesthetics does not align with the immediate depiction of the strength of the continent. It does not also reject all the negative narratives and analyses that characterize the pessimistic portrayal of the continent. However, the moment Mabanckou chose to publish his novel speaks more for what he really references in his depiction of the continent. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is a fictional partner to *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui* (2017),[65] where he asserts, "l'Afrique n'a pas à entrer dans l'Histoire : elle est l'Histoire. Et son drame, justement, n'en déplaise à certains, c'est de n'être jamais sortie d'une histoire tronquée, unilatérale, écrite par procuration par le maître ou racontée avec une voix camouflée…" (10). In this collection of essays, Mabanckou invites writers such as Achille Mbembe, Dominic Thomas, Françoise Vergès, Souleymane Bachir Ndiaye, and many more prominent figures of postcolonial literature to join him in "thinking" the African continent in the twenty-first century. The idea Mabanckou had in

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[65]Alain Mabanckou, editor. *Penser et Ecrire l'Afrique Aujourd'hui*. Seuil, 2017.

the inception of his project was of twofold. First, he refutes misconceptions about the continent, especially caricatures of disaster that have long characterized it. In his vison, "Le continent noir n'est plus l'apanage de ceux qui se complaisent dans son malheur, et le prennent pour la devanture de leur boutique politique" (10). The second idea – which partakes in his quest for a more optimistic vision of the continent – consists not only in erasing the pessimistic consideration when it comes to Africa, but more importantly in creating a new narrative of possibilities. The new narrative championed by Mabanckou in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* suggests that rewriting the continent with the perspectives of possibilities does not exclude an empiric assessment of its realities. It supposes that Africans themselves take the responsibility of that assessment with the aim of constructing a new African ideal. As he says, "l'Afrique, qui a désormais ses 'peintres,' a dorénavant les yeux rivés vers le monde" (10). Mabanckou's Afro-optimism is, therefore, not a blissful conceptualization of life in Africa, but is rather a clever adjustment between reality and the possibilities of change. His allusion to Achille Mbembe's questioning, "où en sommes-nous ? Qu'est-ce qui nous arrive et où allons-nous ? Quelles sont les grandes lignes de fracture ou les grands antagonismes qui nous donnent l'impression de vivre un moment particulièrement agité de l'histoire de notre monde ; qui nous donnent le sentiment inquiet d'être face à des choix irréconciliables…" (17)[66], shows that rewriting is not leaving aside the real problems of the continent, but to interrogate and face their complexity with the objective to open to new social, economic and political changes.

Mabanckou's ideological commitment in leading a reflection on the *devenir* of the continent illustrates an engagement to recenter his literary and ideological approach to the

[66] Achille Mbembe, "L'Afrique Qui Vient". *Penser et Ecrire L'Afrique Aujourd'hui,* edited by Alain Mabanckou, Seuil, 2017, pp. 17-31.

continent. His aim is therefore not to just write his country or Africa, but to return there through a participative commitment. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is, consequently, a novel of return to a past that hardly differs from the present. And as already mentioned, a return to the continent, for unlike what Mabanckou has already produced as fiction, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* corresponds to the author's personal desire to reunite with his continent in terms of active participation into its sociopolitical development. By situating postcolonial Africa in the Congolese experience, Mabanckou's narrative interrogates the accountability of Africans in the different problems that impede its development.

In what follows, the chapter begins by comparing *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* and some of Mabanckou's previous works, including *Bleu, blanc rouge* (1998), *Verre Cassé* (2005), and *Lumières de Pointe-Noire* (2013). These works provide interesting portrayals of the continent that include African youth's obsession with immigration and the failures that characterize the individual's life. The objective is to illustrate the new perspective that prevails in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles.* The section not only considers such a shift as the materialization of his return to the continent as a transnational author, but also examines it as a way to abide to the call to rethink the continent.

The examination of pessimism and optimism that follows in section two is constructed from two leading books that marked francophone expression of afro-pessimism, Stephen Smith's *Négrologie: Pourquoi l'Afrique meurt,* and Axelle Kabou's *Et si l'Afrique réfusait le développement?* Both books lean on a pessimistic analysis of the continent but ultimately differ on their conceptualization of Africa's possible path to a better postcolonial experience. Smith's essay fails to end on an optimistic note. Nicolas Van de Walle remarks that Smith's message, "repeated every couple of paragraphs, is that Africa has proved incapable of rising to the challenges of

modernization and is thus slowly but surely 'dying.'" He also adds that Smith remains vague on the reasons that justify the continent's failure, only relying on socio-cultural elements to support his assertions. Unlike Smith, Kabou provides a glance of optimism after her pessimistic representation of the continent. As such, Kabou's essay aligns with Mabanckou's perspective in that *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* weaves optimism in a narrative that externalizes pessimism. Section three leans on Marie-Claude's Smouts's work on colonial and postcolonial situations. It analyzes the accountability of political leaders in the arrests and murders immediately after the coup as well as the direct involvement of Western powers in decision making and conflicts as a persistence of colonial situation in Africa today. Section four explores Mabanckou's optimism not only as a form of participative commitment to Afrotopia but also views it as the final enactment of his symbolic return.

## 4.2 Mabanckou's Political and Social Orientation

Mabanckou's return to Congo through *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* displays a new level of commitment in issues related to Africa. When it comes to his relationship as a writer with the African continent, one can affirm that Mabanckou's corpus of novels has mainly been concerned with the depiction of the social and political realities of the continent. However, the importance of the place of politics in his narratives and how it contributes to the vision of Afrotopia differs greatly from one novel to the other. From his first novel, *Bleu, blanc, rouge* to *Les Cigognes sont immortelles,* Mabanckou's perspective towards the continent has significantly shifted. The use of humor that also characterizes his novels and which "transmit [s] larger ideas about Africa, France, and contemporary authorship" (Kleppinger, 28), is only part of his aesthetics, a euphemism in his

way of narrativizing important but shocking realities. Consequently, in *Verre Cassé,* a work in which he satirically recounts the stories of different protagonists, Mabanckou mostly explores social and family dynamics. In *Lumières de Pointe-Noire,* a novel that marks his physical return to the Congo*,* Mabanckou blends the pleasure of reconnecting with his past with the negative changes he observes in his hometown. For Hélène King, *Lumières de Pointe-Noire* is "a mixture of observations, often expressing the author's own ambiguity about his place in the modern world" (66).[67] On the other hand, *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is mostly concerned with the realities of exile and acts as a warning to African youth, who are continually tempted to leave the continent. As John Walsh writes, "the story of migration and return at the heart of *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* is about the conflict between the idea of Paris as imagined by the Congolese protagonist and the experiences that do not live up to the dream" (96).[68] Mabanckou, himself, notes that *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* is a novel "sur le mythe de l'Europe comme Paradis pour les Africains" (11).[69] Each of these fictional works translates Mabanckou's link to his homeland and his desire to participate in its new postcolonial experience, "je me suis rendu compte que je serais aussi utile à mon pays de l'extérieur."[70] However, despite the common factors that typify his novels, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* embraces a concern about the continent that differs from his previous novels. The density of the political theme, the way politics severely impacts social and family life, as well as

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[67] In an interview with Rokiatou Soumaré, Mabanckou explains that he wrote *Lumieres de Pointe-Noire* to not only allow his readership to have an idea of where he came from but also to exhibit his emotional attachment to his home city (66).
See Rokiatou Soumaré, "How to Become Globalized Without Losing Your Mind: A Conversation with Alain Mabanckou". *World Literature Today,* Vol. 90, no. 5, 2016, pp. 64-66.

[68] See John Patrick Walsh's article "Mapping Afropea: The Translation of Black Paris in the Fiction of Alain Mabanckou".

[69] Alain Mabanckou. *Lettres noires : des ténèbres à la lumières.* Pluriel, 2016.

[70] See Marianne Payot's article, "Alain Mabanckou: L'Exilé Est Censé Avoir Reussi" in L'Express of January 3rd, 2013. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/alain-mabanckou-l-exile-est-cense-avoir-reussi_1226092.html

the larger geographical space that shifts from a national perspective to a continental one, makes *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* unique.

The pervasiveness of political tension is one of the typical feature of *Les Cigognes sont immortelles.* After President Marien Ngouabi was killed, the new political authorities, headed by military officials accentuated the arrests and killings of the population. As Mabanckou writes, "il y a eu aujourd'hui plusieurs arrestations de militaires et de civils originaires du sud du pays. Ils vont être traduits devant une cour martiale instituée par le comité militaire du Parti" (124). Those political occurrences suddenly disrupt the relative peace of the country and threaten the already fragile national cohesion. Mabanckou's framing of the tension is perceptible from the beginning of the book with Papa Roger's particular attention to the news. As Michel portrays his father's actions in their compound, he highlights, "il n'écoute plus La Voix de la Révolution Congolaise. Il s'est branché sur La Voix de l'Amérique. Et il a l'air très triste" (36). This change of radio stations suggests a search for a very important piece of information that only La Voix de l'Amérique can provide. And as Papa Roger points out to his son, the capital city is in turmoil; gunshots can be heard. His reference to the possible turbulence in the capital city embarks the reader into a the social and political unrest that shapes Mabanckou's novel.

Unlike what one reads in novels such as *Bleu Blanc Rouge* and *Verre Cassé,* the link between what happens at political level and what common people live is made vivid in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles*. After the military putsch, the narrative shows people leaving their own business to gather and express their concern about what happened hundreds of miles away in the capital city. The image of common Congolese discussing and lamenting the political occurrence suggests that the social and the political are intricately linked. In *Bleu Blanc Rouge* and *Verre Cassé,* the narratives are mainly concerned with the story of the protagonists and how they cope

with their own social experience. Rebecca Loescher, in her analysis of *Verre Cassé* indicates, "Aside from buffoonery, these stories are similar to the extent that each is entrenched in some identitary problematic, tangled up with the notions originality, posterity, and authenticity. The prevalence of this theme quickly manifests" (141). On the contrary, in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles,* Mabanckou quickly links the political and everyday life into one narrative. Even with his young protagonist Michel, whose perspective is limited to what a child can understand, Mabanckou does not hesitate to bring in the importance of politics. At the death of Marien Ngouabi, Michel remembers his promises, "dans son dernier discours il promettait de tout faire pour que nous n'ayons plus à souffrir de la crise économique provoquée par les pays riches, et il ajoutait que notre peuple devait chercher la paix malgré les embrouilles des imperialistes…" (54). The prevalence of politics in Michel's thoughts and in his immediate environment may surprise Mabanckou's audience. Indeed, Michel is very young and some of the reflections he attempts to carry out may exceed the reach of a boy his age. Yet, by exposing the extent to which politics saturates the imaginary of a boy like Michel, Mabanckou successfully shows its relevance in the daily life of Africans. Therefore, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is not the writing of a social problem such as immigration, developed in *Bleu Blanc Rouge,* or a moral and social criticism of the Congolese society as presented in *Verre Cassé*.

Mabanckou does not investigate matters that are limited to personal issues, but elucidates how in contemporary Congo, political actions and decisions translate into family and social problems. When Michel's uncles, Tonton René, Kinama, and Moubéri visit his family, they bring news that impacts the family throughout the narrative. After Maman Pauline has offered them dinner and is tired of the political discussion the family is having, she asks for permission to leave. Tonton René, however, asks her to stay, "non, Pauline, je te conseille de t'asseoir avec nous parce

que ce que je vais dire maintenant est une très mauvaise nouvelle, très très mauvaise pour notre famille" (119). For Maman Pauline, if there is a concern about the family, it can only originate from Tonton René's involvement with politics. As such, when she reminds him how much she asked him to leave his political party, thinking that the problem is circumscribed to Tonton René's own relationship to politics, she is shocked to learn that rather than being Tonton René's sole problem, she is also concerned, "comment ça, 'nous'"? She asks, "est-ce que nous sommes dans leur politique, nous?" (121). Michel, his father and his mother learn that his uncle, capitaine Luc Kimbouala-Nkaya has been killed in the military repression that followed the President's death. From that moment, Maman Pauline's desire to make the killers of her brother pay for their murder changes the family's life. Incapable of targeting the military, Maman Pauline seeks revenge by attempting to murder Antoinette Ebaka, a lady supposed to be from the same ethnic group as the killers of Luc Kimbouala-Nkaya. The actions that follow, and which lead to the arrest of Maman Pauline, transcends the innocence of Michel's language in narrating his family's story. Rather than being a simple narrative of a boy, the influence of politics in the story entails that the issue discussed in Mabanckou's novel calls for a more significant consideration. *Les Cigognes sont immortelles,* therefore, embodies some of the characteristics of novels such as *Allah n'est pas obligé* by Ahmadou Kourouma or *L'Aîné des orphelins* by Tierno Monenembo. In each of these novels, the protagonist, always a child, faces the negative effects of conflicts and is involved in experiences that surpasses his age. Like these novels, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* unfolds against the backdrop of postcolonial realities that exceed the understanding of a young narrator. It is then not surprising to note that a substantial part of the novel – mainly the history of conflicts and military putsches that followed the era of independence, as well as the geopolitics between

former colonizers and former colonies in the management of postcolonial Africa – is narrated by Tonton René and political analyst Christopher Smith.

Mabanckou clearly differentiates his personal responsibility as a postcolonial writer in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles*, to a much greater degree than in any of his earlier novels. Though the space he portrays and the realities that pervade all his novels are obviously fraught with African issues, Mabanckou makes clear that he has to focus on more essential matters. As such, he confessed in one of the numerous interviews that "à travers *Les Cigognes sont immortelles*, je reviens peut-être pratiquement à ce qui est essentiel à moi. C'est-à-dire que depuis que j'ai commencé à écrire, je ressens de plus en plus le besoin de dire ce qu'est mon continent et de montrer pourquoi le continent africain est aujourd'hui à la dérive."[71]Mabanckou's allusion to commit to what is more essential for him results in the new perspective about Africa that characterizes his work. Consequently, his approach reveals a more committed writing that unites the social and the political in an historical yet contemporary narrative that revisits African postcolonial situation.

### 4.3 An Attentive Gaze Towards Pessimism

Mabanckou's narrative of return to Congo is governed by his ardent desire to dedicate his work to the Africa, a continent now adrift, as he writes. Thus, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* is characterized by a pessimistic perspective that moves from the social, to the political and economic mismanagement of the continent. The story of the military coup and the death of President Marien

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[71] Alain Mabanckou, "'*Les Cigognes sont immortelles',* Alain Mabanckou – Editions du Seuil [Rentrée Littéraire 2018]." *Youtube,* uploaded by Editions du Seuil, 4 Jul 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6p9QgvlJiQ.

Ngouabi contributes to intensifying the pessimistic representation of Africa. However, it is crucial to disentangle the common pessimistic narrative and analyses of the continent from that deployed by Mabanckou in his novel. The former's intention pertains to a discourse of rejection and dissemblance. It continues to thrive on the ideology that "Africa is a vast dark cave where every benchmark and distinction come together in total confusion" (Mbembe, 3).[72] Such discourse about Africa seeks to demonstrate a totally chaotic life that struggles to follow the general progress of humanity. Never does it attempt to contextualize and historicize its a priori, nor does it formulate a constructive set of proposals to address the problems it describes. Alluding to that pessimistic depiction of Africa, Mbembe adds, "more than any other region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about the facts of 'absence,' 'lack,' and 'non-being,' of identity and differences, of negativity – in short, of nothingness" (4). Contrary to this gloomy and apocalyptic discourse on Africa, Mabanckou's pessimistic narrative that shows the deflagration of the social and political life echoes a desire to see things change. His writing on post-independence Congo is not a simple derogative depiction of the continent's problems for the sole interest of keeping a moral complex on its people. Mabanckou's novel goes further to epitomize a political and ideological call to Africans to realize what is sabotaging their development and thus rethink new ways of social, economic, and political governance.

The objective of this section is to closely analyze the calling into question Mabanckou largely includes in his novel. That perspective participates in showing his interest in matters relative to his continent. As a transnational author who actively participates in the Afrotopia,

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[72] See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony.* For the reasons explaining Africa's quasi-dependence and difficulties refer to the first chapter.

Mabanckou is committed to decrying contemporary African sociopolitical traditions that extensively hinder its development. Therefore, this section aims to analyze the ways in which Mabanckou calls into question African sociopolitical practices rather than deconstructing them.[73] For this reason, we make a distinction between deconstruction and calling into question since deconstruction implies – whether implicitly or explicitly – a negation. The conception being that the pessimism that transpires in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* mostly participates in the construction of a general optimistic perspective that makes change and progress possible, it is imperative to oppose within the notion of pessimism, the perspective that sees no future for the continent and the one that constitutes a warning, and which abstains from whitewashing the continent.

Mabanckou's reference to pessimism in his novel is not something new in postcolonial studies on Africa. Afropessimism has been conceptuliazed in oder to characterize the continent's backwardness, its ongoing conflicts, its incapacity to exploit on its own its numerous natural resources, and its abject poverty. Afropessimism in opposition to Afrooptimism has been the locus of heated debates. In "Afropessimism," Ebere Onwudiwe explains that the term "refers to the perception of Sub-Saharan Africa as a region too riddled with problems for good governance and economic development" (33).[74] In this sense, much Afropessimism focuses on empirical conditions, especially economic indicators. Onwudiwe adds that, in the 1980s, when expressions of Afropessimism were widespread, many thinkers in western countries who called themselves

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[73] In "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", Judith Butler carries out an analysis of the postmodern subject and makes a distinction between deconstruction and negation. For her, "to deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question" (165). Thus, Butler equates deconstruction to calling into question and clearly indicates their opposition to the idea of negation. My understanding, however, in this work is that calling into question is to put forth the incongruities of African sociopolitical traditions that Mabanckou portrays.

[74] Ebere Onwudiwe, "Afropessimism", *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* edited by Maryanne Cline Horowitz, vol. 1, Scribner's Sons, 2005, pp. 33-35.

“Africanists” contributed to the idea that “there was no hope for consolidating democracy and achieving sustainable economic development” on the continent (33). However, Onwudiwe underscores that unlike analysts like Robert Kaplan, Christopher Hitchens, and Marguerite Michaels, who constitute the hard-line and whose pessimism holds that there is no possibility of development in Africa, others like George Ayittey, Robert Jackson, and Carl G. Rosberg suggest the opposite, implying that positive economic and political change is possible.

The tendency for a dark and hopeless description of Africa appears in Stephen Smith’s *Négrologie: Pourquoi l’Afrique Meurt.*[75] In his essay, Smith critiques journalists, politicians and other intellectuals who offer a glowing narrative of Africa. His analysis is foregrounded in the belief that such enthusiastic discourse has the perverse effect of worsening conditions. As a result, he stands against what he thinks to be a double hypocrisy, characterized by failing to tell difficult truths about Africa’s collective destruction (23). Yet Smith’s analysis seems to ignore several factors which on their own could lead to a different representation of the continent’s situation. Unfortunately, the portrait he makes only uses elements that incriminate Africans and ignore the effort that is being made. As such, Smith writes that “ça va mal, très mal. L’Afrique agonise, quoi qu’en disent, une fois l’an dans le creux de l’actualité, les optimistes forcenés des dossiers spéciaux sur ‘l’Afrique qui Bouge’” (13). His determination to dedicate pages of his essay to a pessimistic vision of Africa – in which he rejects the idea of a continent that strives, and which slowly moves forward despite its numerous problems – betrays a one-sided view. Declarations such as “à moins qu’ils ne cessent leur œuvre collective d’autodestruction” that sound like a warning and a desire to get the continent back on track not only aggravate his already depressing image of Africa but also ignore the effort by leaders such as Patrick Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, Sylvanus Olympio

[75] Stephen Smith. *Négrologie: pourquoi l’Afrique meurt.* Calmann-Lévy, 2003.

and many more who dedicated their lives to bringing change on the continent. The use of the term "oeuvre collective d'autodestruction" which gathers all the Africans into the perspective of destruction of the continent contributes to illustrate Smith's disregard of other aspects of Africa's underdevelopment and the racialization that underlies it. Indeed, the representation of the entire population of the continent as people who collectively work together to maintain Africa in its difficult conditions does not provide an accurate depiction of the continent and does not honor the great number of people that still struggle for change. Responding to Smith, Diop, Tobner and François-Xavier Verschave not only oppose his generalization, "600 millions d'hommes traités comme un seul" , but also indicate that Smith's essay is worthy of "*La Revue Coloniale* en 1883" for the image of Africa it conveys.

About a decade before Smith's *Négrologie,* Axelle Kabou portrayed Africa in almost similar terms. Like Smith, she develops an Afropessimistic perspective that derives from the observable conditions of Africa. For her, it is crucial that any analysis of the social and economic situation of Africa ceases to represent the continent in mitigating terms. As such, she holds, "il n'est pas sûr que l'état de civilisation actuel de l'Afrique, marqué par l'extension, au cours de ces dernières années, de la misère et de la précarité à la quasi-totalité des couches sociales, autorise encore longtemps les louvoiements et les ronds de jambes" (11). Kabou's analysis centers on the accountability of Africans in the social, economic, and political "disintegration" of the continent. She highlights what Africans should have done in terms of socioeconomic development, and which were neglected while emphasizing the mismanagement that led to different conflicts on the continent. Though the reality of colonialism, imperialism and slavery established a rather difficult ramp for the economic, political and social progress of the continent, Kabou holds that it would be trivial for Africans to still lean on that past to justify its underdeveloped status. For her, "le refus

du développement … commence par l'occultation des responsabilités de l'Afrique face à son histoire" (20). To the already long list of blames, she adds the conflicts, the impossibility of Africans to constitute themselves as a single people, the incapacity to think development in new and modern terms that embrace a real opening to technology. Kabou's opinion echoes the perceived characterizations of Africa in the 70s, the 80s, the 90s and echoes the current understanding of some of the leaders of the West.[76] Such a portrayal of Africa does not end without her closing with an optimistic vision for the continent. Unlike Smith, Kabou leans on works by Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Cheikh Anta Diop to show that the African continent hasn't always been technologically late and can still recover from its lethargy:

> L'Afrique, c'est un fait établi, n'a pas toujours été en retard sur le plan technologique … les Africains doivent en prendre note. Ils ne doivent plus se contenter des gratifications morales que leur procure la lecture des travaux de ces chercheurs ; ils ne doivent plus jouer aux égarés chaque fois qu'il est question de développement scientifique. (109)

Kabou's remarks speak to the possibility of an endogenous development. Africa is capable of thriving. But as she puts it, it is crucial that Africans realize that progress is not the privilege of other nations. It is therefore a question of mentality and awareness of one's possibilities, "les mentalités africaines sont en voie de transformation. De nombreux éléments, de nature économique surtout, indiquent, en effet, qu'un processus de prise de conscience est désormais amorcé à tous les niveaux" (180). Kabou's general portrayal of Africa may seem severe and uncompromising. Her opinion about Africans and their accountability in the problems that the continent faces may seem compassionless. However, an examination of the subtle proposals she

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[76] President Sarkozy's discourse in Dakar in 2007 used to be the epitome of such an understanding. However, President Donald Trump's allusion to developing countries as "shithole" countries were even more egregious.

provides mainly concludes a desire to see things done differently. In the harshness of her words, we find a denunciation that seeks healing from profoundly rooted practices that slow and prevent the socioeconomic expansion of the continent. Kabou's way of mixing pessimism with a touch of optimism resonates with Mabanckou's *Les Cigognes sont immortelles.*

In *Les Cigognes sont immortelles*, Michel's constant soliloquies provide essential information on social and economic practices in Congo. Far from signifying childish and innocent remarks, the information that the young narrator provides serves as a portal for Mabanckou's subtle expositions of sociopolitical realities, especially those concerning the management of economic resources. In one such passage where admiration constitutes a criticism, Michel observes, "j'ai l'habitude d'admirer les voitures des capitalistes noirs du côté de l'avenue de l'indépendance" (11). Michel's assertion shows that the presence of the "capitalistes noirs" in the country is abnormal. It may appear ironic to notice the use of the adjective "noirs" to better specify the nature of the "capitalistes." However, though such a juxtaposition rather suggests an oxymoron in which capitalism opposes the fact of being "noirs," it emphasizes an important turn in the economic life of the continent less than two decades after it broke the bonds of colonialism. The reference to the term "capitalist" suggests a governance of particularly rich Africans whose source of wealth is regarded as illegal.

Mabanckou continues the depiction of the economic situation by establishing a different degree of responsibility concerning the mismanagement of resources. When, in the first lines of the novel, he underlines the implication of very rich people that he names "capitalistes noirs" in opposition to the social and economic realities of Congo, he devotes the following pages to show that within the Congolese society, individuals of lower social classes and public service workers

are also accountable for squandering the resources. Once again, he makes use of Michel's innocent voice to illustrate the different actions :

> Cet oncle était très gentil, il offrait le courant aux gens de notre ethnie qui n'habitaient pas très loin de sa parcelle, au quartier Rex. Nous sommes trop loin de ce quartier, le défunt tonton Albert ne pouvait pas tirer un fil depuis là-bas jusqu'à chez nous à Voungou pour nous éclairer gratuitement. (15)

This passage is loaded with one of the most important reasons that explain the bankruptcy of African economies: good economic governance. The use and distribution of resources not only reflects a lack of coherent organization but also highlights the imposition of the structural adjustment program in the beginning of the 80s on most African countries, one that derived from the ways Africans themselves ran their economies. The capacity of Michel's uncle to freely distribute electricity to his relatives denotes a lack of real monitoring of the use of resources and calls attention to a mismanagement undertaken at a higher level of responsibility. Indeed, Michel's narrative of his uncle's use of the country's electricity suggests that he is not worried about being caught and potentially losing his job. It also suggests a complete lack of a management control system that could easily lead to his arrest. In this scene, post-independence Congo fails to create an environment that promotes the economic development of the country. Kabou is once again instructive : "quel que soit le domaine considéré, on note la prédominance d'une sorte de flou artistique, d'approximative clarté où l'on parait néanmoins se mouvoir aisément, à force d'habitude, de combine, d'arrangements éphémères, de ruses, de complaisance,…"(14). This observation resonates with Mabanckou's representation of management of the electricity company. In his take, being a relative and living in the uncle's vicinity constitute a way of getting electricity for free. The practice of "combine et arrangements éphémère," and which preludes the

bankruptcy of the company, is predicated on the lack of method and organization. "Les Africains refusent la méthode, l'organisation," Kabou writes. She adds, "Ils gaspillent leurs maigres ressources, sabotent tout ce qui pourrait fonctionner durablement au profit du plus grand nombre" (23). To this already long list of problems Kabou adds the lack of transparency and strictness. For her the absence of an accountable management does not illustrate the desire of postcolonial Africa to move towards development.

Mabanckou's realistic depiction of the lack of economic good governance in Congo also considers the use and management of human resources. Like the natural resources of the country, the ways in which companies handle their workers reveal a contradiction between the need to yield positive results and the desire to keep a human resource that is either not qualified for the work or not needed. Constructing on an irony that opposes Michel's opinion about human resource management and what his uncle Martin Moubéri experiences in his workplace, Mabanckou illustrates the influences of family relationships in public services. The narrative underlines the complacency and lack of discipline that define the management of workplaces. The arrival of Michel's uncles to Pointe-Noire, in order to escape a possible military execution, exemplifies the inefficiency of African companies and services. When uncle Moubéri is kindly requested to explain his work as the Human Resource Manager at the Caisse Nationale de Prévoyance Sociale, he answers laconically, "j'embauche, je vire et je gère aussi les conflits du personnel" (104). Unfortunately, Moubéri's explanation does not seem to reflect Michel's expectations concerning the responsibilities of a human resource manager. His reply, "c'est tout," indicates that his uncle's position does not require a lot of skill and effort. Michel's short answers, in turn, upsets Uncle Moubéri and triggers a long and important invective:

> Ma profession n'est pas facile, mon petit! Tout est politique et chaque décision que je prends doit être d'une intelligence absolue, j'allais dire plus que parfait ! Dès que je vire quelqu'un, le lendemain j'ai un coup de fil d'un ministre qui ne me dit pas clairement ce qu'il veut, mais il me demande en douce depuis combien d'années je suis dans la fonction publique, il fait semblant de me féliciter et me charge de saluer untel qui bosse dans mon service. Or, tu sais qui est cet untel qu'il me charge de saluer, hein? Eh bien, c'est son neveu! Et c'est le même type que j'ai viré la veille. (104)

Moubéri's depiction of his duties conveys a dark picture of the public administration. The treatment of employees depends on the ramifications and relationships they have with officials in the government. Unfortunately, the influence of family members and relatives in the public sector poses a serious problem of efficiency and leads to the recruitment and employment of incompetent workers. The recurrence of such political interventions and the family networks in the administration hinder the empirical evolution of the Congo. In *Afrique: Espérance,* Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara alludes to the persistence of African traditional relationships to explain how social behaviors pose a threat to the development of the continent.[77] He considers that "l'aliénation, l'analphabétisme, la recherche de gains immédiats et les traditions en rapport avec l'endogamie constituent les principaux facteurs qui expliquent ces conduites sociales encore fréquentes en Afrique" (31). Kamara's assertion suggests that corrupt social practices which emanate from various family and tribal relationships impact economic and political good governance. For Kabou, such practices "suggèrent par leur fréquence même d'un modèle idéologique avalé dont on n'ose parler » (13). Consequently, Kabou wonders if African elites have a better knowledge, compared to the masses, of where Africa is heading.

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[77] Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara, *Afrique: espérance.* L'Harmattan, 2011.

Mabanckou's pessimistic exploration of African social life highlights the influence of ethnic belonging in the lack of social cohesion. His narrative of the sociopolitical functioning of Congo alludes to a complete lack of unity between Africans at regional and national levels. At the lowest social level Mabanckou emphasizes the lack of cohesion by using a gradation that starts with Monsieur Ngakala's teaching method to which he adds Mâ Moubobi's price differentiation in her local shop, *Au Cas par cas.* Then, he explores the implication of the military coup within a population that is clustered into ethnic groups. Mâ Moubobi's interpretation of society is less acute than Monsieur Ngakala's. Her vision of cohesion is based on community and thus differs from Monsieur Ngakala's dismissal of the idea of a nation. As Michel shows, in Mâ Moubobi's shop, "les prix ne sont pas fixés pour de bons, ça dépend de si vous connaissez ou pas Mâ Moubobi" (25). Though her way of pricing her goods does not automatically counter the idea of a nation, the fact of differentiating her prices according to whether she knows the customer or not constitutes a problem at the local level.

When describing Monsieur Ngakala, Michel reveals that he is "un type pas très gentil qui chicotte les élèves parce qu'il voulait enseigner dans sa region au nord du pays, l'Etat n'a pas accepté sa demande et l'a envoyé chez nous au Sud" (17). Michel's interpretation of the teacher's attitude in class shows an important divide in the national building of the Congo. Monsieur Ngakala's comprehension of his duties suggests that the idea of *nation* is less important to that of clans and ethnic groups. In his case, there is a close link between what he thinks of the nation and what he owes it. Consequently, Ngakala assumes that he has more to offer to his own region than to the southern part of the country. As a result, it is not surprising to notice Mabanckou's constant mention of the ethnic groups and regions as if he were building a glossary of the ethnic groups of the Congo. References to the Vili, the Lari, the Babembe, the Munukutuba, the Kamba and other

groups underscore the idea of a country that is not yet a nation and whose ethnic divide constitutes a problem to its development.

The military coup also exposes the regional and ethnic division and presents it as a real menace. The narrative of the hours following the announcement of the death of President Marien Ngouabi presents intense debates which quickly move to tribal interpretation and regional differentiation within the population of Pointe-Noire. One of the discussions that erupted moments after the announcement, is exemplary:

> "D'ailleurs, on discute comme si on se connaissait, tu es de quelle région, toi ?"
>
> "De quelle région je suis ? Tu me demandes de quelle région je viens ? Et pourquoi ?"
>
> "Pour rien, c'est juste pour savoir avec qui je parle et …"
>
> "Eh bien, je suis du Nord, plus précisément de l'ethnie des Bangangoulou." (76)

The dialogue between the two unknown characters does not cease at the mention of the regions and the ethnic groups. It escalates to a more national threat that calls for a civil war, "débrouillez-vous avec votre cadavre, laissez notre Sud tranquille sinon on va refaire la guerre civile pour diviser ce pays en deux" (76). Mabanckou's insertion of civil war in this debate is intentional. The allusion to civil war and separatism in this trivial discussion displays a saddening reality. Like Congo, many African countries are composed of tribes and ethnic groups that haven't accepted their nations as geographical spaces that encompasses other people. The recurrence of war and conflict on the continent – which stems from the lack of national cohesion – contributes to the establishment of a pessimistic image of the continent.

Afropessimistic authors as well as afro-optimistic writers quickly assign a predominant place to conflicts as the dominant obstacle of the continent's under-development. Mabanckou only

builds on his observation of postcolonial Africa to construct the criticism of the disunity, the lack of real cohesion and the preponderance of ethnic recognition over national identity. In the introduction to *Nationalism in Asia: A History Since 1945,* Jeff Kingston analyzes the construction of a nation and the different factors that shape its foundation. Expounding on the need for a common identity and a shared past, he argues that nationalism "involves forgetting that which divides or is inconvenient so that the Idea of nation can arouse" (xvi). Many years before Kingston, French historian Ernest Renan in *Qu'Est qu'une nation?,* had already underscored the importance of forgetting in the construction of a nation. For Renan, it is precisely the capacity to forget the diverse origins framing a nation that guarantees its creation (38). One of the main characteristics of a nation is the capacity of its inhabitants to unite around a common set of identity categories that leaves aside the elements that divide. However, Mabanckou portrays a much-divided nation where verbal and military confrontations do not allow for a peaceful sociopolitical life that is conducive of development.

Mabanckou's pessimistic perspective gives an essential place to the question of identity and illustrates it as a loss and a denaturation that impacts the continent. The representation of Congolese high schoolers, whenever a European president comes for a visit, exposes the acculturation of Africans. Michel helps the reader grasp such metamorphosis : "il nous fallait étudier par cœur le résumé de l'histoire de leur pays, puis le résumé de leur géographie, et parfois il nous fallait nous habiller comme leur peuple. Nous avons porté en plein midi des manteaux […]" (61). Presented as ridiculous celebrations of foreign presidents, such actions where students are not only used as political objects but are also forced to dress exactly like the population in the visitor's country reveals a loss of dignity. Mabanckou's portrayal of these mimicries constitutes an important moment in the construction of African identity in most Sub-Saharan francophone

countries. What establishes the cultural identity of the African is severely disputed by what Africans willingly copy from other continents. Though cultural exchanges and opening to different experiences are important, it appears, in Mabanckou's depiction, that the political agenda is more essential than the cultural exchange. Michel's assertion - "je ne peux pas savoir si dans les pays où il était reçu, en dehors de la Roumanie, de l'URSS, de la Hongrie ou de la Bulgarie, les écolières et les écoliers chantaient son nom comme nous chantions les noms de leurs presidents" - questions the reciprocity of the cultural exchanges as well as the equal treatment of values. Postcolonial Africa, as Mabanckou shows in this narrative, is characterized by a vain imitation that unfortunately disregards its own values.

Reading *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* allows one to understand the reasons that support some of Axelle Kabou's and Stephen Smith's analysis. However, those reasons are not exhaustive and Mabanckou's desire to return to Congo transcends the fact of connecting with his country to become a call into question of contemporary management of the continent. Most of the problems he raises are well known among African lettered classes and many authors, including Sony Lab'ou Tansi, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Tierno Monenembo, who have depicted post-independence Africa, have dedicated their works to the depiction of the sociopolitical collapse and disenchantment of the continent. It is not surprising that some of their novels were published between the end of the 60s and the 70. It is also important to note how Mabanckou connects to these writers by situating his novel in the 70s and by aligning on the same themes. Consequently, the fact that Mabanckou narrativizes issues – which unfortunately remain current in the twenty-first century – while using a historical setting that does not differ from contemporary African realities shows that the continent's postcolonial situation is but a reenactment of its colonial situation.

## 4.4 Accountability and The Postcolonial Situation

Despite the economic and sociopolitical perspective that characterize the previous lines of this study, an essential part of Mabanckou's critical reflection on postcolonial Africa remains his portrayal of Africans' political accountability. The narrative of the social and political turmoil reveals a political system that negatively impacts the population. Worse, the novel portrays an attack of African leaders and military forces on the population and on other political leaders. The historical event – the death of President Marien Ngouabi – that serves as the central narrative thread that holds the book together led to numerous political exactions on African leaders and the population. Though the political system is constituted by leaders whose responsibilities dictate that their actions are wisely thought and directed towards the wellbeing of their fellow citizens, Mabanckou offers a rather different view. Indeed, the narrative that unfolds after the military coup illustrates a great degree of irresponsibility on the part of military leaders for whom human life has no value. The killings and arrests that punctuate the killing of Marien Ngouabi indicate that most leaders show little concern for social peace and national cohesion. In addition to the ways in which African leaders and their military abuse political power, Mabanckou suggests that Western countries are implicated in the political systems of African countries. On that subject, the novel presents African countries whose internal politics is marked by divisions fueled by former colonial powers. Thus, this section elaborates on Mabanckou's critique of the postcolonial situation of Africa, mainly by way of the influence of foreign implications in national policies. It also expands on the extent to which African leaders are accountable for such situations.

Mabanckou's writing discloses a postcolonial situation that transcends the simple Congolese social life. His narrative of the confusion that followed the military coup and the practices of African political leaders reveals that beyond the highly visible economic and social

problems resides a much greater truth that contributes to the negative image of the continent. It is presented as the legacy of the colonial domination that continually claims a preponderant place in contemporary Africa. In the introduction to *La Situation postcoloniale: les postcoloniales studies dans le débat français,* Marie-Claude Smouts, writing about the "théorème postcoloniale à la française," observes, "la domination coloniale a bouleversé les sociétés d'outre-mer" (26). What Smouts conveys is the historical implication of colonial powers in the social, economic, cultural, and political disruptions that characterized most colonies. The presence of former colonial powers and the establishment of new borders and rules that could allow the continued management of colonies did not consider the realities of the various peoples that used to live in the same space, but which formed different 'nations'. Consequently, as Smouts says, colonial societies were profoundly disorganized. Such a colonial situation which Smouts describes as "la domination dans un territoire donné d'une minorité européenne sur une 'majorité indigène de civilisation différente" (31) seems to have stopped and relegated to past conditions and realities. As such, it appears that apart from the new order – of *bouleversement* – established within former colonies and the fact that they have become countries that have to construct a new identity as nations, former colonial powers have ceased their domination. However, in her analysis of the postcolonial situation, Smouts holds that the colonial situation is not over, reminding that " dans la situation postcoloniale, le présent et le passé s'interpénètrent" (31). Drawing from Smouts's idea of the mutual influence between past and present, we can assert that the *bouleversement* and the *domination* operated in the colonial situation still persist. Such an assertion also entails that some of the characteristics that marked the African continent before the independence are occurring in post-independent Africa.

The postcolonial situation – conceptualized in this work both as the experience of post-independent African countries and as the direct implication of Western countries in Africa – is

presented as a moment of conflicts. In Boubacar Boris Diop, Odile Tobner and François Verschave's *Négrophobie,* the editor's note raises the implication of the Elysée in the different conflicts in francophone Africa. They explain, "depuis le génocide des Tutsi, la France a été impliquée dans la guerre en République démocratique du Congo, dans les massacres au Congo-Brazzaville, dans les détournements angolais, dans les trucages électoraux au Tchad, dans le putsch récent au Togo et dans les affrontements en Côte d'Ivoire…" (9). This warning speaks to the disastrous consequences of the relationship France maintains with certain African countries. From the conflicts and the electoral interferences, the actions of France are not directed to promote the development of the continent. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that behind the continent's collapsing economy, its general fragmentation due to conflicts, as well as its growing numbers of refugees and the overwhelming mass migration, there is an ongoing colonial situation whose main objective is to maintain domination. When Smith represents the continent as willingly depleting and destroying itself, Diop, Verschave, and Tobner reply, "'l'Afrique meurt.' Phrase slogan en guise de constat, suivie de la conclusion de l'enquête : l'Afrique se suicide. Non, il s'agit d'un assassinat maquillé en suicide par les soins d'un enquêteur complaisant" (11). The use of "assassinat" in lieu of "suicide" shows the existence of an actor that is also accountable for the sociopolitical issues that the continent faces.

Without denying Africans' responsibility for what they face, Mabanckou shows that such accountability, far from being a suicide is also an assassination of Africa' s political autonomy. To strengthen the narrative of the assassination, he highlights the extent to which political orders coming from Western countries influence African sociopolitical construction. The implementation of those political orders and decisions that do not emanate from African politicians decides the orientation of most countries. From the young narrator's memories, we learn :

> La plupart des présidents noirs doivent discuter avec 'le sorcier blanc' pour que la France soit contente. C'est ce monsieur qui décide qui sera le président de la république de tel ou tel pays que la France a colonisé et si un de ces présidents que la France a mis au pouvoir critique trop fort les Français à l'ONU, là où on sépare les bagarres entre les pays en colère, 'le sorcier blanc' se fâche … (43-44).

Michel's vision of the political system in Africa entails that leaders do not have a real control of the continent's sociopolitical realities. African leaders are not free people. They rule the continent according to the injunctions of foreign governments. Consequently, the policies and important decisions they make do not translate their vision for the continent but represents the orders and desires of former colonial powers.

Mabanckou represents the existence of the Africans' obligation to abide by the laws of the former colonial power either in decisions influencing their own life or in decisions about France in international institutions. Such obligation comes with a tacit agreement that is established between the colonial power and African presidents. Michel's narrative on the repression that generally follows the breach of the agreement represents it as a forced desire to comply with France. By asserting that "'le sorcier blanc' se fâche, et le lendemain le vantard africain ne sera plus président de la république, il se retrouvera en prison si on ne l'a pas tué … " (43), Michel shows the impossibility of African presidents to conduct a sovereign policy that is free from the former colonial power's injunctions. As such, the unending relationship between France and its former colonies greatly impacts its development. Thinking the development of Africa, as Mabanckou presents it, becomes a difficult and risky action to undertake. Reflecting on the legacy of colonial periods, Gareth Austin, questions the freedom that emanates from the relationship between former colonies and former colonial powers. For him:

> The causal significance of legacies varies, in that they affect subsequent freedom of manoeuvre to different extents and in different directions. At its strongest, legacy takes the form of "path determination," implying that colonial choices determine post-colonial ones, or at least conditioned them, such that departure from the colonial pattern was, and perhaps remains, difficult and costly.[78]

Though Austin's perspective reveals how different economic and social policies that were established in colonial times keep affecting the continent's contemporary efforts to develop, it also demonstrates that an attempt to sever the colonial patterns may be perilous.

Expounding on examples throughout the continent Mabanckou refers to the multiple physical eliminations of African political leaders as a moment that negatively impacted the history of the continent. He uses Christopher Smith's observations on the postcolonial situation to illustrate the assassinations as recurring actions that immediately started after the proclamations of independence, "les assassinats politiques dans le continent noir sont une tradition sinistre depuis les indépendances au début des années 1960" (156). However, Smith adds that the assassinations, obviously, predate the independences and became common "à la veille de ces mouvements de libération du joug des colonisateurs occidentaux…" (156). According to Smith, the intention of colonial powers was to maintain the dependence of the colonies. The list that Mabanckou establishes through Smith's discourse highlights the implication of France in most assassinations. The references to Ruben Nyobé, whose murderer, Paul Abdoulaye received a medal from France, and the killing of Félix Moumié, "empoisonné par les services secrets Français" (158), is indicative of Mabanckou's effort to reveal the accountability of Western countries in the different problems that characterize the continent. The names, Christopher Smith continues to mention, Patrice

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[78] Gareth Austin, "African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies", https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.78

Lumumba, Sylvanus Olympio, Mehdi Ben Barka, all suggest a desire for real independence. Indeed, those leaders reflected the development of the continent by first resorting to local African political decisions.

Mabanckou also calls into question the implication of western countries in the different conflicts that contributed to portray Africa as a land of chaos. The introduction of Christopher Smith to the listeners of La Voix de l'Amérique is a crucial moment in the narrative that evokes such an implication, "on rappelle aussi qu'il a été présent dans plusieurs lieux ou se passaient des guerres civiles dans notre continent et qu'il a écrit un gros livre avec beaucoup de preuves à l'intérieur, des preuves qui expliquent comment ceux qui nous ont colonisés sont souvent cachés derrière nous pour nous vendre des armes et nous pousser à nous bagarrer" (156). The use of « souvent » to reduce the role played by Western countries in the conflicts in Africa does not eliminate the gravity of their implication. On the contrary, the fact that they actively participate in the divisions and the worsening of the problems by arming and supporting conflicts suggest that the postcolonial situation – marked by the successive conflicts – is desired by former colonial powers. Mabanckou's explicit mention of the Nigerian civil war exemplifies the responsibility of Western countries in what almost divided the country in the 70s. Papa Roger's explanation of the Nigerian conflict holds that "la France avait versé beaucoup d'argent dans cette guerre civile. Les deux camps en conflit, le gouvernement officiel et les partisans de la division du pays, avaient demandé son aide. Eh bien, la France a choisi d'épauler ces derniers et leur République du Biafra" (44). While Papa Roger's assertion does not immediately raise the issue of division and may only seem to underline the support of France to the Republic of Biafra, the narrative concludes that France sided for the division of the country. About the engagement of France in the conflict, Michel clarifies, "la France voulait voir naitre cette république du Biafra à côté, elle avait donné

du travail à des mercenaires, des bandits qu'on paye pour aller faire la zizanie dans un pays qui ne les connait même pas" (44-45). He illustrates one of the threats that post-independence Africa has to overcome, that is the role of former colonial power in the destabilization of Africa. As Mabanckou shows, the continent is not just fighting its own predicaments; it is not trying to subdue its entire population to the idea of national cohesion and eradication of social unrests and conflicts. What is at stake is to fight the many implications and destabilization that originate from former colonizers. The postcolonial situation is, therefore, a reminiscence of past colonial realities that resurface and tend to reshuffle the cards of domination in Africa. It becomes obvious that the pessimism that transcends sociopolitical realities in Africa is fabricated, desired, and maintained. It is, then, in the implication of former colonial powers in the continent that pessimism gains in importance.

*Les Cigognes sont immortelles* conveys that the continent's failure to attain development stems from the ways African leaders treat their population. Here, Mabanckou highlights the influence of African military and political leadership in the exactions. Michel alludes to those bad treatments by referring to Lumumba's death. Michel reports that "un militaire Belge a donné l'ordre à quatre Africains du Congo belge de pointer leur fusil et de tirer sur Lumumba et ses deux amis, et tout ça en présence des soldats et des ministres noirs du Congo belge qui regardaient" (101). The first problem that shows up in this assertion is the deliberate acceptance to murder fellow Africans without questioning the order. The precision "quatre Africains" rather than "quatre militaires" or "quatre personnes" proves that Mabanckou wants to stress the responsibility of Africans. The evocation of the presence of the "soldats et ministres noirs" whose role was to passively watch suggests that those Africans condone the murder of Africans. Such a responsibility reminds Fanon's assertion that "the enemy of the Negro is often not the white man but a man of

his own color" (17).[79] In Fanon's conception, the development of the continent is predicated in the mutual support of Africans. Unfortunately, as Mabanckou suggests, the leadership on the continent does not perceive the urgency to think Africa in terms of support. The various killings that Mabanckou's novel mentions are mainly carried out by African hands. Such a contrary action which consists of systematic murders of leaders and population shows that the continent is resolutely undermining itself.

Mabanckou takes more time to excavate and interrogate such a lack of African respect for Africans' lives. Before him, many writers had committed their work to the denunciation of the recurrence of military and political exactions on African populations. From Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé,* and *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant,* Abdourahman Waberi's *Transit,* to the whole literary project "Ecrire par devoir de mémoire,''the image of the African continent is fraught with contempt for Africans' lives.[80] One of the most important passages that shows how the continent treats its inhabitants occurs when Tonton René explains the ongoing situation to Michel's parents, "il y a eu aujourd'hui plusieurs arrestations de militaires et de civils originaires du sud du pays. Ils vont être traduits devant une cour martiale instituée du Parti" (124). Referring to a document that he found in the Ministry of Economy, where the military committee declares to continue Marien NGouabi's legacy by establishing a socialist society, Toton René maintains: "c'est du blabla! On sait comment ça va finir: les membres du comité militaire du Parti vont se massacrer entre eux, les uns mettront les autres en prison ou les assassineront sans laisser de trace et ce sera le plus malin de tous qui prendra

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[79] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution.* Monthly Review Press, 1967.

[80] "Ecrire par devoir de mémoire" was a literary project whose objective was to commemorate the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda through literary expressions. The project gathered writers from Francophone African countries as well as Meja Mwangi from Kenya.

le pouvoir pour s'y installer à vie..." (125). The consequences of the President's death are enormous and the repercussions in time – through the different assassinations that will follow – are disastrous for the country. As Tonton René's assertion shows the different murders that will occur will shape the political landscape of the country. The new reigning power will not only be built on the exclusion of the "sudistes" but will also maintain itself through an ongoing oppression.

## 4.5 Returning to Optimism

In his review of *Comrade President* – the English translation of *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* – Daniel Bokemper remarks that "Mabanckou continues his contributions of necessary African literature with *Comrade President"*.[81] Not only the narrative and the different themes developed in the novel contribute to that necessity, but Mabanckou also hints at signs of optimism in his novel. A key scene is the conversation between Jean-Pierre and his colleague Prosper Okokima-Motaka a few minutes after the announcement of Ngouabi's death. Through that conversation, Prosper urges Jean-Pierre to leave the capital Brazzaville. Indeed, Prosper judges that Jean-Pierre's regional and ethnic origin can be problematic for his life in the capital city. Clarifying the socioplolitical situation, he advises Jean-Pierre :

> Qu'est-ce que tu fous encore ici, Jean-Pierre? C'est fini pour Marien Ngouabi, ils ont eu sa peau! Et ça ne va pas s'arrêter là, les choses vont se dégrader à partir de maintenant. Tu es un homme loyal, je t'ai toujours apprécié, mais si j'étais sudistes et loyal comme toi, je ne resterais pas une minute de plus à Brazzaville. (123)

[81] Review published in *World Literature Today* (winter 2021). See worldliteraturetoday.org/2021/winter/death-comrade-president-alain-mabanckou.

Presented as a northerner, the normal reaction of Prosper vis à vis Jean-Pierre – who is from the South – should be to keep any information that could save his life secret and hope that he would be arrested and killed like the many other southerners that are being targeted. However, the narrative shows that Prosper Okokima-Motaka, rather than denounce his colleague from the South, helps him take the decision to escape to his region. Prosper who is aware of the possible assassination of Kimbouala-Nkaya, Jean-Pierre's brother and Michel's uncle, adds, "la sagesse nous apprend que lorsqu'on coupe les oreilles, le cou devrait s'inquieter" (123). Prosper also helps him board the last plane to Pointe-Noire before it is too late. This action contrasts the common idea that characterizes Mabanckou's book. As such it calls our attention to the real message Mabanckou conveys. One of the questions that emerge is, therefore, to know what the real intention of Mabanckou is when he portrays the African continent with pessimistic terms and narratives.

Like Kabou, Mabanckou's original thought is to depict mercilessly in order to call attention to the realities and necessary change. Such a literary accountability that mostly generates a truthful depiction of the continent and which talks to Africans and indirectly asks them to seriously reconsider the ways social, political, and economic governance is being executed on the continent, also recalls the responsibility of the writer. In *Necropolitics,* Achille Mbembe presents writing as a gesture whose intention is to engage not only a force but also a "différend" (1). Mbembe conceives of literary production as a tool that brings change through the power of the idea that it circulates. For him, writing is not a neutral activity and the book a mute object because of the opposition they generate when they reach out to others.

Jean-Paul Sartre is well known for his support to African writers during the negritude period. His contribution range from his collaboration with Fanon and his preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française.* In *Qu'est-ce que la*

*littérature?,* Sartre elaborates on the force that literature conveys by associating writing and the act of speaking. The questions that partially construct his analysis demonstrate the desire of the author to find a purpose to writing novels that is mainly characterized by an action, "à quelle fin écris-tu? Dans quelle entreprise t'es-tu lancé et pourquoi nécessite-t-elle de recourir à l'écriture ?" (26-27). The answers Sartre provides to his interrogations indicate that rather than being a mere contemplation, writing carries an action, "la grave erreur des puristes c'est de croire que la parole est un zéphyr qui court légèrement à la surface des choses, qui les effleure sans les altérer et que le parleur est un témoin qui résume par un mot sa contemplation inoffensive" (27). Sartre, therefore, establishes writing as a transformative movement that calls attention to *something* and rejects the perspective of a writing that does not trigger a change or an action for or against a situation. He adds, "en parlant, je dévoile la situation par mon projet même de la changer ; je la dévoile à moi-même et aux autres pour la changer" (28). Sartre opinion on writing aligns with Mabanckou's perspective in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles.*

As Sartre questioned the writer, we also interrogate Mabanckou's perspective in his novel and ask ourselves why he wrote a novel that is entirely different from his previous works – a novel fraught with a sociopolitical image of the continent that completely calls attention to its mismanagement. Though the answer to this question is founded in his affirmation to return to his country while narrativizing its weakness, we must add, with Sartre, "l'écrivain 'engagé' sait que la parole est action: il sait que dévoiler c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer" (28). Mabanckou's writing is marked by the ambition to lead the African continent to change. By portraying the continent as it is, he does not confirm the totally pessimistic opinions that other authors transmit but mainly joins Axelle kabou's interrogation, "les élites africaines cultivées savent-elles mieux que les masses analphabètes où va l'Afrique fut-ce au niveau

national?" (13), to demand a total awareness of what needs to be changed socially, politically, and economically. By denouncing, Mabanckou participates in representing Africa as a land of possibilities where economic and political accountability and social cohesion create an environment of development.

Mabanckou's novel is not limited to denouncing, but also suggests the paths through which change can be made possible. One of the examples Mabanckou offers is the friendship between Jean-Pierre and Prosper which comes as a perfect model of social cohesion. However, concerning the recurrence of the colonial situation of domination in postcolonial Africa, Mabanckou writes, "quand on est ensemble et soudé, l'impérialisme ne peut pas trouver par quel trou passer" (69). The simplicity and the innocence that surround the affirmation convey a tangible reality about the materialization of an autonomous continent that thinks itself in terms of real projections into progress. When coupled with Mabanckou's vision of the postcolonial writer, the sentence leads to an optimistic perspective for the continent. But one may allude to an empirical truth that singularizes Mabanckou's novel: pessimism eclipses the optimistic perspective. However, such a conclusion would be to completely ignore the reference to the implicit and the set of literary stylistic devices that allow writers to tactfully alludes to their ideas. Indeed, as Sartre puts it, "on n'est pas écrivain pour avoir choisi de dire certaines choses mais pour avoir choisi de les dire d'une certaine façon. Et le style, bien sûr, fait la valeur de la prose" (30). Mabanckou's style comes as an explicit and harsh portrayal that at times uses the voice of a child to paint the postcolonial situation. By mainly identifying the sociopolitical and economic actions that compose a troubling reality for the continent, Mabanckou successfully points to change and to optimism. His way of setting forth the continent demonstrates the desire to shock his readers and aligns with Sartre's assertion that "s'il parle, il tire. Il peut se taire, mais puisqu'il a choisi de tirer, il faut que ce soit

comme un homme, en visant des cibles et non comme un enfant, au hasard, en fermant les yeux et pour le seul plaisir d'entendre les détonations" (29). Therefore, we have the possibility to say with Sartre that Mabanckou has a very specific target that corresponds to his desire to write his continent, and that target which should be stated in terms of objective is to wake the continent and see that it becomes aware of its place and duties in postcolonial times. Such awareness is itself summarized in the realization of its independence and its accountability vis à vis its population in terms of real management that creates a favorable environment of progress.

At this stage, an ultimate question about the political nature of Mabanckou's novel arises. By portraying a pessimistic representation of Africa does Mabanckou, as a postcolonial writer, engage in a political perspective? Such a question refers one to Ato Quayson's analysis of postcolonial writers' responsibility. As such one can join Quayson to interrogate that responsibility, "What should the ultimate objectives of a responsible postcolonial discourse be?" (8). Quayson holds that there is a relationship between literature and politics. In his description of the overlapping directions between the dynamics that binds literature and politics, he holds that postcolonial literature belongs to a cultural and political affirmation (77). Quayson's assertion suggests that the nature of postcolonial literature entails its close affiliation to politics and cultural engagement. Writing as a postcolonial writer supposes that one's work is political in nature. Quayson's conceptualization of postcolonial literature also encompasses a wide range of commitment. For him, "the writer or critic speaks to, or for, or in the name of the post-independent nation-state, the regional or continental community, the pan-ethic, racial or cultural agglomeration of homelands and diaspora" (77). The postcolonial writer's responsibility ceases to be local. His interrogation of different experiences and realities is not only circumscribed to his leaving space

but involves a wider geographical area where politics, economy, culture, and social life are continually shaped by past colonial realities.

Mabanckou's narrative itself speaks volumes about the political ideology it embraces. Its depiction of the entangled political and social experiences and the reference to the economic situation constitute an important engagement in postcolonial Africa. As Quayson writes, "the discursive network in African life that may be discerned in anthropological, sociological, political and aesthetic discourse can always be read as ultimately political" (85). Mabanckou's portrayal of Congo, which is metonymic of the African continent does not seek to represent it as a lost land in which every political, economic, social, and cultural experience is characterized by pessimism. It rather seeks to establish a political stance that mainly supposes the reconsideration of sociopolitical and economic realities that are favorable to the continent and its inhabitants.

As such Mabanckou offers an optimistic perspective that borrows from his consciousness of the continent and his consciousness of its inhabitants. His representation of the social unrest and the political troubles that originate from Marien Ngouabi's death and the always complicated problem of regional differences sets the tone for a postcolonial ideology that centers more on what Michel explains as "ensemble et soudé" in order to prevent other forces to dislocate the continent's unity. Mabanckou's geographical position as a transnational writer whose life is lived in the United States and whose literary expression and concern relate to the sociopolitical experience of the African continent entails a cleverly constructed return. He, therefore, shows that the return is not compulsorily physical, it can be carried out as an intellectual commitment or as a spiritual return that leaves the body in a distant land – separated from the homeland – but whose vision and fight is entirely dedicated to that homeland.

### 4.6 Conclusion

Mabanckou's approach in writing *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* shows his commitment to claim a social, economic, and political development for his continent. Though his other novels include narratives and depictions of problems such as immigration and diverse social realities that are serious concerns in the continent, *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* remains an exceptional piece of work in which he interrogates the ways Africa envisions its place and development in contemporary times. Predicating his novel in deciphering the numerous problems that characterize postcolonial Africa, Mabanckou's writing successfully externalizes a pessimistic perspective that represents the continent as it is. However, an attempt to ground Mabanckou's novel in that pessimistic analysis without opening to the possibilities and optimism that Mabanckou slowly weaves into the narrative fails to consider the dexterity of the writer. His writing echoes Sarr's and Mbembe's conceptions of writing as an African in this twenty-first century. As they declare, writing is "une *urgence*." "Le temps nous étant favorable et compté, » they add, "il n'y a plus aucune raison d'attendre. Nous sommes nos propres témoins. Il nous faut absolument faire corps si nous devons reprendre à notre propre compte cette tâche si essentielle que nous ne saurions déléguer à d'autres" (9). Participating in the essential task of "une nouvelle manière de penser qu'il faut donner forme" (Sarr, Mbembe, 9), Mabanckou calls for a new sociopolitical era in Africa where social cohesion, economic accountability and political problems will be targeted and solved. By exploring Africa's historical moment of political unrest and by revealing the existence of colonial rules in postcolonial situations, he also shows the way to a rather different manner of thinking about development. Indeed, as Mabanckou highlights in the novel, it is important for the continent to get rid of foreign domination by creating a stronger bond around its own population. This optimistic perspective becomes a desire to belong to a society that interrogates itself with the

objective of change. It is through that crucial interrogation that Mabanckou signs his return to the continent.

## 5.0 Chapter 4: Intersecting Return and Cultural Revalorization in Dany Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau*

> Je voudrais que rien n'ait changé durant mon absence. J'aimerais reprendre furtivement ma place parmi les miens, comme si de rien n'était, comme si je ne les avais jamais quittés.
> – Dany Laferrière, *Pays sans chapeau*

### 5.1 Introduction

Dany Laferrière's 1996 book *Pays sans chapeau* is an account of his return to Haiti after he left the country in 1976. In an interview where Laferrière was presenting the republication of his novel by Editions Zulma – a French publisher, – he referred to the emotional return that he narrativizes: "j'ai quarante ans. Je suis ému. Je suis de retour chez moi." To this autobiography, Laferrière, who is a member of the Académie Française, *un immortel,* since 2013, blends Vieux Os' life in Port-au-Prince to narratives of his visit to the world of Haitian Vodou gods.[82] *Pays sans chapeau,* therefore, evolves between the real and the unreal in a country where Vodou is culturally important. It is then fascinating to see how stories of bizangos and zengledos – Haitian names respectively for zombies that come out at daytime and zombies of the night – influence human existence. Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau* provides a crucial insight on the writer's identity, and

[82] The term *les immortels* designates the members of the Académie Française. As part of the Academy, Laferrière is, therefore, *un immortel.*

his relationship with the cultural practices of his home country.[83] Focusing his study on Laferrière's Odyssean narrative in *Pays sans chapeau* and on how Vieux Os moves through Laferrière's previous autobiographical works, Piotr Sadkowski writes, "Le héros-écrivain se réinstalle en Haïti, avec sa vieille machine à écrire, afin de percer, par l'acte narratif, les mystères du pays natal et de son propre rapport à l'espace originaire" (105). Indeed, from the publication of his 1985 novel, *Comment faire l'amour à un nègre sans Se fatiguer*[84], *L'Odeur du café* (1991), and *Le Goût des jeunes filles (*1992), *Pays sans chapeau* is Laferrière's first novel that narrativizes life in Haiti in terms of return and cultural rediscovery. Mixing the exile's happiness in the moment of his return with the spiritual and cultural experience of Haiti, Laferrière's work is a careful interrogation of the writer's belonging and role in the visibility of Haitian culture. As such, the return – conceived as a moment when the exile comes back home and witnesses the different metamorphoses that occurred during his absence – turns into a more profound narrative of relearning and cultural rehabilitation. Concerning the autobiographical enactment of the return that mainly becomes an investigation of the Haitian social, cultural and spiritual landscape, Sadkowski adds, "La combinaison de l'autofictionnalité et de l'autoréflexivité a donc un double objectif gnostique: la re-connaissance de soi et la re-connaissance du pays" (105). Drawing from Sadkowski's assertion, one observes that reconnection with one's homeland, one's family and friends, and one's culture in the moment of return, becomes a *re-connaissance*, that is, a period of relearning.

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[83] Piotr Sadkowski. "Les écritures migrantes et le récit odysséen '*Pays sans chapeau'* de Dany Laferrière." *Francofonia,* no. 57, 2009, pp. 101-119.

[84] *Comment Faire l'Amour à un Nègre sans Se Fatiguer* is Laferrière's first novel. The novel is a social satire on the experience of African migrants in the West.

*Pays sans chapeau* chronologically starts with Vieux Os' arrival in Port-au-Prince after twenty years of exile in North America. His mother and his aunt are present at the airport to welcome the only son of the family, a now prominent writer who had to flee his country to save his life from the Duvaliers. At home, Vieux Os is celebrated with joy and tears. In the excitement of the return tante Renée and Vieux Os' mother realize that their son no longer has in memory the respect that is due to the dead of the family. Ironically, the story itself turns out to be about the writing of a novel on the dead. Vieux Os soon discovers that dead people and zombies are part of the everyday conversations of Port-au-Prince. Stunned by the cultural and social life of Haiti that revolves around the dead, and the presence of zombies, Vieux Os is curious and decides to better understand the situation. When in the physical world he has the opportunity to discuss the problem with J.-B. Romain and Legrand Bijou, two prominent Haitian intellectuals, he is offered the possibility to physically go to the realm of the dead to witness the reality of the invisible world. At the end of the novel, the reader discovers that the offer hid something that surpassed the simple fact of visiting the gods.

Laferrière's narrative of return blends past and present experience by portraying a protagonist whose desire is to bridge his life before and after exile despite his noticeable disconnection with his homeland's cultural practices. In a scene where he listens to the radio, Vieux Os comes across the result of a football match between Racing Club and Violette. Strangely, he remembers that the same match was to take place the day he was leaving Haiti twenty years before. The coincidence between the two national events at the moment of his departure and at his arrival triggers a sense of nostalgia in him. The two events, therefore, connect his memory to the Port-au-Prince he knew as a young man and the city he rediscovers as an adult and renowned writer. As he thinks about his presence in his country and the many ties that unite them, his desire

to reconnect with the Haitian social and cultural life grows bigger and supersedes the simple act of reuniting with his family. Yet, as the novel shows, Vieux Os' deepest aspiration is to connect his life before exile to the new post-exilic experience he is having as if the bond between them has never been severed. As he reflects, "Je voudrais que rien n'ait changé durant mon absence. J'aimerais reprendre furtivement ma place parmi les miens, comme si de rien n'était, comme si je ne les avais jamais quittés" (105). Vieux Os' statement about a possible integration that could wipe away twenty years of absence while reinstating his emotions and feelings as well as his knowledge and understanding of his homeland's social and cultural life opposes the narrative of his return.[85] His long exile disconnected him from his culture. Thus, it is an acculturated Vieux Os that has forgotten some of the basic Haitian and family practices that returns.

Early in the novel, Laferrière signals the narrative thread and the major theme that characterize his book. His portrayal of Vieux Os displays a protagonist whose post-exilic experience indicates a detachment from social and cultural practices and the necessity to rediscover and assimilate them for a better integration in the community of Port-au-Prince. Consequently, *Pays sans chapeau* presents the many years of absence as a period of acculturation where the exile unlearns both basic and complex cultural practices. Therefore, to return, as one notes in Laferrière's novel, entails a "réapprentissage," a relearning of cultural and social elements. Yet, in such a narrative, Laferrière adjoins the crucial aspect of the patriotic role devolved to writers in the Haitian national and historical landscape, or, as Martin Munro argues, "the task of glorifying history, race, and nation" (178). This chapter considers the return as a post-exilic experience of "réapprentissage" and readaptation to cultural and social practices, and also analyzes it as a

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[85] In the sentence before the quotation cited above, Vieux Os asserts, "à l'affût de la moindre sensation, de la plus fine émotion, de tout ce qui pourrait me donner l'impression de n'avoir jamais quitté le pays" (104)

moment where the process of relearning shifts to a participative commitment to a national and cultural cause in *Pays sans chapeau.*

Of the many critics that have studied the work of Dany Laferrière, Munro is the one that clearly shows the extent to which Laferrière's novel does not embrace exile as a mournful condition. In his analysis of the novel, Munro holds that "we are no longer witness to the traumatically disoriented individual caught in the modernist dramas of exile-induced uncertainty and identitary chaos" (178). Indeed, as a story of the return, *Pays sans chapeau* eschews the narrative of exile as a complete dislocation or a moment of loss. Instead, Laferrière works on moving forward with a perspective that situates the exile in his homeland, with the quest for a new identity that does not originate from the difficulties before or during exile. As such, for Munro, "Laferrière's work engages critically with the legacy of Haitian Indigenism, ethnology, and Jacques Roumain and his seminal novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*" (75).[86] From Munro's comparison of *Pays sans chapeau* and Jacques Roumain's' work, one understands that the primary concern of Laferrière is not to paint his character's experience in exile but to root his experience into Haitian realities.[87]

Laferrière creates a new relationship between the Haitian diaspora and their country through the story of Vieux Os' return. Indeed, the bond between writers of the Haitian diaspora and the literary expression that centers around their country lies in the significance of history in the national memory. Because Haitian history is at some point characteristic of the Duvaliers'

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[86] Martin Munro, "Ethnography, Exile, and Haitian Literary History in Dany Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau."* *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2003, pp. 74-88.

[87] The similarity between *Pays sans chapeau* and *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* lies in the fact that in both novels the protagonists are returning from exile. In Laferrière's novel, Vieux Os returns from North America, and in Roumain's book, Manuel returns from a fifteen-year exile in Cuba. In both cases, the protagonists discover the realities of their homelands and finally decide to act on them.

dictatorship – that forced a great number of intellectuals into exile –, narratives of life in exile and in Haiti by the diaspora are symbolic of what Munro depicts as "the nostalgia for a lost sense of rootedness, certainty and truth" (178). In *Pays sans chapeau,* Laferrière abandons the vision of loss that characterizes the painful experience of Haitian intellectuals in exile. He avoids the narrative of difficulties that typify the life of separation from one's country and family in order to engage with a more contemporary experience of Haiti: a narrative that constructs from the past, but which is resolutely turned toward the present.

Indeed, the narrative of the present in Laferrière's work is the account of the encounter with one's identity. Laferrière therefore reflects on the ways the return from exile can become a moment when the returnee learns to live with his own people. "Réapprentissage," is then a connection that goes beyond the simple act of visiting friends and family to be what Munro qualifies as a "postmodern narrative of an attempted reconnection with Haiti" (180). That relearning which is the materialization of reconnection is symbolized by Vieux Os' direct transcription of what he sees and hears. The act of writing in immediacy suggests that Vieux Os is in an instant of "réapprentissage" of his new Haitian life. As the narrator reveals while comparing himself to a seismograph, "j'écris tout ce que je vois, tout ce que j'entends, tout ce que je sens" (13). However, the act of writing instantly does not provide all the aesthetics of the novel, nor does it by and in itself constitute the moment of relearning. Laferrière adds to the aesthetics of writing the important participation of the people Vieux Os interacts with. As such, Vieux Os' writing is influenced by others, "je n'arrive pas à écrire si je ne sens pas les gens autour de moi, prêts à intervenir à tout moment dans mon travail pour lui donner une autre direction" (12).

Throughout the novel, Laferrière leads his protagonist on multiple paths that constitute his search for his identity. The most salient ones are Vieux Os' desire to understand the new national

and social environment characterized by the presence of "bizangos and zengledos," and his quest in the realm of the dead. In both occurrences, Laferrière emphasizes the necessity to rely on others for new cultural discoveries. Munro's assertion that "*Pays sans chapeau* ... marks the end of Old Bones's exilic cycle," and his reference to the return as a reconnection, is crucial to substantiate the fact that other people's participation and guidance is important in the act of "réapprentissage" (180). Indeed, Vieux Os' reconnection to his homeland supposes a meeting with the living (Munro, 87). His absence as a traveler and an exile is compared, by Munro, to a moment of death and his presence or return is seen as a period to claim back his place among the living (87).[88] As such, there is an analogy between the direction that bends Vieux Os' writing of his presence in Haiti and his act of relearning from the living that have never left the island. "Réapprendre," therefore, supposes the process of reliving, a moment of emerging from the dead to belong to the living through their direction and guidance.

This chapter starts by exploring the return as a reconnection, a moment of happiness where the exile sees loved ones after a long period of absence. Though reconnection is primarily viewed as reuniting with people, I argue that Laferrière also narrativizes it as a bond with natural elements that were once important in the exile's life. Section two and three present the return as a disconnection. Consequently, the returnee finds himself/herself in a community where previous sociocultural practices are no longer part of his/her common way of life. In that sense, exile is presented as a moment of unlearning, and the return is seen as a moment where one realizes the degree of acculturation and the necessity to relearn. The last section explores Vieux Os' return to Haiti as a way of contributing to the country's cultural rebirth.

[88] Martin Munro article "Exile, Return and Mourning in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* and Dany Laferrière's *L'Enigme du Retour.*

### 5.2 A Dialogue of Reconnection of Love and Feelings

Haitian literature, and Caribbean literature in general, is characterized by the influence of exile. From Aimé Césaire's well-known *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* to recent novels such as Laferrière's *L'Enigme du retour*, the theme of exile remains central to literary productions where writers question the identity of the Caribbean and its place in this world. For Martin Munro, who conducted a much-elaborated work on Haitian literature, "The History of the novel – in Haiti and elsewhere – strongly suggests that it is a literary genre born out of and sustained by change, displacement, and exile" (27). Though one cannot dispute the preeminence and centrality of the theme of exile in Haitian and Caribbean literature, one has to admit that some of the themes that animate books such as Césaire's *Cahier,* Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée,* and *Pays sans chapeau* – the object of our study – are established in the idea of the return and the reconnection it creates with the homeland.

Critic Nadége Clitandre maintains that exile and emigration redefined Haitian literature, shifting its former nationalist concern to narratives that center more on the Haitian individual's lives (91-92). She links the changes to the impact the Duvalier regime had on exile, but also highlights the urge " to redefine Haitian identity within a developing global and transnational society" (92). The redefinition of identity that Clitandre alludes to, and which mainly highlights the experience of Haitian, cannot be restricted solely to realities lived in Haiti. Experience of the diaspora partakes in such redefinition. In addition, it is crucial to underscore the intersection of the diaspora's experience and their life in Haiti through the return and the reconnection it brings.

Laferrière's novel is characteristic of the intersection of the presence of the diaspora and Haitian cultural experience. And though the text later moves to the link between Vieux Os and his family and friends and shows how he navigates Haitian social and cultural realities, the first images

of reconnection center around the bond between Laferrière's protagonist and his land. The opening lines present a protagonist that is longing to "parler tranquillement d'Haïti" (11). For Vieux Os, this means establishing a contact with natural elements of the land. It is a physical bond that reconnects the son he is to his natural place of birth through the very elements that remain important to him. Vieux Os differentiates the act of speaking from the act of writing, "je n'écris pas, je parle" (11). What makes both actions different, in Vieux Os' terms, is not characterized by the obvious distinction between the means of communication he uses. It is rather situated in the explicit difference between the physical and the immaterial part of his being that is involved in both acts. "On écrit avec son esprit," he explains, "On parle avec son corps" (11). Thus, the decision to speak rather than to write pertains to Vieux Os' desire to relate to his land after his long years of exile. That use of speech which is materialized in the poetic use of "je suis chez moi" (11) and which refers to the narrator's expression of lyrism shows the extent to which reconnection affects Vieux Os' emotions. Thus, the return is a constructive dialogue that is first manifested in the physical reunion of Vieux Os to what may be said to constitute his natural environment.

Laferrière establishes a sentimental dimension to his protagonist's relation to his homeland. Vieux Os is aware of such affective attachment and acknowledges its emotional effect on him. His memory does not fail to recognize past sensations and feelings that were once part of his environment. "Je reconnais, ici," he observes, "chaque son, chaque cri, chaque rire, chaque silence" (11). For Munro, memory is one of the central aspects that differentiates Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau* from Haitian contemporary biographies and autobiographies. That singularity, according to Munro, stems from the vivid and accurate memory of past attachment and past experiences that characterize Vieux Os. "In Laferrière's text," he writes, "there is no problematic

investigation into fading memories" (180).[89] Therefore, what is real for Vieux Os in what Laferrière marks as "pays réel" is mostly the material aspect of Haiti to which he relates.[90] The body is therefore capital in that connection for the silent dialogue it constructs between the returned exile and his land. The materiality of things, that is their presence in the moment of return and the fact that they not only predate the departure for exile but are also present – changed or not – in the time of the return contributes to a faster reconnection.

Laferrière's narrative of return and reconnection illustrates the importance of family and friends in the exile's life. It also reveals the place and value of the exile in the lives of those who stayed at home. As Cristina Hurtado-Beca writes, "la première période du retour enchante celui qui revient. Ce sont les retrouvailles avec la famille, les amis, le terroir …" (256). Vieux Os' reunion with his family is like the reconnection with his land: fraught with emotion and feeling. The affect that transcends and which shows how much the reconnection with his family is crucial is itself embedded in the history of the family, in the reasons that underlie his departure for exile, and the history of Haiti in general.

Though Exile in the history of Haiti goes back as far as the founding of the republic in the early 19th century, it reached its climax during the Duvalier era, a thirty-year period when ideologies developed and supported by intellectuals ran counter to the ideas of François Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier. Because intellectuals had a diverging opinion of how national and public policies should be exercised, they became targets of the reigning president. In "Haiti:

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[89] Martin Munro, "Master of the new : Tradition and intertextuality in dany Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau.*" *Small Axe,* vol. 9, no. 2, 2005, pp. 176-188.

[90] The narrative, as we will see, shows that when it comes to immaterial aspects of Haiti, Vieux Os is disconnected. His reference to "parler," which is more of the connection with the body ceases to accurately render the reality he finds at home.

The Rise and Fall of Duvalierism," David Nicholls outlines the history of Haiti that explains how for the Duvalier the intellectuals represented the threat to his power. For Nicholls:

> François Duvalier ruthlessly repressed all attempts by his opponents to challenge his position and skillfully eliminated the most dangerous elements in the army. In the course of the following years, he dealt severe blows to all potential centers of political opposition, including the intellectuals (schoolteachers, students, professors and journalists). (1240)

Repression in Haiti justified the first moments of exile. Nicholls's summary of the Duvaliers' totalitarian period not only resonates with the history of the Laferrière's family but also explains the narrative of Vieux Os' departure for exile. Martin Munro, writing on Laferrière, provides a compelling account that explains the exile and separation that occurred in the family history. Munro observes that Laferrière's father, Windsor Kléber who worked with François Duvalier as mayor of Port-au-Prince, as a minister and as an ambassador, "spoke against the regime, and was subsequently forced out of Haiti" (179). Jana Evans Braziel gives an explanation that focuses more on Laferrière's past. She underlines that "following the assassination of Gasner Raymond, who was found decapitated on the beach near Léogâne, murdered by Baby Doc Duvalier's infamous Tonton Macoutes, the young Laferrière scrambles to pack his bags and flee the country before he too is found dead on the beach" (168). The historical accounts provided by Munro and Braziel align with Vieux Os' own narrative of his exile. As he relates, "à dix-neuf ans, je devenais journaliste en pleine dictature des Duvalier. Mon père, lui aussi journaliste, s'était fait expulser du pays par François Duvalier. Son fils Jean-Claude me poussera à l'exil. Père et fils, présidents. Père et fils, exilés. Même destin" (149-50). The account that Vieux Os' gives about his father's and his own exile is enough to suggest the pain and the many difficulties the family experienced. The difficulties can be summarized in the emotional and affective separation at the time of departure.

However, beyond that specific moment, there are the many years during which a mother and an aunt (Vieux Os' mother and his aunt, Renée) were deprived of their son, and vice versa. Aunt Renée, who is more expressive of her feelings than Vieux Os' mother, refers to the separation and its affective consequences in the form of a question, "pourquoi es-tu resté si longtemps sans revenir?" (17). Vieux Os does not have the answer. Comparing his exile to the time he was a little boy who had to run an errand for his aunt, Vieux Os admits, "je suis resté vingt ans en chemin" (17). That separation and the twenty years that elapsed are like a weight upon Vieux Os' return. However, the long period of separation helps understand the happiness that emanates from the return. The timid welcome Vieux Os receives at the airport therefore does not do justice to the true nature of the sentiments Vieux Os, his mother and his aunt have.

The affective aspect of the return is crucial in Laferrière's narrative of the family reunion. It provides a solid anchor to Vieux Os and allows him to not rely on the sole realities of his memory but to the tangibility of the love and affection that the family offers. Therefore, affection and family bond play an important role in the reconnection of the returnee to the homeland. The intersection of reality – which is materialized by Laferrière's own experience – and the narrative, which draws from some of the aspects of his life – elevates the value of reconnection. Vieux Os' capacity to start his integration in Haiti is predicated on the affection and link that unites him to his mother and his aunt. Martin Munro's analysis of Vieux Os shows that his integration in Haiti draws from the reality that emanates from Laferrière's relationship with his family during exile. For Munro, "Laferrière's Old Bones is able to return to and re-engage with Haiti, principally because Laferrière's American autobiography has maintained a close connection, through family link" (180). Therefore, like Laferrière's relationship with his family, Vieux Os also has that intense connection with his family. However, the story does not offer a narrative of the bond between

Vieux Os and his mother or his aunt during his exile. Indeed, the reference the narration makes of the money transfer Vieux Os' mother receives from him only shows that the connection was not severed. It does not illustrate the depth and importance of the connection.

The intensity of the relationship and the existing affection between Laferrière's protagonist and his family transpires after the family leaves the airport and gets home. The narrative unfolds on a heartbreaking welcome that externalizes all the love Vieux Os' mother and tante Renée did not show at the airport. Tante Renée and Vieux Os' mother express their happiness and love in three different ways. First, it is a sudden thanksgiving prayer. A way for them to thank "heaven" for the return of their son, "Tout à coup, ma mère et tante Renée lèvent leurs bras au ciel en criant: "gloire à l'Eternel! Gloire au Ressuscité ! Que son nom soit béni ! Alléluia ! Alléluia ! Alléluia !" (34). It is noteworthy to discern the ambivalence of the term "Ressuscité." Though, it is clear that Vieux Os' parents refer to a religious belief, the resurrected they allude to could also be Vieux Os. His return can entail a sort of resurrection and a presence within the living. The second expression of love is the dance tante Renée and Vieux Os' mother perform around him : "Elle font une petite dance autour de moi en battant des mains et en chantant : "IL EST REVENU !" (34). Here, the clarity of the happiness is inscribed in the intersection of the ritual-like dance and the song that accompanies it. Beyond the expression of the feeling, the dance around him suggests a recuperation and an expression of belonging: Vieux Os belongs to his parents. It also evidences a reconnection that emanates from a past moment of doubt and fear. By clearly saying that their son has come back, tante Renée and Vieux Os' mother indirectly express a repressed fear, that of no longer seeing their son. This aspect of doubt and fear as well as the physical return of Vieux Os leads to his parents' emotional cry, "ce n'est qu'au moment de franchir la porte que j'ai remarqué qu'elles pleuraient" (34). The act of crying, more than the prayers and the dance, symbolizes the

happiness of the return. It recreates the bond that existed before exile and is a perfect illustration of the love that used to unite them.

Laferrière's novel provides a compelling narrative of the first moment of the return from exile. The images of reconnection that transcends the first pages of the narrative show that the return acts as a dialogue with the land by resurfacing the bond that connects a person to natural elements of the homeland. Yet, the dialogue of reconnection cannot be complete without the important link it reestablishes with loved ones. In Vieux Os' case, the story does not represent his love for his parents. Laferrière barely externalizes his protagonist's feelings for his parents. He rather focuses on the parents' emotion and their happiness to welcome their son after his long period of exile. Maybe such a state of refusal to lay down Vieux Os' feelings is due to the auto/biographical nature of the novel. As such, Laferrière abstains from writing about feelings that are truly his. Nevertheless, the novel provides a substantial opening onto Vieux Os' relationship with his friends, Philippe, and Manu. If Laferrière's novel could be divided into different linear parts, his protagonist's meeting with his friends would constitute the penultimate chapter, that is, the part that reconnects him to the last people that were dear to him before his departure, and which precedes his pilgrimage to the realm of divinities. It is, therefore, a crucial narrative of encounter between close friends who used to share everything, "on partageait tout. Même les filles" (166). His reunion is similar to the ones observed with the land and his parents. It is filled with past memories of happiness and shows that despite the years of separation their friendship remained intact. Though the narrative of the encounter between Philippe and Vieux Os shows that their viewpoints differ at times, it also indicates their desire to transcend their personal opinions on national realities. In one such passage where their differing opinions suddenly surface around the bourgeoisie and the contribution of Haitian exiles in the changes brought to the country, Philippe

indirectly questions Vieux Os, “j’espère que tu n’es pas ici pour changer les choses” (171). Vieux Os’ answer, “non, Philippe… Je ne suis qu’un Voyeur” (171) triggers an emotional reaction from him. Indeed, as Philippe explains, he does not want to lose his Friend. What the narrative shows is that Vieux Os left the country without informing his friends. For Philippe, who understands the situation that prevailed and the impossibility for Vieux Os to speak about his departure in a moment when his life was in danger, it is a pleasure to reunite with him. As such, one understands the emotional valence in Philippe’s assertion, “je dis ça parce que je ne veux pas te perdre” (171). The act of “on s’embrasse” (165) that follows their first dialogue when they meet for the first time also highlights the importance of Vieux Os’ return for both of them.

### 5.3 Disconnected: The Other Side of the Return

In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned Vieux Os’ desire to continue with life in Haiti as if his period of exile did not occur. His reconnection with the natural environment of the native land and his physical bond with family and friends have the effect of transporting him back to where he was twenty years ago. The feeling of belonging to Haiti and the reestablishment of the severed link with people he loved before his exile have made the first moments pleasant and friendly. Yet, Laferrière’s novel also suggests that reuniting with loved ones does not translate a complete reconnection with one’s homeland. As such, Vieux Os’ desire to discard twenty years of absence is but an illusion. In many cases, as we will see, Vieux Os is out of step with the ways of life in Port-au-Prince and shows real signs of disconnection. Reflecting on the extent to which exile breaks the bonds with one’s country of birth, Hurtado-Beca writes, “pour l’exilé qui rentre dans son pays d’origine, ce retour est le deuxième exil ou plutôt ce que l’on peut appeler l’exil

caractérisé. C'est d'autant plus l'exil qu'il croyait retrouver 'son pays'. Mais le pays originaire n'est plus son pays" (251). Hurtado-Beca claims that, rather than fostering connection, the return not only exposes the discontinuity of the exile's experience with his native land, but also reveals the extent to which he/she has lost local values that were once part of the social environment. To that sense of loss, Hurtado-Beca adds, "tant de choses ont changé depuis son depart" (251). Indeed, Laferrière's protagonist could not witness the various changes that took place in his absence. As the narrative unfolds, the return becomes a realization of a disconnection that is characterized in two ways. The first involves Vieux Os' loss of cultural habits and his unsuspected implementation of cultural values acquired in exile. And the second encompasses his awareness of the changes that occurred in his absence. This section therefore comes as an analysis of the disconnection of the exiles that returns to his homeland. It aims at exploring Laferrière's narrative of the return as an oblivion of social and cultural practices.

Vieux Os' story of return externalizes the effects of long exilic periods in the relations between exiles and their culture. Laferrière presents those cultural and social changes as imperceptible for the returnee. Indeed, for his protagonist, life back in Haiti is a simple reconnection with what had existed before. As such, even when he acknowledges that "je suis là, devant cette table bancale, sans ce manguier, à tenter de parler une fois de plus de mon rapport avec ce terrible pays, de ce qu'il est devenu, de ce que je suis devenu…" (37), he does not really apprehend the extent to which his geographical and temporal disconnection changed him culturally. An interesting example takes place when Vieux Os is given his first cup of coffee. For Vieux Os, the act of having coffee implies nothing else than the consumption itself. However, for his mother and his aunt the gesture transcends the realm of the living to signify a reverence to the ancestors. We read :

On m’apporte une tasse de café bien chaud. Je m’apprête à prendre la première gorgée.

“As-tu oublié l’usage, Vieux Os ?”

“Il faut en donner aux morts d’abord. Ici, on sert les morts avants les vivants.” (36)

As this passage reveals, the dead have an important place in Haitian cultural belief. Vieux Os knows their primacy and rank in the hierarchy that links them to the living, as he observes, “n’importe quelle mort devient subitement l’aîné de tout ceux qui respirent encore” (36). However, he fails to honor them the first time he is given the opportunity with the cup of coffee. For Vieux Os to forget to sacrifice to the important act of honoring them before his first sip, therefore, suggests that he has forgotten a key cultural practice.

The difference of cultural values between Vieux Os’ land of exile and his native land explains his “disregard” for some Haitian cultural practices. The impossibility to continually relate to and apply Haitian customs in the West and the quasi obligation to embrace norms that completely differ from the ones in the native land result in a complicated situation in the return. The disconnection between the return and his native culture is, thus, a matter of dissemblance of values. Hurtado-Beca links the returnee’s disconnection to his/her degree of integration while in exile. For her, “la distance entre les valeurs qui sont devenues maintenant les siennes et celles de son pays d’origine est d’autant plus grande que le pays d’accueil ou, au moins, le milieu qui entourait l’exilé et avait facilité son insertion manifestait une sensibilité et des valeurs autres que celles que possède aujourd’hui son pays d’origine” (252). *Pays sans chapeau* does not provide an extended narrative of Vieux Os’ life and how well he was integrated in his community of adoption. Yet, it shows that the values that are now part of Vieux Os’ realities are predominantly from the West.

Laferrière illustrates the difference of values by resorting to the difference in food. Vieux Os' family members are curious about what food he ate during his absence, "qu'est-ce que tu as mangé pendant ces vingt ans?" (26). Rather than provide an answer, Laferrière explains the importance of food in Vieux Os' family. Food, as he writes, is a symbol of love and a means of communication (26). As a cultural element, food may have different values in different cultures. Yet, the type of food Vieux Os consumed in the West shows that his integration was successful. As such, the answer "spaghetti" that Vieux Os gives has the merit of triggering his mother's and his aunt's hilarity. Spaghetti as they say, "n'est pas un plat antillais. D'abord, pas de repas qui se respecte sans riz" (27). The difference between rice and spaghetti underscores the difference between the cultural values in Haiti and in Vieux Os' land of exile. It also reveals that during exile, Vieux Os' way of life was not based on his previous cultural practices but mainly on the ones he found in exile. His disconnection with his homeland's culture is then predicated on difference of values but also on the loss of cultural habits during exile.

Laferrière also represents Vieux Os' disconnection from Haitian realities through his unsuspected practice of values he acquired in exile. Indeed, Laferrière's protagonist's vision of the Haitian way of life differs from his friends. In a discussion with Philippe, Vieux Os finds the way he drives in Port-au-Prince reckless, "Philippe conduit la puissante jeep comme si la rue était vide. Les gens circulent au milieu de la chaussée comme si la voiture n'avait pas encore été inventée. Il y a problème" (171). For Vieux Os, Philippe's way of driving is harmful and can cause accidents. Vieux Os is surprised to note that, "ce n'est que comme ça qu'il est possible de conduire" (172). Vieux Os' and Philippe's contrasting views about driving in Port-au-Prince illustrate a difference in cultural values. For Philippe, who is part of "ceux qui sont restés. Ceux qui n'ont pas quitté ce pays quand ça allait mal" (171), there is only one way of driving within Port-au-Prince. His careless

driving therefore denotes a habit for him and a custom for Haitians. That custom translates into the pedestrians' daring way of walking in the middle of the road. For Vieux Os, who is part of "ceux qui reviennent après vingt ans pour changer les choses" (171), things are not normal and driving like Philippe or walking like the pedestrians is unconceivable. Yet, Vieux Os' understanding of Haitian cultural realities is mediated by what was his culture and habits during exile. By aligning the ways of doing things in his western country where he lived for twenty years to the ways they are understood in his homeland, Vieux Os not only fails to acknowledge the cultural differences between the West and Haiti, but also unwittingly lives with Western values while being in Haiti. Consequently, he fails to understand Philippe's advice, "trop vite, c'est pas bon. Trop lentement, non plus. Tu comprends?" (172). Through the narrative of the debate, Philippe appears to be aware of Vieux Os' transformation and his disconnection with his homeland. It is with no surprise that the only advice that Philippe provides takes the form of a local idiom: "réapprendre à danser la *méringue*"; in other words, he suggests that Vieux Os readapt to a Haitian rhythm.

Concerning the diverging understanding of life in the homeland and how the returnee sees, conceptualizes and incorporates them, Hurtado-Beca explains, "leurs représentations font référence à une toute autre vision du réel. Les codes ne sont plus les mêmes, les langues et les représentations diffèrent, il n'existe plus de monde commun" (254). Drawing from Hurtado-Beca, we understand that the "réel" which is an important component of Philippe's and Vieux Os' interpretations of everyday occurrences differ. The nature of the réel for Phillipe remained constant since it is the materialization of Haitian usual practices. For Vieux Os, the réel about Haiti has changed because it is mediated by his western culture. Thus, he judges Haiti and people's common practices with values that do not belong to the country. His lack of Haitian values to assess what

appears to be new or odd makes him an exile in his own country. Hurtado-Beca posits that the condition of estrangement that the exile experiences in his homeland is also based on the rift between the dreamed country and the real country. For Vieux Os, however, both the dreamed and the real countries refer to one entity, Haiti, and are subject to the same misrepresentation due to values acquired abroad.

In the introduction to *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States,* Edwidge Danticat reports on Haitians' conceptions about the 'Dyaspora.' Her analysis shows that Haitians who live outside the national boundaries are mostly characterized as people who know nothing about their country. Danticat writes, "I mean in another type of introduction to list my own personal experiences of being called 'Dyaspora' when expressing an opposing political point of view in discussions with friends and family members living in Haiti who knew that they could easily silence me by saying, 'what do you know? You are a Dyaspora" (XIV). The fact of equating the diaspora or the exile that returns to his homeland to the lack of understanding of national realities explains the disconnection between Vieux Os and Haiti. Indeed, like Danticat, Vieux Os is characterized by his friends and family members as someone who does not know things, a person that cannot discern the extent to which the national realities have shifted. As his mother reminds him, "ce pays a vraiment changé" (47). And to insist on the changes that occurred during Vieux Os' absence, his mother adds, "je n'ai pas quitté ce pays, même pour une minute, alors je sais de quoi je parle" (48). His mother's statement exposes the belief that Haitians who have not left the country have a better knowledge of reality whereas those who went abroad are not aware of anything. The discussion between Vieux Os and his mother tells all about the misapprehension Vieux Os have about things:

"Tout le monde a peur, dit ma mère, comme si on était au milieu d'une conversation commencé il y a un moment…"

"Heureusement qu'on ne t'a jamais cambriolée."

"Je ne parle pas de ça, Vieux Os…"

"Tu parles des tueurs, alors ?"

"Non."

"On a peur. On a peur de ne pas exister. C'est de ça qu'on a peur."

"C'est ce que je voulais dire. Avec tous ces crimes…"

"Non ! (Ma mère a presque crié.) Les crimes, ce n'est pas le pire." (101)

The incomprehension between the mother and the son results from the difference in the conception of what can lead to the general fear the mother alludes to. When for Vieux Os, the factor that can drive to a collective fear is mainly physical and is simply related to thefts and crimes, his mother insinuates a more metaphysical problem that is common knowledge in Haiti. In front of her son's incomprehension for things she deems ordinary since it was part of everyday conversations, Vieux Os' mother finally accepts reality, "Tu sais, Vieux Os… Tu ne peux pas savoir, tu n'étais pas là…" (102). Despite her reconnection with her son, Vieux Os' mother knows that there is a big gap that now characterizes her son's life in Port-au-Prince. She realizes that her son's absence has deterred his comprehension of national realities and practices. Vieux Os is therefore as the narratives reveals a disconnected person in the midst of Haiti, the "pays réel."

### 5.4 *Réapprentissage*: An Encounter with Culture

Vieux Os' return to Haiti is a moment to relearn his culture and the ways of life that have been wiped out by his time in exile. *Réapprentissage*, as I conceive it here, is a constructive way of overcoming cultural disconnection through the incorporation of social norms and the discovery of cultural realities that were unknown. Consequently, to relearn is not only to rediscover and live according to one's past social and cultural norms, but also to rediscover practices and mores one did not suspect existed. For Vieux Os, therefore, this act supposes adjusting his social attitude as a person that returns from exile to basic but essential elements of Haitian ways of life. Such a relearning also encompasses the difficult acceptance of unsuspected realities that surpass common understanding. Indeed, as one of their neighbors said – when Vieux Os' mother was worried about his eccentric attitude – "il lui faut simplement réapprendre à respirer, à sentir, à voir, à toucher les choses différemment" (13).

The importance for Vieux Os to relearn social and cultural practices transcends his personal relation to his homeland. It is also part of the reconstruction of his identity, and the national debate on the identity of the Haitian diaspora commands that such a relearning take place. Laferrière narrativizes the issue on the diaspora's identity through a radio debate, as Vieux Os and Philippe drive through Port-au-Prince. It starts as a simple question that irritates Philippe : "faut-il considérer les gens qui ont vécu trop longtemps à l'étranger comme des Haïtiens" (212). While Philippe characterizes the question as "la même connerie" (212), concluding that it is particularly debated with the aim to exclude other people, and therefore, wants to turn to a different channel, Vieux Os finds it important because it relates to him. Danticat alludes to the question of the diaspora's identity through Jean Dominique's assertion, "the Dyaspora are people with their feet planted in both worlds … There is no reason to be ashamed of being Dyaspora" (XV). As a person

that returns from exile, Vieux Os' case is much different from that of just being part of the diaspora. He is back to his homeland and his presence, his disconnection from Haitian social and cultural practices, as well as his attitude and actions that emanate from the cultural practices of his land of adoption, dictate that he entirely relearns and commits to local social norms. It is through his *réapprentissage* that he will fully integrate his community, show that his "feet planted" in Haiti go with Haitian culture, return to his identity as a "natif-natal" and a "fils d'Haïti-Thomas" (268).

Laferrière strategically builds Vieux Os' cultural *réapprentissage* as a prerequisite to his contribution to his homeland. And though he sets Vieux Os' pilgrimage to the realm of the dead as the completion of the relearning, he takes him first to understand Haitian everyday life and the national events. One of Vieux Os' first moments of relearning happens with his mother. After his mother and his aunt remind him about the necessity to honor his ancestors each time he drinks, his mother takes him out to encounter the real life of Port-au-Prince. Vieux Os discovers a world fraught with scammers of all sorts that are ready to make a few more dollars from people who are not familiar with the city's lifestyle. The experience that serves as a first lesson to Vieux Os occurs when he desires to change a few dollars to local currency, "j'ai sur moi de l'argent américain que je veux changer en monnaie du pays" (121). The operation seems very easy for Vieux Os, who thinks of completing the exchange with the first money changers they meet. For him, the first rate "deux cent cinquante dollars haïtiens pour cent dollars américains" (122) reflects a good operation. His mother, on the contrary, does not agree with the rate, and when Vieux Os shows his exasperation when his mother refuses the rate, she simply tells him, "ne sois pas pressé" (122). The mother finds that it is wiser to know the real exchange rate before any transaction. However, when she finds a better rate, she does not commit to the exchange and notes, "ici, c'est plein de voleurs. Allons plutôt du côté de la Radio-Métropole" (122). Vieux Os learns from his mother that

to navigate the marketplace of Port-au-Prince, the first thing to remember is to trust no one at first offer. Such lesson spans from the understanding of the exchange market to the ways in which money changers act. Indeed, when Vieux Os and his mother find the right person and get to the right place for the exchange, another problem arises: the exact amount of money received and making sure that one is not followed by thieves. During the transaction, Vieux Os' mother feels that she is being scammed and decides to stop the operation, "tu peux garder ton argent," she tells the young man (123). For Vieux Os, who still has to learn, the exchange was normally done and there was no problem. His mother, who knows the strategy changers use to keep part of the money, explains, "ils comptent l'argent une première fois, et le compte est toujours bon. Toi, tu comptes à ton tour, ça va encore. Mais ils décident de recompter, et c'est à ce moment qu'ils glissent un billet dans leur manche" (123). The changers' strategy surpasses Vieux Os' understanding. For him, the banal act of changing money becomes a moment of learning where patience and trust constitute an important lesson. Vieux Os, therefore, discovers a practice that escapes what he seemed to know about his hometown. As his mother clarifies, not paying attention to whether one is followed or not after an exchange can be fatal, "on a tué une femme comme ça, la semaine dernière. Ils l'ont suivie jusqu'à sa maison et sont revenue, la nuit, lui voler son argent. Comme elle a tenté de résister, ils l'ont égorgée" (124). Vieux Os' mother's discourse illustrates the importance for him to know what and who surrounds him each time he would engage in such a transaction. In taking him out, she helps him discern and understand the new experience that he should expect back in his country.

Vieux Os' *réapprentissage* takes a more important turn with his encounter with unsuspected cultural practices in Haiti. Unlike the lessons he learns from his mother in the market of Port-au-Prince, his relearning – that occurs in the realm of the dead – unveils a much deeper

attachment to his culture and to the land of his ancestors. Laferrière initially introduces the presence of the metaphysical, as a curious reality in the physical existence of Haiti: the prevalence of zengledos and bizangos. For Vieux Os' mother – who has not left the country – the presence of zombies that roam Port-au-Prince day and night symbolizes the complete collapse of the country and its impossibility to return to its previous state. The reason for such a zombiesque presence is, according to the mother, due to human activities, "les prêtres vaudous ont ratissé le pays du nord au sud, de l'est à l'ouest. Ils ont ratissé tous les cimetières du pays. Ils ont réveillé tous les morts qui dormaient du sommeil du juste" (49). Rather than being terrified by his mother's description of the situation, Vieux Os seems to not pay attention to the *fable.* His mother is upset and cannot understand that her son's prolonged stay in Western countries has taught him to accept as real only things that are scientifically demonstrable. Vieux Os' skepticism is reinforced by the failure of the president to unleash an army of zombies on the American army after he had promised to do so. His question, "où était donc cette armée quand les américains ont débarqué" (64) shows that for him the zombies' existence as narrated by his mother is but a pure fantasy.

Despite Vieux Os' skepticism about his mother's statements on the presence of zombies, the persistence of the discourse on the "living-dead" excites his curiosity. His disbelief of his mother's assertion was shuttered by the widespread discourse on the question of zengledos and bizangos. Indeed, Vieux Os grasps the magnitude of the situation when a shoe polisher advises him to quickly leave the country because, "le pays a changé, mon ami. Les gens que vous croisez dans la rue ne sont pas tous des êtres humains" (56). The reality about the zombies seems unknown only to people that were outside the country. The description and the different stories told here and there about the bizangos and the zengledos shows that for the common inhabitant of Port-au-Prince, not only it is not a secret, but it has also become part of everyday life. It is, therefore, an

imperative for Vieux Os to align himself to the common perception of things and connect himself to the social and cultural experiences that escapes his returnee's mind.

Vieux Os' complete acceptance of the problem comes from the explanations provided by J.-B. Romain and Legrand Bijou. Their position as intellectuals who work for the government on the issue of zombies informs Vieux Os about the existence of the path between the dead and the living in Haiti. Unlike his mother's and the shoe polisher's statements that are not based on facts, Vieux Os knows that he can trust J.-B. Romain and Legrand Bijou on these matters. A confirmation from them would also mean that he had to take his mother's advice seriously. J.-B. Romain – who is a Professor of Ethnology – provides a more plausible, yet troubling explanation of the situation. In addition to his mother's and the shoe polisher's warning, Vieux Os learns from the Professor that the story about the zombies is authentic and originates from a real-life situation in northwestern Haiti. According to the Professor the story about the bizangos and zengledos comes from a "groupe de paysans qui semblent ignorer les affres de la souffrance et même la paix de la mort" (74). To the account about the resistance to pain and death, Doctor Legrand Bijou also points to the peasants' capacity to endure thirst and hunger for three months. The reality may be appalling for Vieux Os, who was severed from his homeland's cultural experience for so long. However, his return serves as a moment of discovery and learning of cultural reality which – unlike the social codes and the new modern ways of navigating Port-au-Prince – do not lie on the surface. By opening with the story of zombies, Laferrière leads his protagonist to a higher dimension of knowledge that differs from the simple understanding of the ways to negotiate social and cultural life in Port-au-Prince.

The spiritual aspect of Vieux Os' *réapprentissage* comes as a revelation. Laferrière narrativizes it as an encounter between the visible and invisible worlds. He creates a bridge

between them to allow Vieux Os to continue his cultural discovery in the realm of the dead. As such, the story moves to a deeper degree of knowledge that stages the living and the dead around the reality of Haitian vodou. Names of gods such as Legba, Ogou, and Erzulie Dantor that are only part of Haitian imaginary and vodou quickly become part of the universe Vieux Os uncovers. In the first moments of his presence in the realm of the dead, Vieux Os remarks that "la rue n'avait pas changé à mes yeux. La couleur un peu violette de l'aube donne une teinte assez étrange aux choses, mais c'est tout" (249). Some of the elements of the visible world, therefore, remained unchanged in the invisible world. The interpenetration of these two worlds is so perfect that Vieux Os does not seem disoriented. The first change, however, comes when Lucrèce, who mentors Vieux Os' transition to the realm of the gods pays his bread at the bakery with leaves of tea. In his pilgrimage, Vieux Os learns that in the realm of the dead "il n'y a pas la difference du jour d'avec la nuit" (251). One of the most important things he gets in the invisible world is the truth about the existence of the gods. Vieux Os finds that Ogou and Erzulie Dantor, known as powerful gods in the cosmogony of Haitian vodou are not just an imagination but are real beings. That discovery of the existence of the gods triggers an important question concerning Haitian culture and vodou. To what degree does the invisible influence cultural perception in the visible world? How do both interpenetrate? Laferrière shows that as the gods impact human social and cultural life so do humans participate in influencing the gods by the place they offer them in their religious and everyday experience.

### 5.5 Beyond *Réapprentissage*: Discovery as a Cultural Support

In her article "Exile: Between Writing and Place," Haitian writer Yanick Lahens examines the influence of exile on Haitian writers' literary creation. More specifically, she analyzes the participation of writers living in exile in the Haitian cultural environments. Her question: "what does living in a country mean for a writer?" not only serves as guideline for her analysis, but also shows her interest in calling into question the exclusionary debate that opposes exiled Haitian writers to writers living in the country (735). Lahens begins her investigation by referring to Jean Price-Mars' nomenclature of what should constitute the primary focus of Haitian writers. "Indeed the propositions he set forth, sometimes in the form of exhaustive lists, sometimes in the form of descriptions," Lahen writes, "were all aimed at the revalorization of an authentic culture, centered essentially around Vodou, the Creole language, and oral traditions of which the hinterland is the exclusive depository" (735). Therefore, for price-Mars,not only the rehabilitation of Haitian culture was fundamental in the country's literature, but it should be grounded into a limited number of cultural domains. Yet, Lahens opposes such culture-centered reflection of literary activities. She finds that centering Haitian literary expression on these perspectives entails an impossibility "to engage freely in research of creation, for the discourse of identity proposed impassable schemas and models" (736). Therefore, for her, regrouping Haitian literary work under these themes limits the very act of literary creation – which should be inherently open to an endless exploration and questioning. However, unlike Lahens' assumption of the restrictive characteristics of a culture-centered literature, Laferrière successfully blends literary aesthetics with cultural revalorization. More, his narrative of Vieux Os' pilgrimage to the realm of the gods and its implications for characters such as J.-B. Romain, and Lucrèce show the intricate link between the writer's return to the homeland, his *réapprentissage* of Haitian culture, and his function as a transnational Haitian

writer that attempts to rehabilitate it. The connection between these three aspects raises an important question: How does the return from exile – developed in this chapter as a necessity to learn cultural practices – expand into a cultural revalorization? How does Laferrière successfully weave literary aesthetics and Price-Mars' perspective of revalorization?

The answers to these questions lie in the way Laferrière transforms Vieux Os' return and his ability as a novelist into a commitment to write about Haitian Vodou gods. *Pays sans chapeau* gives an important place to Haitian identity and image. Its exploration of Haitian cultural practices through Vieux Os' daily relearning constantly uncovers social realities that participate in the representation of the country. As such, voluntarily or not, Laferrière' novel contributes to the idea of revalorization that not only attempts to bring to public knowledge the culture of Haiti, but also tries to magnify it. Examining the theme of exile and how it makes the literary discourse possible in Laferrière's *Pays sans chapeau,* Katell Colin-Thébaudeau views Laferrière as a worthy representative of Haitian culture. For her, Laferrière's "inscription [of *Pays sans chapeau*] dans le 'terreau' haïtien est donc volontaire, affichée et revendiquée. Le narrateur [Vieux Os] prend en charge la réalité haïtienne pour l'assumer jusque dans ses excès et dans ses facettes les plus sombres" (70). It is, however, important to note that Vieux Os' narrative does not only evolve around the "darkest side" of Haitian culture but also illuminates its social and spiritual life. The latter aspect, structured around the existence of the dead and the gods as well as the extent to which they permeate Haitian society and religions, constitute the pedestal of that cultural representation. Consequently, the special attention to that spiritual existence in *Pays sans chapeau* plainly substantiates Laferrière's support to the notion of cultural revalorization. It is, therefore, understandable that the novel moves from reconnection, discovery, and *réapprentissage* to

embrace the more tangible cultural expression manifested in the relationship between its protagonists and the gods.

Vieux Os' encounter with Lucrèce shifts the narrative from the happiness of reunion and learning of his culture to the imperative of writing in support of that culture. The link Laferrière constructs between the notion of réapprentissage and that of cultural support is characterized in Lucrèce's proposition to Vieux Os. Lucrèce, who heard about Vieux Os' writing a book about the dead, thinks that it is essential for him to cross "cette porte" that constitutes the border between the living and the dead (134). A visit to that realm, according to him, would provide Vieux Os with "l'expérience nécessaire pour écrire votre ouvrage sur les morts" (134). At first, Lucrèce's offer seems to be a selfless support to Vieux Os' literary activities. As such, the offer can be considered as a way for Vieux Os to provide evidence of his assumptions and imagination about the dead. The possibility of crossing the gates of the dead will make Vieux Os one of the rare mortals to support their literary activities about the abstract and the spiritual with firsthand proof.

Lucrèce's invitation speaks to the cultural revalorization of Haiti, and his choice of Vieux Os as the link between the dead, the living and Haitian culture is part of a skillfully planned project. Formulated in terms of discovery and invitation to witness what the realm of the gods is, Lucrèce's suggestion seems to be supportive of Vieux Os' work. Yet, as the book evolves, the exact opposite comes true. Vieux Os' discovery of part of his culture and the cosmogony of Haitian traditional religion translate into the mission of writing that culture. As such, one understands tante Renée's surprise when Vieux Os reveals to her Lucrèce's proposition to cross the gate of the dead, "c'est étrange, murmure tante Renée presque pour elle-même … C'est la première fois qu'il propose ça à quelqu'un" (135). Drawing from tante Renée's assertion, it is evident that in Lucrèce's opinion Vieux Os has exceptional characteristics that may be useful for something more important than

the simple possibility of visiting the gods. Some of Lucrèce's statements in the beginning of his conversation with Vieux Os call attention to the nature of these exceptional traits. In his conversation, Lucrèce remarks : "on dit que vous écrivez un livre sur les morts" and adds, "on dit aussi que vous venez de l'étranger" (133). From Lucrèce statements, one notices the distinctive attributes that singularize Vieux Os: the fact of returning from a foreign country and the ability to write a book. The very intersection of these two traits draws in Lucrèce. Therefore, one understands not only his refusal to let other people visit that world but also his surprising proposition to Vieux Os.

The nature of the mission Lucrèce and J.-B. Romain entrust to Vieux emanates from the Professor's understanding of how Western culture succeeded in spreading itself. In his discussion with Vieux Os, J.-B. Romain seems to ignore the real motives of Lucrèce's suggestion. However, the parallel he builds between the ways Western civilization differs from Haitian civilization in their handling of science suggests that somewhat he knows the reasons that justify Lucrèce's offer to Vieux Os. Thus, when J.-B. Romain mentions to Vieux Os that Westerners went to the moon, he also stresses that "Neil Armstrong a aussi écrit un livre relatant cette experience" (161). His statement illustrates the importance of writing a book. As such, it transpires from his assertion that in addition to the scientific progress of going to the moon, the most important aspect of Western science is its translation into books. The Professor opposes the act of writing in Western civilization to the silence observed in Haitian culture. As he notes, there is progress in both Western countries and in Haiti. More, for the Professor, the progress realized in Haiti is much greater than the one achieved by Westerners when they went to the moon, "le pays de la mort est bien plus loin" (161). Despite Haitians' great success in crossing the bridge between the realms of the invisible and visible, J.-B. Romain admits that Haitians "n'en parle[nt] parle pas" (161). An

important part of Haitian culture still remains unknown and the fact of not writing it or making it public contributes to reinforcing the sense of nonexistence of progress or science.

J.-B. Romain's explanation of the existence of a Haitian science that is not made public triggers Vieux Os' understanding of his mission. Indeed, the presence of a Haitian science that is kept secret and Lucrèce's proposition lead Vieux Os to perceive the reason why he is permitted to witness the invisible. He has a kind of epiphany : "peut-être que les dieux du Vaudou veulent qu'on en parle maintenant. Peut-être qu'ils veulent tout simplement une reconnaissance internationale" (161). However, the fact of realizing that his visit to the realm of the dead is more of a mission leaves him with more questions. He hardly makes the link between the characteristics mentioned by Lucrèce and the proposition. Vieux Os, therefore, wonders why Lucrèce chose him and not someone else. His interrogation leaves J.-B. Romain confused. Rather than provide a rational answer, J.-B. Romain offers a long comparison with biblical characters that were commissioned by God. For the Professor there is a general pattern that typifies the chosen ones, which is their propensity to always try to understand the reasons why they were chosen. Examining the question from its religious implications, he replies, "du point de vue mystique, cette question n'a jamais reçu de réponse" (162). J.-B. Romain's answer entails that Vieux Os must rather comply with the gods' desire rather than try to discern why he was chosen. One, therefore, understands that the task Vieux Os has to accomplish is more important than the fact of knowing the reasons that sustain his choice. A comparison with J.-B. Romain's biblical figures suggests that Vieux Os should solely focus on the mission entrusted to him while viewing it as a necessity for his community. Indeed, though J.-B. Romain indicates that the Virgin, David, Saul, and Abraham wondered why they were chosen, it appears that their duties were not directed to their own interest.

It is only when a disappointed Vieux Os returns from the realm of the dead that the reality of his pilgrimage appears clear to him. For Vieux Os, who expected an extraordinary discovery, "le savoir absolu … la possibilité de tout comprendre, de tout voir, de tout sentir d'un coup" (159), and other "tartarean" encounters such as "une pluie de formes étranges dans un monde bizarre, un univers si puissant, si gorgé de symboles, si complexe" (256), it was shocking to realize that the realm of the dead was not as much different from the realm of the living. Worse, the squabbles between Ogou, "le dieu du feu," and his wife Erzulie Freda Dahomey around matters he found trivial eventually left him puzzled. The narrative shows that his visit to the gods transcends the conception of a discovery of the secrets of Haitian epistemology he did not know. Indeed, for Vieux Os the gods did not embody the fear and the respect humans have for them. As such, there is not much to say about them and much to offer to the curiosity of the world of the living. The apparent pettiness of what he saw cannot compete with the well-established supremacy of biblical characters.

Faced with Vieux Os' reluctance to accept the exceptional nature of the gods and their superiority to Christian characters and stories, J.-B. Romain finally reveals the true objective that underlies Vieux Os' visit to the realm of the dead. The revelation came as a supplication and bore the reality of the mission as a contribution to culture, "nous, ici, on a besoin d'un coup de main… J'ai pensé que ça vous intéresserait, vu que vous êtes un écrivain" (266). Drawing from J.-B. Romain's explanation of their need for Vieux Os because he is a writer, one understands that from the first contact between Lucrèce and Vieux Os there was a well-formed plan to make Haitian culture visible and allow it to officially reclaim its place and influence. Indeed, J.-B. Romain illustrates the necessity of visibility by reminding Vieux Os of the anti-superstition campaign of 1944 when Haitian vodou was targeted by the Catholic Church with support from the government.

According to the Professor, during that campaign, "ils ont détruit les temples, fait mettre en prison tous les hougans, déracinés les grands mapous, ces grands arbres qui nous servaient de lieux de mémoire" (268). The anti-superstitious campaign, mentioned by Professor J.-B. Romain, refers to a series of actions by the church to suppress Haitian vodou. In his article, "A propos de la Campagne Antisuperstitieuse en Haïti (1911-1912) : Contribution à une Historiographie," Lewis Ampidu Clorméus writes about the genesis of the campaign:

> Dès la signature du concordat de 1860, le clergé catholique entame une guerre sans merci contre les cultes réformés et le vodou. Les offensives qu'il mène contre ce dernier, motivées par un idéal civilisateur et moralisateur, présentent un caractère particulier. Le vodou est considéré comme une honteuse "superstition", révélant l'aspect primitif des croyances religieuses entretenues dans les milieux ruraux. (105)

As Clorméus, puts it, the objectives of the church since the nineteenth century were to suppress the practice of vodou. About the campaign waged in the 1940s, and known as "la Renonce" in Haitian Creole, Alfred Metraux writes :

> L'Église s'était flattée d'exterminer une fois pour toutes le vodou en détruisant les sanctuaires des dieux africains, en brûlant, dans de véritables autodafés, les objets sacrés et en exigeant, par la menace, des sectateurs du vodou un serment dit des "rejetés", par lequel ils "renonçaient" au culte des Iwa et aux pratiques superstitieuses. (137)

The attack on Haitian vodou meant an attack of its culture. Consequently, as the gods and devotion to them were silenced, the Haitian people were left at the mercy of the Catholic Church.

Writing a narrative about the gods is equivalent not only to resurfacing their existence, but also reestablishing their importance. The Professor expounds on the place of the gods in Haitian society : "notre réputation est au plus bas. Et nous demandons à tous les fils d'Haïti de faire un

effort supplémentaire pour remettre à l'honneur nos racines et nos dieux" (269). It is important to relate the Professor's observation of a lower reputation of vodou to the series of campaigns that characterized it as an evil and backward religion and practice. Thus, for him, and, surely, Lucrèce, the act of writing is not deprived from power. Both understand the influence of narrative in the real world and want to seize the opportunity literature offers to reestablish the reputation of vodou in Haitian culture. If, as the Professor says, Vieux Os can contribute to restoring the honor of the gods through his writing, then there is a real connection between the world of the unseen, the world of the imagination, and the physical one. As such it is quite understandable that a big part of the novel shifts from reconnection and *réapprentissage*, to cultural support.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The link between the real and "the unreal" and how they interpenetrate helps understand the importance of the role Vieux Os must play as a writer in the new representation that Lucrèce and J.-B. Romain consider. For the Professor, who has a deeper understanding of both worlds, the physical world is but a reenactment of the world of the gods. As such what is seen is only a copy of the unseen. And when he alludes to Shakespeare, mentioning that "ce ne sont pas les dieux qui imitent Shakespeare, c'est Shakespeare qui imite les dieux" (266), one perceives that J.-B. Romain introduces the writer as an important link between those two worlds. As such, they give form to what is conceived as belonging only to the spiritual world or to human imagination. J.-B. Romain's reference to poets is more illustrative of the role of writers in the understanding of the physical world. For him, "les poètes disent la stricte vérité. Quand le poète dit que l'homme se souvient des cieux, ce n'est pas une parole en l'air, il veut dire que si nous construisons des maisons ici, c'est

parce qu'il y a des maisons là-bas" (267). Drawing from the Professor's assertion, one sees that Vieux Os' mission and the influence that can derive from his book is explicit and amounts to bringing the reality of the spiritual to the reality of the physical world. By analogy with J.-B. Romain's conception of Shakespeare's work and the two worlds, one understands that Vieux Os' writing about the life of the gods of Haitian Vodou is the transcription of their real but unseen existence into the physical world. As such, Vieux Os brings a stronger credibility to Haitian Vodou.

Vieux Os' mission as a writer, as J.-B. Romain conceives it, is, however, not limited to bridging the seen and the unseen through the narrative of Haitian cosmogony. The Professor's most salient vision is to finally impose Haitian culture, its gods and preeminence on a particular aspect of the country. As he explains to Vieux Os, "comment pensez-vous que l'Eglise catholique a pu imposer sa volonté au monde occidental, si ce n'est grâce aux Michel-Ange, Leonard de Vinci, et même Galilée d'une certaine manière" (269). Thus, the cultural revalorization he promotes owes to an extensive artistic and literary production, by which writers play an essential role. Consequently, writers like Vieux Os are the frontliners of cultural rebirth in Haiti.

The task as defined by J.-B. Romain is not a sinecure. It requires the deconstruction of preconceptions about the gods and Vodou more broadly and calls for the reshaping of their representation. Vieux Os recognizes the difficulty of such his charge : "vous me demandez beaucoup… Fabriquer une nouvelle image aux dieux du vaudou" (270). Yet, he takes up the challenge of the cultural transformation that once was dear to Jean Price-Mars. Vieux Os is himself already convinced of the project. This change may be due to the fact that he witnessed the existence of the gods, and, having spoken with Frieda Dahomey, he knows that they have the power to interfere in the realm of the mortals. As such, it is not surprising to hear Vieux Os ask : "pouvez-

vous me garantir que les dieux seront à mes côtés ?" (270). J.-B. Romain's answer is unequivocal. The gods agree to work with the writer to revive Haitian culture.

Laferrière's writing of the return reconnects the writer to his/her culture. The reconnection that follows the return, therefore, marks the end of cultural exile. The literary expression of the return escapes the boundaries of the narrative. It is a dialogue between a writer and some of the aspects of his/her culture for the revalorization of that culture. Consequently, the return not only symbolizes an author's reconnection to his homeland but more importantly is characteristic of the cultural rebirth that it brings.

## 6.0 Conclusion

> Il s'agit en fin de compte de "labourer" de nouvelles terres et d'y enfouir des graines qui germeront demain. Dans ce sens les écrivains deviennent les hérauts de cette besogne.
> – Alain Mabanckou, *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui.*
>
> De manière générale, penser par nous-mêmes et pour nous-mêmes n'est jamais s'interdire certains savoirs ou certains auteurs au nom du "propre." En matière de savoirs, il n'y a pas de *propre.* Il faut penser les questions Africaine depuis l'Afrique.
> – Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Pour un universel vraiment universel."

This dissertation has argued that the return from exile provides an active participative commitment in African and Caribbean sociopolitical and cultural experiences. Though the desire to return to one's homeland originates from various scenarios, two main factors motivate the literary imaginaries examined in this study: the peripheral existence of African and Caribbean diaspora in the West and the persisting images of the homeland that act as a reminder of the existence of different alternatives. As Brubaker explains, the embrace of assimilation rather than integration in the French nation speaks to the persistence of the discourse on alterity and national belonging. It is in the manifestations of such a discourse, expressed as a lack of social recognition, that the imaginary of the return takes place.

However, the imaginary of the return is not in itself limited to the decision and desire to return to Africa or the Caribbean. If the imaginary starts as a personal expression of hope in the homeland, it is ultimately the emanation of a greater vision. For the African and the diaspora, the imaginary is an important element of Afrotopia. As such, Literary texts, whatever the genre,

participate in the establishment of a perspective of development that situates Africa not only in the world but also vis-à-vis itself. By providing different narratives of the presence of African and its diaspora in different geographical spaces and by illuminating them with what Sarr rightfully called "the fields of possibilities," literature provides an important space for constructive reflections on the *devenir* of the continent. Such investigations, as Mabanckou does in *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* does not spare the continent and its intellectuals but provide a dispassionate assessment of "les grandes lignes de fractures ou encore les grands antagonismes qui nous donnent l'impression de vivre un moment particulièrement agité de l'histoire de notre monde" (Mbembe, 17).[91] To exemplify the link between the literary and intellectual reflections with Afrotopia, it is important to come back to the political decision that marked a crucial step in the relationship between France and francophone Africa.[92] Indeed, on receiving Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr's report on the restitution of the African cultural heritage, President Macron decided that " d'ici cinq ans les conditions soient réunies pour des restitutions temporaires ou définitives du patrimoine africain en Afrique."[93] Though the president initiated the report, the debates that led to his determination to investigate and return the African arts was predicated for a big part on the intellectual discussions that arose on the issue, and at a certain degree from Les Ateliers de la Pensée.

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[91] Achille Mbembe, "L'Afrique qui vient." *Penser et écrire l'Afrique aujourd'hui.* Seuil, 2017.

[92] The literary and intellectual reflections referred to here is Les Ateliers de la Pensée. Présence Africaine writes about the objectives of the first session of Les ateliers in 2016 that among other questions, the workshops would evolve around " les questions des héritages postcoloniaux notamment celles liées à la pensée et aux épistémologies post et décoloniale ; la quête de nouvelles formes du politique et de la citoyenneté, l'Afrique et sa relation planétaire ; les thèmes récurrents de l'identité, de l'altérité et de la différence, des langues, ou encore de l'universel et du particulier, mais également des préoccupations concernant le devenir de la planète en général."

[93] Though Savoy and Sarr's investigation was a report mainly for the French president (because initiated by him), it was published in 2018, under the title, *Restituer le patrimoine africain.*

The constitution of a continent that reimagines itself and that wants to claim a greater visibility in the twentieth century – far from the pessimistic representations that characterized it – is triggered by the voices from the continent as well as from the diaspora.[94] The return from exile is central and the creation of the imaginary that rewrites Africa, essential. Critic Benaouda Lebdai, who joined Sarr and Mbembe in their reflection on the continent, holds that "les écrivains de la diaspora appartiennent à une génération revendicatrice, à un nouvel ordre et leurs textes œuvrent à changer les mentalités aussi bien en Afrique qu'en Europe" (90-91). Thus, it is a work on the transformation of mentalities, the inscription of the necessary interrogation of sociopolitical as well as cultural realities, that should take place on the continent and in the Caribbean. Such an enterprise requires the consideration of all the forces, intellectual or not, continental or diasporic. The gathering of all the human potentialities and sources of knowledge sounds as a necessity for the construction of an African epistemology that reexamines its history, and its presence in the world today in order to open its future. As Mbembe notes "pour accompagner la naissance de cette nouvelle histoire mondiale – planétaire mais décentrée –, l'Afrique a besoin de s'écrire elle-même" (23). Mbembe's reflection considers the centrality of Africa in its *devenir.* However, it is important to remember that his conceptualization is not delineated to the relationship of Africa to itself but a relation of the continent to the world. For Miano, "il s'agit d'en interroger les significations pour nous-mêmes, de voir comment procéder pour y loger, par catachrèse, des métaphores nouvelles par lesquelles l'appropriation serait plus qu'un renversement du stigmate, et qui pourrait soutenir un projet de civilisation original, autonome" (106). Because the human capital is important in the reflection, it is important to open the debate to a plurality of voices. Indeed, the discussions cannot

[94] Christiane Taubira, French former minister of justice who is from Caribbean/African descent, gave a talk during the 2019 Ateliers de la Pensée.

be limited to the intellectuals, who already have a voice in matters related to the continent. A rethinking of the continent should include the different social layers. Recent popular demonstrations in Africa and its diaspora, including Senegal, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Mali, etc., attest to the importance of liberating the reflection. The average citizen cannot continually be at the margin of such an important chapter of the continent. To prevent them from contributing is not only to remove them from the imaginary of development of the continent and the Afrodiasporic spaces, but also entails a reenactment of the characteristics of universalism, this time, by African intellectuals on African subjects.[95] To rethink is, therefore, to find ways to effectively listen to the masses in the continent's capital cities as well as in the remote villages.

An important question that needs to be investigated is the restriction of mobilities for African and African descended people. Though the imaginary conceptualized and defended in this work calls for Africans and the diaspora to return from their exilic experiences and contribute to Afrotopia, it is not calling for their restriction to freely move between continents and countries. It is a fact that there is an urgence for Africa to produce and gather its epistemology. Yet, preventing Africans from accessing the West is at a great degree stopping them from accessing an important source of knowledge and as such, refusing that they participate in the exchanges that characterize the twenty first century. The implementation of the restrictions through new military, political and economic norms calls African to reestablish a new contract of mobility within the continent.[96] It

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[95] Under the notion of universalism, Western countries imposed their ideologies on the global south, making their vision of the world the norms, without opening the human epistemology to other nations. In *Poétique de la relation* (1990), Edouard Glissant opposes such a vision of universalism.

[96] Mbembe remarks in "L'Afrique qui vient" that "au demeurant, *la violence aux frontières et par les frontières* tend à devenir un des traits marquants de la condition contemporaine. Elle est une forme relativement circonscrite de la violence de la guerre. Cette forme nouvelle de la guerre n'oppose pas une armée à une autre. Elle est une guerre menée par des bureaucraties civiles relativement invisibles, mais transformées en agences policières au nom de l'anticipation des risques" (19).

is no secret that the sociopolitical manifestations of the African *vivre ensemble* did not succeed in shattering the borders between countries on the continent, nor did it succeed in creating a social cohesion between Africans of diverse nationalities. The recent attacks of Ivorians on people from Niger living in Abidjan, and the recurrent xenophobic expressions in South Africa speaks volumes about the need to quickly assess intra-African mobilities.[97] The frontiers, as well as the great regional blocks inherited from colonization have maintained a great distance between Africans. As such Africans have become foreigners for Africans and that posits important problems for the imaginary of development.

In this dissertation, different literary texts from Hane, Mokeddem, Mabanckou, and Laferrière have illustrated some of the ways the return from exile contributes to the cultural and sociopolitical imaginary of Africa and its diaspora. The utopia, as advocated by Sarr, has not only been debated in and outside the continent, but has also been exemplified by the literary imagination that placed Africans and African descended people at the center of the changes that await the continent.

[97] For more information about the attack on Nigeriens in Ivory Coast, refer to https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/one-killed-many-injured-in-ivory-coast-xenophobic-violence-20210521

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