D.Phil. Thesis Abstract

Dauda Yillah ~ Lady Margaret Hall ~ Hilary 2007

Post-War French Writings on Black Africa: The Ambiguities and Paradoxes of a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Edward Said stresses the politically and ideologically skewed nature of western imperial responses to colonised or formerly colonised cultures and peoples. articulated in a variety of media, including scholarly and imaginative writings, which are inflected by the various kinds of power (political, intellectual, cultural and moral) that the West has wielded and continues to wield over non-Western regions of the world. While recognising the path-breaking import of Said's work, critics have pointed out his blindness to the possibilities of resistance to and subversion of the discourse of Empire within the western-authored texts that he discusses. Even where he does consider the issue of resistance and opposition to Empire by western intellectuals, he still stresses the complicity of their texts with the processes of Empire. If one were to pursue the logic of such criticisms to its limit and apply it to the intellectual resistance generated from the centre in the context of the post-War dismantling of European overseas empires and its aftermath, one might be tempted to conclude that such resistance constitutes an unqualified disruption of colonial modes of apprehending difference. Against the backdrop of such readings of Said, this thesis examines the issue of cross-cultural representation in a selection of mainstream metropolitan French writings relating to black Africa produced between 1945 and the present. It brings together scholars and writers like Gide, Sartre and Griaule, some of whose works relating to black Africa belong to the first decade of the post-War period marked by France's continued colonial presence in the continent. It also considers other scholars and writers like Dumont, Conchon, Verchave and Le Clézio, whose books appeared in the second and succeeding decades of the period. The overall aim is to identify the ways in which these writers respond individually and collectively to black Africa often construed as a paradigm of cultural difference, and to consider whether such cross-cultural responses, given their historical context, can be described as being invariably a function of the changing relations between France and black Africa. What forms do the cross-cultural responses take? What cultural assumptions and ideological motivations shape those responses? Are the responses entirely disruptive of colonial modes of relating to difference? If not, what are their aporias, their ambiguities and paradoxes? My conclusion is that while Sartre and others relate to black Africa with unmistakeable empathy, their positive cross-cultural disposition does not necessarily enable them to attain a relationship with the peoples and cultures of Africa which is an equipollent relationship between equals.

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If one were to pursue the logic of such criticisms to its limit and apply it to the intellectual resistance generated from the centre in the context of the post-War dismantling of European overseas empires and its aftermath, one might be tempted to conclude that such resistance constitutes an unqualified disruption of colonial modes of apprehending difference. Against the backdrop of such readings of Said, this thesis examines the issue of cross-cultural representation in a selection of mainstream metropolitan French writings relating to black Africa produced between 1945 and the present. As that period saw the dislocation of France's black African empire and the emergence in its place of a politically independent continent, the thesis seeks to identify

the ways in which various writers respond individually and collectively to black Africa often construed as a paradigm of cultural difference, and to consider whether such cross-cultural responses, given their historical context, can be described as being invariably a function of the changing relations between France and black Africa. What forms do the cross-cultural responses take? What cultural assumptions and ideological motivations shape those responses? Are the responses entirely disruptive of colonial modes of relating to difference? If not, what are their aporias, their ambiguities and paradoxes?

In addressing these questions, the thesis brings together scholars and writers like Gide, Sartre and Griaule, some of whose works relating to black Africa belong to the first decade of the post-War period marked by France's continued colonial presence in the continent. It also considers other scholars and writers like Verschave and Negroni, Conchon and Le Clézio, whose books appeared in the second and succeeding decades of the period. Lastly the thesis discusses writers like Balandier whose writings span the whole period. While it would be perfectly legitimate to approach each of these scholars and writers in a narrow temporal context, I am persuaded that approaching them as a unit is equally legitimate where one seeks to map out the responses to cultural difference within the wider temporal framework of the ending of colonial control.

Since cross-cultural representations produced over five decades or so constitute in the nature of things a complex and varied phenomenon, one might ask whether the works chosen for treatment reflect such complexity and variety. They have been chosen because of the intellectual range they represent, to include sociological and ethnological pieces, literary critical articles, books by agronomists and human-rights activists and indeed works of fiction (two of them by a woman). Over and beyond their specific

disciplinary, generic and gender frameworks, they exhibit a shared imaginative template in their authors' attempt to come to terms with France's historical ties with its erstwhile black African periphery. Where matters of cross-cultural perceptions and representations are concerned, the non-fictional works provide the intellectual basis within their narrower, specialised frameworks, of attitudes towards difference; attitudes which the fictional works echo in their much larger, imaginative domain.

The juxtaposition of essays and novels in the thesis is not intended to present the latter as exact and undifferentiated copies of the former where cross-cultural representation is concerned. As Jean-Marc Moura reminds us, the conditioning of literary works by the facts of colonial dominance is not by any means a foregone conclusion. For while colonialism through its institutions and policies is premised on closure and control in its dealings with difference, narratives of difference exemplified by travel literature offer a characteristically nomadic and de-centred viewpoint. But as Moura again notes, if a close reading of a literary work may throw into relief a writer's distinctive perspective on difference, the same work may at the same time bear the stamp of its historical context. No European writer writes as they please about non-European cultures and peoples: their competence in such matters and the very language they adopt are determined by a multiplicity of factors, explicit or hidden, including their personal circumstances, the literary models they use and the historical situation in which they write. The works examined in this thesis are grouped together in terms of the ways their authors, writing in the context of decolonisation and its aftermath, question their country's recent and on-going relations with black Africa.

A shared imaginative template on matters of cultural difference justifies the juxtaposition of works by sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, cultural and literary critics and human rights activists on the one hand and by novelists on the other. Yet how does one decide precisely which non-fictional and fictional works should constitute the material investigated? The thesis is not a quantitative account of essays and novels produced in France relating to black Africa in the last half century. Rather, it is a tentative exploration of how some influential scholars and writers have responded to African situations in the context of their country's continuing relations with that continent. Regarding the choice of fictional material, the thesis places emphasis on the novel, as this is the literary form through which post-War French authors seem to have largely handled the black African theme.

The term mainstream French writing is used in the thesis to refer to essays and novels by authors of intellectual repute and of proven literary merit such as Gide, Sartre, Griaule and Balandier. The thesis also considers essays by multi-faceted personalities like René Dumont, whose *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (1962) is considered in some quarters as the best analysis of the developmental needs of post-colonial African societies, and Verschave, who was until his death in 2005 the president of 'Survie', a pressure group that monitors France's African co-operation policy. The novelists chosen, Conchon, Constant, Grainville and Le Clézio, have been crowned by the award of prestigious literary prizes like the Goncourt, the Renaudot and the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française.

The issue of location as reflected in the term metropolitan France is equally important. As France's official retreat from the colonies is not synonymous with complete political

and cultural disengagement but has led rather to new forms of domination, these authors represent the intellectual elite of a post-imperial society that is still visibly active in its erstwhile black African periphery. The choice of essays and novels on black Africa by exclusively white, metropolitan French writers and scholars thus provides an opportunity to observe how these intellectuals relate to issues of cultural difference.

The issue of location is important in one other respect: for ease of exposition and coherence, the thesis focuses on fictional works that are explicitly set in black Africa. Of course Le Clézio's *Onitsha*, published in 1991, is set not in a formerly French African colony but in what was British-ruled Nigeria. I have selected the book nonetheless, for the important thing to note is that whether the action of any of the novels considered takes place in a French colony or not, or in a country once administered by France or not, the author is almost always faced with the fundamental problem of responding to a continent judged from the outset to be culturally different from the one he or she represents.

In determining the extent to which post-War French intellectual responses to black African situations might be read as sites of contestation of colonial modes of cross-cultural representation, a crucial issue arises: how does one define and categorise a writer's cross-cultural perspective in a given fictional or non-fictional text? Indeed how does one distinguish in a text a dominating apprehension of cultural difference from a non-dominating one? What in textual terms are the signs or markers of cultural control and those of its opposite, that is, respect for and acceptance of difference? What forms do the markers of the presence or the absence of dominating and non-dominating modes of cross-cultural depiction take? And how much of the presence or absence of those

modes of apprehending and delineating cultural difference is quantifiable in one text and in another?

In seeking answers to these questions, I offer a critique in the first chapter of the thesis of a number of imagological studies of representations of black Africa in French literature over significant stretches of time. In doing so, I attempt to link up contemporary debates surrounding the issue of western intellectual resistance and opposition to Empire to aspects of the earlier critical tradition of imagological studies. These studies seem to promote in general terms and in opposition to what is viewed as a negative, stereotypical and, by extension, dominating perspective on cultural difference, a certain model of positive, fuller, or rather, non-dominating cross-cultural representation. One set of studies sees this model at work in some of the pre-War literary texts it explores while another throws into relief the absence of the positive model of cross-cultural representation and the prevalence of its opposite, but then goes on to identify the conditions pointing to the possible emergence of the preferred model in the post-War period. But if a negative cross-cultural perspective is perhaps easily recognisable through the cultural assumptions and biases shaping and colouring it, does the converse, a positive perspective on difference, constitute a case of unproblematic journeys across the cultural divide? Indeed does not any attempt to discuss a culture other than one's own, inevitably involve using one's own cultural reference to describe the other culture? And when in a colonial or neo-colonial situation one stands in a position of strength vis-à-vis other cultures, is one's vision of them entirely immune to the discourse of control? Is not even the most enlightened perspective on cultural difference in this case open to contradictions and inconsistencies?

To explore these issues, the second chapter of the thesis draws upon the argument that resistance and opposition was an inherent feature of the experience of empire, expressed by scholars and writers not just from the colonies but from the imperial centre itself. In this way the thesis approaches post-War French fictional and non-fictional works selected as scholarly and artistic variations on what I call a narrative of collective self-criticism; a narrative which in the spirit of the general context of decolonisation and independence to which it belongs sets out to interrogate the cultural assumptions and ideological motivations shaping France's colonial and neo-colonial involvement with black Africa.

The first section of the chapter focuses on a range of essays which display a positive, non-dominating mode of apprehending and delineating cultural difference, by virtue of the fact that such features add up to an explicit attempt by the authors to undo the ethnocentrism that served to justify France's colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and subjugation of black Africa. Here, I consider the radical positions taken on matters of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation by scholars and writers as different from each other as Sartre in the early post-War period and Verschave in the 1990s.

The second section of the chapter explores further the themes of anti-colonialism and of cultural self-criticism taken as positive features of cross-cultural representation, by considering works by four novelists, Conchon, Grainville and Constant and Le Clézio, To date these novelists have between them published eight books set in black Africa and offering either a retrospective perspective on the colonial presence in that continent or a vision of the more immediate post-independent African realities, or a combination of the two. Through the system of characters they create and the narrative viewpoints they

adopt, the novelists convey a sense of Europe's questionable involvement with the continent.

Related to this anti-colonial and cultural self-critical narrative is another narrative, that of cross-cultural empathy, which is the focus of the third chapter of the thesis. A logical outgrowth of the cultural self-criticism and the questioning of France's colonial and neo-colonial project which the post-War French scholars and writers undertake is their unmistakable attempt at an empathetic apprehension and delineation of black African situations. Focusing on the essays already discussed, the first section of this chapter examines a second level of positive features of cross-cultural representation, namely a range of ideas, attitudes and strategies whose main thrust is a recognition, indeed celebration, of black Africa and its people construed as a paradigm of cultural difference. The second section then examines how the novelists celebrate in fictional terms what is judged as the continent's cultural specificity.

The fourth chapter then strikes a dissonant note within the thesis. It emphasises what I call limits to disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural representation. Looked at more closely, the anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and celebration of difference explored in the preceding two chapters seem fractured in places: the cultural assumptions and biases that are unmasked and negated seem to resurface and the empathy towards difference remains in certain respects affiliated to the discourse of control. The first section examines the complexities of the anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and empathy towards difference in the essays, showing how those disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural representation are held in check by a certain cultural self-assertiveness which the writers set out ostensibly to shed. The second section does the

same for the novelists, whose attempt to enter empathetically into pre- and indeed post-independent African situations seems to be at variance with certain observable, if at times unacknowledged, assumptions about the superiority of European culture and modes of thought.

What I thus demonstrate in the thesis are the ambiguities and paradoxes of the cross-cultural perspectives offered by the French scholars and writers I investigate. My main claim is that while it can be said with some justification that they respond positively to the black African situations they depict or discuss in their writings, the cross-cultural perspectives they offer are not without their problems. The perspectives do not entirely put to rest the assumptions and biases that underpinned Europe's antagonistic and dominating relationship with black Africa. This is not to discredit them, however. Rather, it is to do two things; firstly, to highlight the anti-colonial and cultural self-critical thrust of their writings considering the cross-cultural understanding such anti-colonialism and cultural self-criticism facilitate and foster; secondly, to emphasise by drawing attention to the aspect of cultural self-reassertion in their works, the need for continued vigilance. For misconceptions about other cultures die hard especially in today's world characterised by the global reach of western economic and technological ascendancy and its attendant global political, intellectual and cultural outcomes.

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Contents

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La plume est une arme dangereuse: trop longtemps au service de la plus redoutable des dominations: la domination culturelle. Je vais essayer [...] d'en éviter le piège...
(René Dumont, *Pour l'Afrique, j'accuse*, 1986, p.13)

Introduction

1. The Said-Porter Controversy

Did the post-War dislocation of France's colonial hold on black Africa necessarily usher in a period of unqualified disruption of colonial modes of cross-cultural perception and representation in French writings pertaining to the continent? If, as Edward Said has argued in his influential book *Orientalism,* Western scholars and writers of Empire reproduced in their works on non-metropolitan cultures the supremacist political spirit of their age,[1] should one assume that French writings relating to black Africa in the last half century constitute a new mode of cross-cultural depiction? Does the former French imperial centre now perceive differently its former black African periphery, in intellectual terms at least, now that it comprises a multiplicity of independent sovereign entities? But then what sense should one make of the fact that although France has officially retreated from what used to be its black African possessions, these areas continue to be a key arena for France's projection of its national identity, that is, its prestige and power as a former imperial nation and an important post-War world actor?[2]

To address these questions, I will begin by discussing Said's work, since a certain critical response to it provides a useful starting point for explaining why I have chosen to investigate the nature and function of French essays and novels on black Africa written in the last half century or so, what sources I have used, and what procedures I have adopted

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[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* [1978] (London, Penguin Books, 1995).
[2] See for instance G. Martin, 'The Historical, Economical and Political Bases of France's African Policy', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 23, 2 (1985), 189-208, and T. Chafer, 'French African Policy in Historical Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 19, 1 (2001), 165-82.

in handling the subject. Indeed if critics and theorists alike have acknowledged the far-reaching influence of Said's book on the constitution and development of postcolonial studies, they have in the same breath underlined what they consider to be major flaws in it. One such flaw, of crucial importance for my argument, is what has been seen as Said's ironic if unconscious promotion of the very reductive essentialism he locates at the heart of Western scholarly and imaginative writings on the Orient. It is claimed that even though he refers often to the need to rethink the Orientalist tradition and suggests that there might be non-dominating ways of apprehending difference, his remarks on these matters are no more than hints; he thus fails to engage with the texts he discusses in ways that emphasise the non-adversarial forms of knowledge which he advocates. For instance, Dennis Porter insists on the flawed theoretical framework Said adopts, claiming that by yoking together what he considers to be two potentially conflicting theories - Foucault's discourse theory and Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony - Said denies the literary texts of Empire the capacity to undermine the political spirit of their age and to produce knowledge of cultural difference that is free from the constraints of imperialism. Porter then discusses Marco Polo's thirteenth-century *Travels* and T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, both of which Said mentions, to demonstrate how texts that are 'characterised by a self-interrogating density of verbal texture' may offer internal resistance to the very ideologies they tend to foreground.[3]

This issue of internal textual resistance to hegemonic discourse also informs the theoretical perspectives of Homi Bhabha, like Said a key figure of postcolonial criticism

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[3] D. Porter, 'Orientalism and Its Problems', in *The Politics of Theory, Proceedings of the Essex Sociology of Literature Conference*, ed. Francis Barker and others (Colchester, University of Essex, 1983), 179-193 (p. 182). For a detailed discussion of critical responses to Said's works and of Said's influence on

and theory. Indeed as Valerie Kennedy has shown in her excellent critical introduction to the works of Said, the distinctiveness of Bhabha's theoretical perspectives stems from the emphasis he places on the heterogeneous and ambivalent character of colonial and postcolonial experience and society; an emphasis that allows him to highlight instances of counter-hegemonic discourse that are absent in *Orientalism*.[4] In point of fact, in exploring what he sees as the problematic condition of nation as narrative, Bhabha defines the ambivalence and heterogeneity he sees at work in large-scale processes of identity formation in these terms: 'a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of political and cultural authority are negotiated'.[5] This possibility of resistance to hegemonic discourse, be it in the shape of resistance from within the metropolitan literary canon or from colonial or postcolonial textual peripheries, is further elaborated by Kennedy herself for whom Said's exclusive focus on Western male writers prevents him from seeing the potential contradictions within the Western Orientalist canon he investigates. Kennedy writes:

> In limiting his discussion to the works and actions of predominantly Western male writers, Said loses an opportunity to look at Western imperialism in a radically different way. A consideration of the works of non-canonical writers, men and women, Western and non-Western, would give a different view of the imperialist project from the peripheries rather than from somewhere near the centre.[6]

Mindful certainly of having overlooked the possibility of dissonant, counter-hegemonic

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postcolonial studies, see V. Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000).

[4] For the distinctions that Kennedy makes between Said and Bhabha and for her analysis of Bhabha's adoption and extension of Said's ideas, see *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 118-123.

[5] Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990), p. 4. For details of Bhabha's point about the ambivalent and contradictory dimension of colonial discourse see his 'Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker and others (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1983), 194-21, and in particular his 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (Spring 1984), 125-133.

[6] *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 101-102.

voices within the Western Orientalist tradition. Said seems to have made amends by devoting a chapter of his *Culture and Imperialism*[7] to the issue of intellectual resistance and opposition to Empire. That book appeared some fifteen years after *Orientalism* and is generally seen as a sequel to it. *Culture and Imperialism* does restate some of the arguments first advanced in *Orientalism* pertaining to Western culture's complicity with the processes of Empire. Nevertheless, it shows how the views of liberal-minded intellectuals from metropolitan Britain and France often paralleled the positions of intellectuals from Asian and African colonial peripheries in raising doubts even before the period of decolonisation about the morality and practices of empire. Such questioning from both sides of the imperial divide was characteristic between the wars and was intensified in the post-War years, which witnessed the rapid dismantling of Empire fuelled particularly by the strident rejection of European tutelage by intellectuals from the colonies like Frantz Fanon and C. L. R. James. And in a later edition of *Orientalism* itself, Said adds an afterward to his original work. There, he mentions James again alongside the Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie, and the Caribbean poets Aimé Césaire and Derek Walcott, calling their works 'daring new formal achievements [which] are in effect a re-appropriation of the historical experience of colonialism, revitalized and transformed into a new aesthetics of sharing and often transcendent re-formulation'.[8]

Yet to Kennedy, Said's treatment of the issue of counter-hegemonic discourse lacks the complexity of Bhabha's handling of the subject. According to her, Bhabha's view of

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[7] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] (London, Vintage, 1994).
[8] *Orientalism*, p. 353.

colonial discourse as 'contradictory and conflict-ridden'[9] contrasts sharply with Said's presentation of it as an 'essentially unified and dominant system which effectively silences those it rules.'[10] She adds that while Bhabha uses the concept of hybridity to emphasise the inherent ambiguity of colonial discourse and its potential for self-interrogation and negation, Said uses it in a limited sense to refer to the 'overlapping of colonizing and colonized cultures in all domains, and the characteristics of literary works produced in this situation'.[11] Apparently only Bhabha goes far enough in his use of the concept to credit colonial discourse with the capacity to resist and subvert the very authority - colonial power - from which it emanates. Kennedy refers to Bhabha's discussion of potential Indian converts to Christianity as exemplifying the way 'resistance to colonial discourse actually operates'.[12] Said seemingly fails to show how that resistance works, for if he comes up with the technique of contrapuntal reading as a way of accounting for the literature of resistance and opposition that he discusses in *Culture and Imperialism*, he also demonstrates through that technique the 'imperial complicity of Western-authored texts'.[13] Interestingly, Kennedy is quick to point out the limitations of Bhabha's own arguments. Bhabha's analyses may have the advantage of clarifying the transgressive nature and function of colonial discourse. They are however according to her no less 'problematic in terms of agency, intention and history'.[14] Referring to More-Gilbert's critique of Bhabha, she adds:

> It is never clear [from Bhabha] whether the colonial subject is conscious of the ambivalence and mimicry of his subject. If mimicry is not conscious on the part of the colonised, then it cannot be intentionally subversive. Moreover, the

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[9] *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*, p. 122.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., p. 123.

> ambivalence in the discourse of the coloniser does not make that discourse any less effective as a tool of imperial repression.[15]

Kennedy's use of Bhabha to critique Said and the qualification she gives in the same breath to Bhabha's own insights seem to be a reading of Said that gives back with one hand what it takes with the other. She seems to be saying that if colonial discourse is complex enough to transcend Said's characterisation of it as a basically unifying and reductive conception of and reaction to difference, it is at the same time predictable enough in its nature and function to be seen as an instrument of the repressive power structure it springs from and represents. Perhaps the difference between Said and Bhabha is in one sense a matter of emphasis; the heterogeneity Bhabha underscores does not necessarily erase the uniformity Said throws into relief, while Said's perspective itself does not cancel out Bhabha's.

2. Resistance and Opposition to the Idea of Empire: The French Context

This double-edged nature of colonial discourse seems to be at the heart of Girardet's *L'idée coloniale en France: de 1871 à 1962.*[16] This work is a second important critical reference point for my thesis both in terms of the comprehensive and detailed historical background the book provides in relation to reactions in France to that country's overseas colonial expansionist project, and in terms particularly of the light it sheds on the various forms of discursive opposition to which this project gave birth. Significantly, Said himself regards Girardet's work as offering the most sustained

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Raoul Girardet, *L'idée coloniale en France: de 1871 à 1962* (Paris, Editions de la Table Ronde, 1972).

exploration to date of the anti-imperialist movement in France.[17] Girardet details in his work the complex and differing and often warring reactions to the idea of empire among France's intellectual and political elite and indeed within the wider French society from the early years of the Third Republic to those of the Fifth: a period which witnessed, it should be noted, the birth, growth and subsequent decline of France's imperial dominance in Asia and Africa. He argues that from its inception in the 1870s following France's defeat by Prussia and the associated loss of Alsace-Lorraine, through its apogee symbolised by the colonial exhibition held in Paris in 1931, to its final dislocation exemplified by the Algerian war of independence and France's official retreat from that colony in 1962, France's overseas imperial enterprise occasioned a strong and sustained current of anti-colonialism. In the period leading up to the First World War, a period that witnessed the military phase of France's overseas imperial enterprise and the subsequent establishment of French rule in the conquered territories, Girardet shows that there was an outright support in French intellectual and political circles for overseas territorial conquest and control, hailed among other things as a new source of wealth for an industrialised European nation which needed overseas territories both for the raw material they provided and for the fact they could serve as outlets for its products. Colonial expansion was also hailed on political grounds: it was thought of as a means of national self-regeneration, that is, a way of restoring France to its status as a world power; a status that had been compromised by her loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Additionally, colonial expansion was hailed and justified on moral grounds: it was seen as a means of pursuing abroad the humanitarian ideal of bringing the blessings of Western civilisation to the less

[17] *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 291.

enlightened and advanced cultures and peoples of the earth. France was particularly well-suited for this role, being a champion of democracy and human rights. This was after all the country that produced the 1789 Revolution and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* to which that revolution gave birth. There was however a simultaneous rejection of the same territorial conquest and control, which were viewed in certain quarters either as a needless waste of France's human and material resources, which could be better utilised at home, or as an unjustifiable exploitation of non-European lands and peoples. Such conquest and control achieved by force of arms ironically violated the spirit of human rights and democracy in the name of which it was conducted.

Girardet further shows that these warring reactions to the idea of empire characterised the inter-War years as well. For while that period witnessed the apotheosis of the colonial enterprise epitomised in the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, which was indeed a national event attracting no less than thirty-four million visitors, it also saw the radical contestation of the idea of empire by communists in France, who saw colonial issues in terms of a wider, proletarian struggle against capitalist exploitation, of which imperialism seemed a specific manifestation. Additionally, Girardet argues that another level of contestation resulted ironically from the very nature of the colonial project itself: by bringing Europeans into close, physical proximity with what were assumed to be savage and barbarous lands, there emerged a range of studies devoted to various aspects of life in the colonies which went to demonstrate the authenticity and validity of their cultural heritage. A third level of contestation Girardet discusses is the emergence in the same period in Paris of a black intelligentsia originating from France's African and Caribbean

peripheries, whose emancipatory discourse, exemplified by the writings of Césaire and Senghor and commonly referred to as the Negritude movement, represented the response of colonised black people to the supremacist ideology of colonialism.

The first two decades of the post-War period then witnessed similar conflicting attitudes and responses to the principles and practices of colonisation. On the one hand, intellectuals and politicians of differing ideological, political and religious persuasions, the military, and indeed French society generally, continued at the onset of decolonisation to support and justify in their varying ways France's hold on its overseas colonial territories in the name of their nation's grandeur and sovereignty. On the other hand, there was active opposition to colonialism either in the form of violent, revolutionary writings from France's imperial peripheries such as Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* and Fanon' s *Les damnés de terre*, first published in 1955 and 1961 respectively in the heat of decolonisation, or in the form of moral protests within metropolitan France itself, where sections of French society including left-wing intellectuals and the communist party rallied to the cause of Algerian independence.

But central to Girardet's argument is his conviction that what was strikingly missing in the debate surrounding the colonial question during the various phases of France's colonial history was 'le respect de l'Autre et la volonté de le comprendre'.[18] Not even the anti-colonial movement was immune from this incomprehension of and lack of respect for difference: the communist outcry of the interwar years or the support for the cause of Algerian independence often served hidden agendas - ideological or otherwise - and thus constituted varying forms of appropriation of difference.

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[18] *L'idée coloniale en France*, p. xi.

The official demise of empire epitomised by the Algerian debacle did not in Girardet's view seem to usher in a new and better mode of apprehending difference. Indeed in answer to this question asked by a dispirited supporter of the French Algerian cause: 'Un peuple peut-il vivre sans rêve, et le grand rêve algérien par quel autre le remplacer?'[19]. Girardet predicts three possible outcomes of the end of his country's imperial dream. France may transform its ambition of external domination into one of internal consolidation, devoting its energies to developmental tasks at home, and in so doing ensure its security and well-being. It may also seek to replace one failed big external project with another, namely the construction of a united Europe beyond the traditional framework of old states and nations, which task would recuperate for its purposes the great expectations the overseas imperial project had generated in its heyday. Thirdly and more importantly for our argument, France may also seek to respond in a new guise and in a new political context to those calls that had during the age of empire propelled it and its people towards Africa and Asia. For while France's post-1960 policy of aid and co-operation echoes the sincerity, altruism and generosity of those who saw France's imperial project as an act of charity and solidarity, that policy smacks at the same time of the cultural assumptions and misconceptions, the hidden agendas that had underpinned that very imperial project. Girardet notes:

> Elle [l'actuelle politique d' 'aide' et de 'coopération'] recouvre [...], maintenus dans un sembable et très discret arrière plan, les mêmes calculs, les mêmes arrières-pensées, les mêmes présomptions, les mêmes vanités. A travers elle, se trouve d'autre part, à peine changée, la même conception de rapports de civilisation, la même assurance dans la bonne conscience, la même certitude dans la supériorité des modèles occidentaux de progrès humain qui avaient si longtemps donné aux vieux impérialismes européens leur légitimation morale et stimulé leur dynamisme conquérant. Témoignage de l'inextinguible volonté de messianisme du vieux

[19] Ibid., p. 291.

> continent, de son inaltérable puissance de survie, les forces qu'elle tend à mobiliser ne semblent guère [...] prêtes à s'éteindre.[20]

But there is a problem here, and a crucial one at that. If Girardet criticises the continuity of attitudes of European superiority in the post-colonial age, his choice of words towards the end of the quotation clearly marks a change in his critical voice, showing how the discourse of control is discreetly embedded in his exposé of neo-colonialism. For he seems to admire, despite the negative impact he outlines, the vitality and strength displayed by France and Europe in their imperial and post-imperial dealings with non-European cultures and peoples. This is perhaps no surprise considering Girardet's own conflicting political and ideological orientations and affiliations. Born to a Republican family in 1917, Girardet held in his youth what one might in today's parlance call extreme right-wing views and sympathies. He was attracted to 'Action française' and was an admirer of Charles Maurras, the scholar and bitter critic of the French Revolution and its liberalist legacy and a passionate defender of monarchism and Catholicism which he viewed as the true embodiments of the French nation. Yet in the name of the 'grandeur de la France', Girardet participated in the resistance against Nazi occupation, but then supported the cause of 'Algérie française' in the name of the same principle. The point here is that Girardet's critique of the shortcomings of the anti-colonial movement and of his country's neo-colonial ambitions is undermined by his explicit if perhaps unconscious admiration of his culture's supposedly adventurous energies. The irony is that he celebrates the very thing he castigates, thus earning in his turn the reproach that the anti-colonial discourse did not go far enough.

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[20] Ibid., p. 292.

Additionally, Girardet plays down the role of anti-colonial movements from the colonial peripheries. He stresses instead the role played by the metropolitan centre both in the initiation and development of the colonial enterprise and in its subsequent demise. In other words, France alone in its greatness and generosity of spirit bore responsibility for the establishment of the colonies, and she alone out of the same disposition and under the able leadership of General de Gaulle presided over the dismantling of her empire when she saw fit.

If the author of a work that provides the most sustained study of the anti-imperialist movement in France and that recognises and denounces the fact that supporters and antagonists alike of colonialism failed to respect and understand cultural difference, cannot himself resist glorifying his culture's action in its dealings with other cultures, then surely one should guard against overrating the reach and effects of hegemonic subversion from within the western cross-cultural discursive space. This brings me to the main issue raised in this thesis: given that resistance and opposition constitute defining features of the processes of Empire and of the supremacist cross-cultural discourse that Empire enabled, what might the nature and function of intellectual cross-cultural representations then be when generated within a metropolitan centre whose control over its colonial peripheries ceased officially nearly a half century ago? Is one to assume that such intellectual cross-cultural responses are so conditioned by the momentous political change in relations between centre and periphery occasioned by the post-War dismantling of European overseas empires, that they constitute unqualified disruptions of colonial modes of apprehending cultural difference? Indeed if, as Porter and Kennedy contend, literary and gender specificities may generate sites of resistance within western

hegemonic discourse and inscribe within it alternative ways of relating to cultural difference, is the resistance such specificities create so effective as to rule out lapses into a discourse of control, especially where a post-imperial situation is concerned? More specifically, have the warring responses to the idea of empire, which, as Girardet shows, were at work in metropolitan France even up to the decade of decolonisation, now ended in an unqualified triumph of the discourse of resistance and opposition to empire? How close are they to achieving what Girardet calls 'le respect de l'Autre et la volonté de le comprendre'? But then considering that Girardet himself is at pains to distance himself from his culture's sense of its superiority and supremacy, how far-reaching is their attempt at cultural self-distancing and openness to difference?

In other words, how have post-War French scholars and writers related in the context of decolonisation and its aftermath to their country's colonial involvement with black Africa? Does one have here, to extend the logic of Porter and Kennedy's critique of Said's *Orientalism*, a more sympathetic apprehension and delineation of difference? Is their reaction to difference a success story of cross-cultural understanding? What are the merits of their approach to difference? Do these outweigh its demerits or is the reverse the case? How can one give an account of those merits and demerits in a bid to assess what has been achieved in terms of healthier cross-cultural relations, and what still needs to be done? It is certainly perfectly legitimate to ask, as Porter and Kennedy have done, whether to speak about colonised or formerly colonised societies from within the imperial or post-imperial centre inevitably results in a stereotypical and dominating perspective on difference. But it is perhaps equally important not to overstress such subversion of

colonial modes of apprehending difference, given that the effects of colonialism after the event are still with us.

3. Selection Criteria

To establish the extent to which post-War French intellectual responses to black African situations might be read as disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural perceptions and representations, a number of basic concerns regarding selection of corpus need to be addressed in the first place. To begin with, what does mainstream metropolitan French writing mean in this context and what are the criteria used in identifying such writing? Additionally, why examine essays and novels together? Is there not a risk here of diluting textual and generic specificities and of thus neutralising what might be called the relative autonomy of the literary instance? In other words, do essays (construed at a basic level as straightforward prose compositions on a given subject) and novels (taken as fictitious prose narratives of considerable length and complexity) necessarily approach cross-cultural issues in the same way? Are the fictional works selected by their nature as works of the imagination necessarily a direct reflection of the positions taken more or less explicitly on matters of difference in the non-fictional works? Furthermore, where fictional works are concerned, why limit the corpus to novels?

Chronological Range

A key criterion used in selecting the material examined is that of chronological range. The aim is to juxtapose a variety of writings produced in France on the black African theme from the early postwar years (the late 1940s) to the present so as to establish the

ways in which such writings relate to cross-cultural issues in the context of changing political situations. In this way, the thesis brings together scholars and writers like Gide, Sartre and Griaule, some of whose works relating to the continent belong to the first decade of the postwar period marked by France's continued colonial presence in black Africa. It also considers other scholars and writers like Verschave and de Negroni, Conchon and Le Clézio whose books appeared in the second and succeeding decades of the period. Lastly the thesis discusses writers like Balandier whose writings span the whole period. While it would be perfectly legitimate for a researcher interested in authorial and temporal specificities to approach each of these scholars and writers in the specific context of the decade in which his work appeared, I am persuaded that approaching them as a unit is equally legitimate where one seeks to map out the pattern or patterns of responses to cultural difference within a wider temporal framework shaped primarily by the official cessation of colonial control.

Intellectual Range; *Textual/Generic Diversity*

Assuming for a moment that cross-cultural representations produced over five decades or so constitute in the nature of things a complex and varied phenomenon, one might ask whether the works chosen for treatment reflect such complexity and variety. In point of fact, the works selected in the thesis have been chosen because of the intellectual range they represent. They include sociological and ethnological pieces, literary critical articles, books by agronomists and human rights activists and indeed works of fiction (two of them by a woman). Over and beyond their specific disciplinary, generic and gender frameworks, they exhibit a shared imaginative template in their authors' attempt

to come to terms with France's historical ties with its erstwhile black African periphery. In other words, where matters of cross-cultural perceptions and representations are concerned, the non-fictional works provide the intellectual basis within their narrower, specialised frameworks, of attitudes towards difference; attitudes which the fictional works echo in their much larger, imaginative domain.

It has to be said however that the juxtaposition of essays and novels in the thesis is not intended to present the latter as exact and undifferentiated copies of the former where cross-cultural representation is concerned. Indeed as Jean-Marc Moura reminds us, the conditioning of literary works by the facts of colonial dominance is not by any means a foregone conclusion. For while colonialism through its institutions and policies is premised on closure and control in its dealings with difference, narratives of difference exemplified by travel literature offer on the other hand a characteristically nomadic and de-centred viewpoint in relating to difference.[21] But as Moura again notes, if a close reading of a literary work may throw into relief a writer's distinctive perspective on difference, the same work may at the same time highlight 'les présupposés, les idées, les options politiques, toutes les déterminations historiques qui ont marqué la création du roman et qui lui donnent sa coloration particulière'.[22] The point Moura is making is that no European writer writes as they please about non-European cultures and peoples: their competence in such matters and the very language they adopt are determined by a multiplicity of factors, explicit or hidden, including their personal circumstances, the literary models they use and the historical situation in which they write. The works examined in this thesis are grouped together in terms of the ways their authors, writing in

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[21] *L'Europe littéraire et l'ailleurs* (Paris, PUF, 1998), p. 5.
[22] Ibid. p. 3.

the context of decolonisation and its aftermath, seek to question in their essays and in their novels their country's recent and on-going relations with black Africa.

A shared imaginative template on matters of cultural difference justifies the juxtaposition of works by sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, cultural and literary critics and human rights activists on the one hand and by novelists on the other. Yet how does one decide what quantity of non-fictional and fictional works should constitute the material investigated? The thesis is not of course a quantitative account of essays and novels produced in France relating to black Africa in the last half century. Rather, it is a tentative exploration of how some influential scholars and writers have responded to African situations in the context of their country's continuing relations with that continent. Regarding the choice of fictional material, the thesis places emphasis on the novel, as this is the literary form through which post-War French authors seem to have largely handled the black African theme. There is of course Chalaye's *Du noir au nègre: l'image du noir au théâtre*,[23] which focuses on pre-War and post-War literary material in the domain of drama and theatre but this seems to be the exception that confirms the rule. Indeed studies like Sébastien Joachim's *Le nègre dans le roman blanc, lecture sémiotique et idéologique du roman français et canadien*,[24] Dugast-Portes's 'Héros noirs, romans blancs dans la littérature française métropolitaine'[25]and Jean-Marc Moura's *L'image du tiers monde dans le roman français contemporain*[26] all focus mainly on post-War French novels and in so doing exemplify the primacy of the novel in post-War French writers'

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[23] Sylvie Chalaye, *Du noir au nègre: l'image du noir au théâtre* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998).
[24] *Le nègre dans le roman blanc, lecture sémiotique et idéologique du roman français et canadien* (Montréal, Presses de L'Université de Montréal, 1980).
[25] F. Dugast-Portes, 'Héros noirs, romans blancs dans la littérature française métropolitaine', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 19-35.
[26] Jean-Marc Moura, *L'image du tiers monde dans le roman français contemporain* (Paris, PUF, 1992).

treatment of the cross-cultural theme. My selection of corpus reflects this critical bias in favour of novels.

Intellectual Stature/Imaginative Capacity

The term mainstream French writing is used in the thesis to refer to essays and novels by authors of intellectual repute and of proven literary merit. The focus therefore is on essays by such prestigious and well-known figures as the writer Gide and the philosopher and critic Sartre, and by such distinguished Africanists as Maurice Griaule who is credited with pioneering ethnographical fieldwork in France and Georges Balandier who is known for studies on the dynamics of social change in societies subjected to the influence of Western modernity. The thesis also considers essays by multi-faceted personalities like the ecologist, agronomist, third worldist and one-time candidate for the French presidency René Dumont. His book *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* first appeared in 1962 and has ever since enjoyed the status of a classic, hailed in some quarters as the best analysis of the developmental needs of post-colonial African societies. Additionally, the thesis takes into account very recent essays by François-Xavier Verschave. Verschave was a human rights-activist who until his death in 2005 presided over 'Survie', a pressure group that monitors France's African co-operation policy. His appraisal of successive post-War French governments' involvement with Africa made him recently the object of lawsuits initiated by some black African heads of state and French Government ministers who accused him of bringing their names into disrepute. Finally, the novelists chosen, Conchon, Constant, Grainville and Le Clézio, constitute a selection of writers whose works have been published by renowned publishing houses

like Gallimard and Seuil and have been crowned by the award of prestigious literary prizes like the Goncourt, the Renaudot and the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française.

It could be argued of course that such a selection simply compounds the problem Kennedy raises when she accuses Said of focusing mainly on established western writers. But perhaps what can be more atypical, more iconoclastic than the attitude of a writer like Sartre whose ire against the French establishment - the colonial one - often culminated in open endorsements of violence as a political strategy such as: 'Abattre un Européen c'est faire d'une pierre deux coups, supprimer en même temps un oppresseur et un opprimé: restent un homme mort et un homme libre'?[27]

Geographical Location

The issue of location as reflected in the term metropolitan France is equally important. Indeed as France's official retreat from the colonies is not synonymous with complete political and cultural disengagement but has led rather to new forms of domination, the authors whose texts I have selected thus represent the intellectual elite of a post-imperial society that is still active and visibly so in its erstwhile black African periphery. The choice of essays and novels on black Africa by exclusively white, metropolitan French writers and scholars thus provides an opportunity to observe how these intellectuals relate to issues of cultural difference.

The issue of location is important in one other respect: for ease of exposition and coherence, the thesis focuses on fictional works that are explicitly set in black Africa. Of

[27] J.-P. Sartre, *Situations V* (Paris, Gallimard, 1964), p. 183.

course Le Clézio's *Onitsha*, published in 1991, is set not in a formerly French African colony but in what was British-ruled Nigeria. I have selected the book nonetheless, for the important thing to note is that whether the action of any of the novels considered takes place in a French colony or not, or in a country once administered by France or not, the author is almost always faced with the fundamental problem of responding to a continent judged from the outset to be culturally different from the one he or she represents.

4. Plan of Thesis

The question that arises in determining the extent to which mainstream post-War French responses to black African situations might be read as sites of contestation of colonial and neo-colonial cross-cultural representation, is this: how does one define and categorise a writer's cross-cultural perspective in a given fictional or non-fictional text? How does one distinguish in a text between a dominating apprehension of cultural difference and a non-dominating one? What in textual terms are the signs or markers of cultural control and those of its opposite, that is, respect for and acceptance of difference? What forms do the markers of the presence or the absence of dominating and non-dominating modes of cross-cultural depiction in the essays and novels studied in this thesis take? And how much of the presence or absence of those modes of apprehending and delineating cultural difference is quantifiable in one text and in another?

In seeking answers to these questions, I start by offering a critique of a selection of imagological studies whose distinguishing feature is a sustained analysis of representations of black Africa in French literature over significant stretches of time. In

doing so, I attempt to link up contemporary debates surrounding the issue of western intellectual resistance and opposition to Empire to aspects of the earlier critical tradition of imagological studies. Read together, the studies offer an analysis of literary images dating from the middle of the sixteenth century to the Second World War and beyond, and seem to promote in general terms and in opposition to what is viewed as a negative, mythologised, stereotypical and, by extension, dominating perspective on cultural difference, a certain model of positive, demythologised, fuller or rather non-stereotypical and non-dominating cross-cultural perception and representation. One set of studies sees this model at work in some of the literary texts it explores, be these pre-War or post-War material.[28] A second set of studies, in appraising pre-War literary material, throws into relief the absence of the positive model of cross-cultural representation and the prevalence of its opposite, but then goes on to identify the conditions pointing to the possible emergence of the preferred model in the post-War period; while dealing with postwar literary material itself in which a negative response to difference happens to predominate, these studies make a case explicitly or otherwise for the desirability of the preferred model of cross-cultural representation.[29]

This preferred, supposedly enhanced model of cross-cultural representation seems to apply in general terms in the two sets of studies to writers of proven intellectual stature

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[28] This set of studies comprises Mercier's *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française. Les premières images* (1962), Lebel's *L'Afrique occidentale dans la littérature française* (1921) and *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* (1931), Milbury-Steen's *European and African stereotypes in Twentieth-Centuy Fiction* (1980) and Dugast-Portes' 'Héros noirs, romans blancs dans la littérature française métrpolitaine' (1988).

[29] The second set of studies includes Fanoudh-Siefer's *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française, de 1800 à la 2e guerre mondiale* (1968), Hoffmann's, *Le nègre romantique, personnage littéraire et obsession collective* (1973), Martinkus-Zemp's *Le blanc et le noir: essai d'une description de la vision du noir par le blanc dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres* (1975), Kimoni's *Une image du noir et de sa culture. Esquisse de l'évolution de l'idée du noir dans les lettres françaises du début du siècle à l'entre-deux-guerres* (1980), Chalaye's *Du noir au nègre: l'image du noir*

and imaginative capacity, whose works apparently reverse age-old negative assumptions about black Africans and their continent, prevalent by implication in the less enlightened strata of French society, and which popular opinion, the media and indeed minor writers tended to perpetuate. The first chapter identifies in both set of studies the categories or forms ascribed to each of the two models of cross-cultural representation. The categories, forms or markers of the positive model add up to what I call in general terms *anti-colonialism* and *cultural self-criticism* and their attendant *celebration* of difference. These words refer to a whole range of ideas, attitudes and strategies through which the harsh realities of Europe's colonial and neo-colonial ties with black Africa are unmasked, through which the racial and cultural assumptions tending to legitimise the colonial and neo-colonial project are disavowed, and through which black Africa taken as an autonomous and authentic cultural entity is celebrated.

As regards the categories or markers of the negative model of cross-cultural representation, my critique of the imagological studies leads me to instances of what I call again in broad terms *cultural self-reassertion* and its attendant *denigration* of difference. These words refer to situations in which a certain cultural consciousness, a certain collective pride and sense of superiority inform a writer's vision of his own culture in relation to another; a collective pride and sense of superiority which, in the words of Nobert Elias, 'sum up everything in which western society [...] believes itself to be superior to earlier societies or "more primitive" contemporary ones: its level of

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au théâtre (1998), and Joachim's *Le nègre dans le roman blanc, lecture sémiotique et idéologique du roman français et canadiens* (1980).

technology, the nature of its manners, the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world'.[30]

The chapter then raises a crucial issue: if a negative cross-cultural perspective is perhaps easily recognisable through the cultural assumptions and biases shaping and colouring it, is its opposite, a positive perspective on difference, a case of unproblematic journeys across the cultural divide? Indeed does not any attempt to discuss a culture other than one's own inevitably involve using one's own cultural reference to describe the other culture? And when in a colonial or neo-colonial situation one stands in a position of strength vis-à-vis other cultures, is one's vision of them entirely immune to the discourse of control? Is not even the most enlightened perspective on cultural difference in this case open to contradictions and inconsistencies?

To explore these issues, the second chapter of the thesis draws upon Said's and Girardet's argument that, as discussed above, resistance and opposition was an inherent feature of the experience of empire and that such resistance and opposition came not just from scholars and writers from the colonies but from scholars and writers situated at the imperial centre itself. In this way the thesis approaches post-War French fictional and non-fictional works selected as scholarly and artistic variations on what I call a narrative of collective self-criticism; a narrative which in the spirit of the general context of decolonisation and independence to which it belongs sets out to interrogate the cultural assumptions and ideological motivations shaping France's colonial and neo-colonial involvement with black Africa.

The first section of the chapter focuses on a range of essays which, taken together, display within their individual authors' disciplinary orientations and ideological

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[30] Nobert Elias,*The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1 (New York, Urizen Books, 1978), pp. 3-4.

motivations and from thematic standpoints, features that can be described, in the spirit of the imagological studies reviewed in the preceding chapter, as a positive, non-dominating mode of apprehending and delineating cultural difference. This is by virtue of the fact that such features add up to an explicit attempt by the authors to undo the ethnocentrism that served to justify France's colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and subjugation of black Africa. Here, I consider the radical positions taken on matters of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation by scholars and writers as different from each other as the critic and philosopher Sartre in the early post-War period and the human rights activist Verschave in the 1990s.

The second section of the chapter explores further the themes of anti-colonialism and of cultural self-criticism taken as positive features of cross-cultural representation, by considering works by four novelists, Conchon, Grainville and Constant and Le Clézio, To date these novelists have between them published eight books set in black Africa and offering either a retrospective perspective on France's (Europe's) colonial presence in that continent or a vision of the more immediate post-independent African realities, or a combination of the two.[31] The section describes how through the system of characters they create and the narrative viewpoints they adopt, the novelists relate to the historical and social circumstances of colonial and post-colonial Africa to convey a sense of Europe's questionable involvement with the continent.

Related to this anti-colonial and cultural self-critical narrative is another narrative, that of cross-cultural empathy, which is the focus of the third chapter of the thesis. A logical outgrowth of the cultural self-criticism and the questioning of France's colonial and neo-

colonial project which the post-War French scholars and writers undertake is their unmistakable attempt at an empathetic apprehension and delineation of post-1945 black African situations. Focusing on the essays already discussed in the first section of the second chapter, the first section of this chapter examines this time a second level of positive features of cross-cultural representation, namely a range of ideas, attitudes and strategies whose main thrust is a recognition, indeed celebration, of black Africa and its people construed as a paradigm of cultural difference. The second section then examines how the novelists attempt to enter in turn empathetically into African situations by celebrating in fictional terms what is judged as the continent's cultural specificity.

The fourth chapter strikes a dissonant note within the thesis, however. It emphasises what I call limits to disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural representation. Looked at more closely, the anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and celebration of difference explored in the preceding two chapters seem fractured in places: the cultural assumptions and biases that are unmasked and negated seem to resurface and the empathy towards difference remains in certain respects affiliated to the discourse of control. More specifically the first section of the chapter examines the complexities of the anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and empathy towards difference in the essays, showing how those disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural representation are held in check by a certain cultural self-assertiveness which the writers set out ostensibly to shed. The second section of the chapter explores the manner in which the novels themselves contradict the oppositional, anti-colonial perspective they initially display. For like the essays, the novels' attempt to enter empathetically into pre- and indeed post-

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[31] The novels in question are Conchon's *L'état sauvage* (1964), Grainville's *Les flamboyants* (1976) and *Le tyran éternel* (1998), Constant's *Ouregano* (1980), *Balta* (1983) and *White spirit* (1988) and Le Clézio's

independent African situations seems to be at variance with certain observable, if at times unacknowledged, assumptions about the superiority of European culture and modes of thought.

What I thus demonstrate in the thesis are the ambiguities and paradoxes of the cross-cultural perspectives offered by the French scholars and writers I investigate. My main claim is that while it can be said with some justification that they respond positively to the black African situations they depict or discuss in their writings, the cross-cultural perspectives they offer are not without their problems. The perspectives do not entirely put to rest the assumptions and biases that underpinned Europe's antagonistic and dominating relationship with black Africa. In articulating this claim, I ask whether the French scholars' and writers' cross-cultural responses which occurred in the context of decolonisation and its aftermath, can be described as being invariably a function of changing relations between France and black Africa. The issues I address in the four chapters taken as a whole are these: what forms do the cross-cultural responses displayed by Sartre and the other writers take? What assumptions and motivations shape those responses? Are the responses entirely disruptive of colonial modes of relating to difference? If not, what are their aporias, their contradictions and blind spots?

My conclusion is that while Sartre and others relate to black Africa with unmistakeable empathy, their positive cross-cultural disposition does not necessarily enable them to attain a relationship with the peoples and cultures of Africa which is an equipollent relationship between equals.

Onitsha (1991) and *L'Africain* (2004).

Chapter I

A Critique of Some Imagological Studies

Critics concerned with images of black Africa in French literature have tended to emphasise two conflicting interpretations of the nature and function of the images they appraise. On the one hand, there are those for whom perceptions of black Africa in French literature progressed in the course of several centuries from myth or fantasy to truth or reality. They locate the highest point of that enhanced image in the early decades of the 20th century, which paradoxically marked the height of France's colonial dominance of the continent. Such critics give the reader the impression that the closer Europeans got to black Africa, in time as in space, the more focused, accurate and positive their knowledge of it became. On the other hand, there are those who seem to question the validity of this linear movement towards an accurate cross-cultural representation. They posit instead the prevalence in the works they study of a fundamentally inaccurate and negative image of black Africa. To them that image found its fullest expression in again the early decades of the 20th century. These critics give the reader the impression that the closer Europeans came to the continent at least up until the Second World War, the more distorted and hostile their perception of it became.

I will argue in this chapter that though apparently opposed in the ultimate value they assign to the images of black Africa in their respective corpora, the two groups of critics curiously promote the same model of positive cross-cultural representation: the difference being that the first group already sees that model at work in a number of books it

analyses, while the second group makes a case explicitly or otherwise for the possible emergence of the model at some future date. I will take a close look first at each group of critics to show how its arguments diverge from those of the other group. I will then show that beyond their differing perspectives, the two groups of critics merge in the end, considering that their arguments either recognise the existence of a positive, demythologised perception of black Africa or identify the conditions favouring the birth of such a perception. Finally, I will attempt to bring out the implications the divergent yet complementary arguments have for my project, which aims to appraise perceptions and representations of black Africa in a range of French essays and novels produced from the second half of the 20th century onwards.

Analyses of French literary images of Africa abound and have in general terms a clearly regional focus. Indeed critics tend to discuss literary images pertaining to North Africa and to Africa south of the Sahara separately. Such an approach seems quite legitimate not only because it allows for coherence but also because it takes into account the cultural differences between the two regions. North Africa, also known as the Maghreb, includes the former French possessions of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, and is much closer culturally to the Arab and Islamic Middle East than to black Africa from which it is moreover physically separated by the Sahara desert.[1] The focus of this chapter and indeed of the whole thesis is Africa south of the Sahara, or black Africa. The last

[1] Studies of individual French authors as well as of groups of authors relating to their perceptions and representations of North Africa include for instance Odile Husson, *Lorraine et Afrique dans l'oeuvre de Louis Bertrand* (1966), Guy Turbot-Delof, *L'Afrique barbaresque dans la littérature française aux 16e et 17e siècles* (1973) and Jean Robert Henry, *Le Maghreb dans l'imaginaire français: la colonie, le désert, l'exil* (1985). In his *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* (1931), discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, Roland Lebel devotes separate sections to French literary representations of North Africa and of Africa south of the Sahara. Even in works which focus on authors whose experiences encompass North Africa and Africa south of the Sahara, the experiences in question are often categorised along regional lines. Gabriel Michaud, *Gide et l'Afrique* (1961) is a case in point.

appellation is a function of course of the region's predominantly dark-skinned inhabitants. But it is also a function of the fact that throughout history, Europe's relationship with the continent has been shaped by the way it understands black Africa's racial peculiarity. In any case, the central importance of the appellation strikes the reader readily in the sense that it figures in the very titles of some of the critical studies examined here.

Although there is an extensive literature on French literary images of black Africa itself, certain books stand out from the rest in the very systematic way they have accounted for the origins, nature, function and evolution of the images in question. And as I have said, these works fall into two broad categories. The first category comprises books that possess an unmistakably literary historical thrust. True to their disciplinary orientation, these studies tend to place the cross-cultural images they investigate in a continuum. In this way, they show how these images are shaped by the circumstances of history, that is, by social and political events and by the actions of influential personalities. The resultant changes the images undergo are said to point to a growing accuracy and empathy in the depiction of black Africa. The second category of works also comprises studies that place the literary images they examine in well-defined historical contexts. However, the analyses in question foreground an ever-worsening depiction of Africa. These works posit that France's historical relationship with black Africa gave birth to clearly warped literary images of the latter and call into question the validity of such images.

The question however is this: to what extent are the conclusions and projections made in the two categories of works applicable to literary representations that lie outside their

temporal frame of reference? It should be understood that I do not seek to re-analyse the literary works examined in these studies. Rather, I identify in them the general statements and conclusions their authors have put forward about the cross-cultural perspectives they find in the books, and use the statements and conclusions as a starting point in evaluating the quality of post-War French literary responses to black Africa.

I will start with the first category of works and will limit my discussion to two studies. These are Roger Mercier's *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française. Les premières images XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*[2] and Roland Lebel's *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France*.[3] Read together, the two books provide a historical and literary framework that links the earliest recorded contacts between France and black Africa to the relatively newer forms of those contacts in the early decades of the 20th century. They also suggest explicitly or otherwise the literary shape those contacts might take in the decades that lay ahead.

1. An Increasingly Accurate and Positive Idea of Black Africa?

As its title clearly indicates, Mercier's book focuses on 17th - and 18th -century French literary depictions of black Africa. The author charts the early beginnings of a slow process of geographical and cultural discovery, which, I infer from his conclusion, subsequent centuries were to enhance and bring to a final and logical end. He reconstructs painstakingly from a rich and diverse array of sources a picture of black

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[2] *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française. Les premières images XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Dakar, Publications de la section de langues et littératures, no. 11, 1962).

Africa that strikes readers in the first place as negative and denigrating. He attributes this to the fact that very influential early European works on black Africa, translated, published and widely read in France in as early as the middle of the 16th century, portrayed the continent from an overly Eurocentric standpoint. One such work was Leo Africanus's *Description de L'Afrique*, whose author saw Africa, according to Mercier, as the backward and inferior opposite of Europe.

> Il a connu, soit en Espagne, soit au Maroc, de puissants royaumes solidement organisés politiquement et militairement, une civilisation d'artistes, de lettrés et de bâtisseurs. Quand il visite le pays des Noirs, il fait la comparaison de ce qu'il voit avec ce qu'il a connu dans son pays, et il traite avec dédain ces peuples qui ne lui offrent pas le même spectacle d'Etats centralisés, de villes aux monuments grandioses, de vie intellectuelle raffinée.[4]

Subsequently, when French authors themselves began writing about black Africa from the 17th century onwards, they reproduced in their works those earlier unflattering images of the continent. But Leo Africanus had indeed visited Africa and travelled there extensively. On the other hand, the French Dominican priest Pierre Labat whom Mercier credits with introducing black Africa definitively to the French public had never been to the continent which he described, amazingly, in works running into several volumes.[5] The point Mercier is making is that that Labat, like many other French writers after him had no direct experience of black Africa. They relied to a large extent on sailors, traders and explorers for information, which they then reworked often in the light of their

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[3] R. Lebel, *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* (Paris, Larose, 1931). Directly related to sections of the book that deals with black Africa is Lebel's earlier work *L'Afrique occidentale dans la literature française: depuis 1870* (Paris, Larose, 1925).

[4] *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française. Les premières images*, p. 15.

[5] Ibid., p. 54. Labat's books on black Africa Mercier refers to are *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique Occidentale,*5 volumes (1728), *Voyage du Chevalier de Marchais en Guinée..,* 4 volumes (1730), and *Relation historique de l'Ethiopie occidentale...,* 5 volumes (1732).

religious or philosophical convictions, or in terms of prevailing social attitudes, economic realities, political imperatives or literary taste.

Thus Labat regarded black Africa as a continent inhabited by lazy people whose immense natural resources waited to be harnesssed by the more industrious Europeans.[6] The theologian Bellon de Saint-Quentin argued that slavery and by implication the trade in African slaves were legimate before God and man.[7] The attitudes towards black Africa of enlightened minds like Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau are shown by Mercier to have been biased in certain respects. In discussing Voltaire for instance, Mercier writes:

> Son opinion sur les Africains répond parfaitement à sa réputation d'humanité. Mais il suffit de tourner quelques pages pour découvrir sinon un complice des oppresseurs, du moins un homme imbu des préjugés raciaux. Il n'hésite pas à faire des nègres une race de niveau intellectuel inférieur.[8]

In works of fiction, black Africa was merely a convenient background for exotic adventures featuring mainly Europeans, and if black characters appeared at all, they simply reinforced the racial prejudice of the authors and their readership.[9]

These negative images of black Africa do not however outweigh what Mercier considers a positive and accurate apprehension of the continent and its people. As a matter of fact, what emerges in the book is a clear sense of the changing nature of perceptions and representations of black Africa; a change dictated according to Mercier by pressures within France and by increasing contacts with black Africa itself. Mercier locates the change in the humanitarian ideas and ideals of the French Enlightenment. He

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[6] Ibid., p. 65.
[7] Ibid., p. 101.
[8] Ibid., p. 105.
[9] Ibid., pp. 75-76.

discusses Montesquieu, Voltaire, Condorcet and particularly Raynal, showing how their writings, though theoretical in focus and not based on a direct experience of black Africa, undermined the institution of slavery and paved the way for its abolition.[10] Mercier further ascribes this positive apprehension to the influence of scholars like Volney whose experience of Egypt led him to formulate in the second half of the 18th century the hypothesis of a possible link between Ancient Egypt and black Africa.[11]

However, it is a literary work, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul et Virginie* published in 1788, that Mercier considers the high point of black Africa's entry into the imagination of the French public. Set in an Indian Ocean island then called L'Ile de France (now Mauritius), which the author had visited, the novel portrayed sympathetically two black slaves entirely devoted to their white masters whose joys and sorrows they shared fully. Mercier assesses the decisive impact of the novel on matters of cross-cultural perception and representation in these terms: 'Après avoir longtemps tenu les Africains à l'écart la littérature était donc à l'origine du mouvement qui devait les conduire à la liberté: l'émotion suscitée par une histoire touchante avait fait plus que les raisonnements les mieux déduits'.[12] As a matter of fact, slavery was abolished in France and its overseas territories in 1794. And even though it was re-established under Napoleon in 1802, that did not apparently reverse the positive apprehension of the continent, which, as Mercier states, continued right beyond the second decade of the new century.

> Tel est l'état des choses en 1794, quand est promulguée l'abolition de l'esclavage. Les événements politiques et sociaux qui suivent [Napoleon's accession to power and the subsequent re-establishment of slavery] paraissent avoir pour conséquence

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[10] Ibid., p. 145.
[11] Ibid., pp. 161-162.
[12] Ibid., p. 171.

> un retour en arrière. Il n'est cependant qu'apparent. Une fois l'émotion apaisée, l'opinion retrouvera sans arrière-pensée l'orientation de la curiosité et de l'intérêt humain vers l'Afrique et accueillera avec sympathie les oeuvres littéraires qui lui seront consacrées après 1820.[13]

Is one to assume from this conclusion that from the 1820 onwards France's apprehension of black Africa became increasingly unproblematic, devoid of the economic motives that underpinned for instance Labat's and indeed Bellon de Saint-Quentin's visions of the continent? But we know from history that the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century witnessed an intensification of France's contact with black Africa and its resultant military conquest and political subjugation of the continent. Can such a cross-cultural contact founded on political control thus be envisaged as a continuation of a positive and sympathetic cross-cultural response?

It has to be said that Mercier's work was published in Dakar, Senegal, in 1962. What this means is that the work belonged to a decade in which Senegal and many other black African countries beginning with Nkrumah's Ghana in 1957 and Sékou Touré's Guinea in 1958, gained their independence from Britain and France.[14] So by focusing on a body

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[13] Ibid., p. 219.

[14] The decade following the end of the Second World War was the period of decolonisation in black Africa during which colonies ruled by Britain and France sought self-rule and which they obtained from the late 1950s onwards. Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sékou Touré were two notable architects of that self-rule. Nkrumah hailed from Ghana, called the Gold Coast under British rule. In 1948, he founded the Convention People's Party (CPP) which became hugely popular, fostering an active sense of nationhood among the various regions and ethnic groups of the colony. The slogan of the party was 'Self-Government Now', which reflected the mood of a people determined to regain its freedom. And in 1957 Ghana became independent with Nkrumah as its first president. Sékou Touré was from French Guinea. He began his political activism in1946, the year he and other French West African leaders founded the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), a sub-regional political movement designed to accelerate the pace of the quest for self-rule. Ten years later, Sékou Touré was elected Guinea's representative to the French National Assembly and mayor of Guinea's capital, Conakry. In 1958, a referendum was held throughout French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa (the two sub-regional divisions of France's black African Empire). The choice was between membership of a proposed French Community (a reorganised political relationship granting some form of autonomy to the colonies) and outright independence. Of all the colonies, Guinea alone under the leadership of Sékou Touré opted for independence. That same year it gained full political freedom, the first country to do so in French-administered black Africa. In 1960

of material written over two centuries before his time and circumstances, Mercier enjoys the benefit of hindsight, enabling him to criticise the eurocentrism, as we have seen, of Leo Africanus, Labat, Voltaire and a host of other writers. In this respect it would be incorrect to consider Mercier as a latter-day apologist of France's black African enterprise, which in any case had ceased to exist - officially at least - at the time his book was published.

That notwithstanding, there is a sense on reading Mercier that the forces of history he describes initiated, nurtured and directed a geographical and cultural awareness that grew in strength and health from one century to another. The reader is thus made to feel that under the irresistible pull of circumstances, Europe's initially hostile, exploitative attitudes towards black Africa ultimately gave way to a reasoned and humane approach to the continent.

> Au point de départ l'Afrique est comme un domaine étranger sur lequel on souhaite faire le plus de conquêtes possibles: conquêtes économiques d'abord, par le développement du commerce et l'exploitation des ressources naturelles au bénéfice exclusif de la nation commerçante...; conquêtes intellectuelles aussi, par l'acquisition de connaissances de tout ordre sur le pays et sur ses habitants, par l'intégration de l'Afrique aux sciences de la nature et de l'homme. Peu à peu cependant la prise de conscience de la relation de l'Afrique avec le reste de l'univers connu, des Africains avec les autres hommes, se précise et s'enrichit...Puis quand des rapports humains plus nombreux se sont établis entre les uns et les autres [...], la compassion, la sympathie se font plus actives et conduisent, malgré bien des traverses encore, à un essai loyal pour affirmer l'égalité dans les institutions et les faits.[15]

Clearly, if the reader were to extend the logic of this idea of an increasingly positive apprehension of black Africa to images of the continent in succeeding centuries, he would come to the conclusion that even the self-seeking economic motives behind

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however, the other colonies including Senegal which had chosen to join the proposed French Community too gained their independence.

France's late 19th - and early 20th -century black African colonial project in turn gave in to the triumphant march of reason, humanity and justice that Mercier posits. Mercier may not be a nostalgic apologist of Empire but the thrust of his account bestows a largely positive gloss on his country's dealings with black Africa. Moreover, a close look at such expressions as 'l'univers connu', ' l'intégration de l'Afrique aux sciences de la nature et de l'homme', 'la compassion, la sympathie se font plus actives' that Mercier uses, reveals that like the writers he criticises he himself takes certain things about his culture for granted. For the expressions in question cast Europe as the known world, intellectually and emotionally equipped to meet and open up the hitherto 'unknown' and 'neglected' world of black Africa. This is a clear case of paternalism and self-congratulation. In this sense, the expressions echo quite ironically the eurocentrism Mercier detects in others.

There is one more point to raise. In his concluding remarks on the nature of 17th- and 18th-century works of fiction on black Africa, Mercier foregrounds a positive shift from the formerly exotic, fantastical and utopian evocations of black Africa to more accurate representations of the continent.

> Négligée pendant longtemps, l'Afrique est, dans les premières peintures qui en sont données, uniquement un cadre inédit pour y situer des aventures pathétiques ou les exploits des héros qui accaparent à eux seuls tout l'intérêt, ou bien elle sert à construire des utopies qui gagnent en piquant à avoir pour fond de tableau des pays réels, mais assez mal connus pour permettre sans invraisemblance toutes les fantaisies de l'imagination. Un jour enfin ce sont des personnages africains qui suscitent l'intérêt et dont les romanciers et auteurs dramatiques s'emploient à analyser les sentiments, d'abord de façon conventionnelle, puis avec un souci d'exactitude parfois assez grand, en même temps que le goût naissant du pittoresque fait trouver un charme de nouveauté aux paysages d'Afrique et inspire quelques descriptions colorées.[16]

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[15] *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française. Les premières images*, p. 218.

This drive towards greater realism that Mercier posits has its problems too. Do colourful descriptions necessarily provide an accurate and intimate knowledge of a culture and people perceived to be different from those of Europe? In other words, was the taste for the picturesque which facilitated those colourful descriptions not ultimately, as the critic himself points out, a response to the demands and expectations of a particular European readership? Should those demands and expectations be equated with accurate representations, whatever these may be, of non-European cultures?

The linear progression in the quality of Europe's apprehension of black Africa that Mercier posits also underpins the sections of Lebel devotes to the continent in his investigation of the origins and development of French colonial literature. Lebel's work in fact subsumes the time span covered by Mercier's, for it follows right into the 19th and early 20th centuries the mutations undergone by the now distant, external or exotic images of black Africa in preceding centuries.[17]

Lebel classes all representations of the continent prior to the late 19th century under a general literary category he calls the exotic tradition and which, to him, dates back in France to the middle ages.[18] He locates the origin of this tradition in what he calls man's instinctive desire and search here on earth for a mythical golden age in reaction, as it were, to the frustrations and disillusionment of life. He sees this primeval human obsession with the unknown as a major source of travel literature in that the latter enables writers to project onto foreign lands their dreams of utopia provoked by the quotidian

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[16] Ibid., pp.218-219

[17] It should be noted that Lebel's *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* actually predates Mercier's *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française* by three decades. However the time frame of his analysis goes beyond the 17th and 18th centuries with which Mercier is concerned. For clarity of exposition in terms of the logical sequence of the literary periods covered by the two authors, I have placed Lebel's book after Mercier's.

[18] *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France*, p. 11.

banality of the world in which they live. Lebel is aware of the dangers inherent in the tradition, which, as he points out, may degenerate into sensationalism thus offering no sense of what the imagined lands really might be.[19]

To Lebel, what was different in that late 19th century was that representations of black Africa occurred in the context of France's colonial penetration of the continent. The implication here is that to the direct political possession of the continent corresponded a direct discovery and knowledge of it, crowned by a body of works whose distinguishing feature seems to the critic to be a faithful rendering of the distinctive realities of the colony. In other words, related to France's colonial presence in black Africa was a radical shift from exoticism to accuracy in depicting the continent. It is in this shift that Lebel locates the birth of French colonial literature, an offspring of the exotic tradition, which it apparently transcended and sanitised by offering a true picture, as Lebel understands it, of the continent.

Lebel identifies in the shift from the exotic mode of representation to the colonial mode various kinds of writing that he categorises as travel literature, literature of geographical discovery, literature of war and conquest, reportage and touristic literature, technical literature, popular and children's literature, poetry and the novel.[20] I will focus here specifically on the novel, as it is the body of writing Lebel considers most important of all. In his view, the colonial novel provided the necessary human content and context for the knowledge of black Africa produced by other categories of writing.

> A l'information du journal, à l'article de revue, à la documentation administrative, économique et financière, aux applications de quantité d'ordre matériel et limité,

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[19] Ibid., p. 10.
[20] Ibid., pp. 128-143.

> l'interprétation littéraire vient s'ajouter pour donner la vie et l'atmosphère à toute cette matière, incomplète sans elle.[21]

The first group of colonial novels on black Africa the critic discusses was published in the last two decades of the 19th century and came from what he calls 'les romanciers métropolitains'. By this appellation Lebel emphasises the fact that the authors of the novels concerned lived and wrote mainly in Europe. In consequence, the knowledge of black Africa they brought to fiction (knowledge they had acquired during brief visits to the continent) was limited and superficial. As he in fact argues, such novels as Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881), Vigné d'Octon's *Chair noire* (1889) and Maurice Dubard's *Fleur d'Afrique* (1894) revealed more about the personalities of their respective authors than about the black Africa they set out to portray.

> La valeur des oeuvres réside dans la qualité de l'émotion ressentie par le voyageur: celui-ci nous peint des paysages (y compris son paysage moral), et nous nous y intéressons quand sa vision et sa sensibilité sont de qualité exceptionnelle: il ne peint pas, il ne peut véritablement pas peindre des caractères, c'est-à-dire l'âme intime, l'âme vraie des habitants.[22]

A sub-group of the metropolitan novels which Lebel assesses appeared in the first two decades of the 20th century. While Pierre Loti, Vigné d'Octon and Dubard had visited black Africa albeit briefly, the authors of this sub-group had had no direct contact with the continent. They relied (as Labat and others had done in the 17th and 18th centuries) entirely on second-hand information, out of which they created an essentially bookish image of the continent. To Lebel, whatever the literary merits of books like Paul Adam's *Ville inconnue* (1911) and the Tharaud brothers' *La Randonnée de Samba Diouf* (1922),

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[21] Ibid., p. 212.
[22] Ibid.,, p. 139.

they lacked the freshness and authenticity of novels based on an intimate and first-hand experience of black Africa.

The second and most important category of novels Lebel examines was written generally in the first three decades of the 20th century. Significantly, he refers to the authors of these novels as 'romanciers africains', in contrast no doubt to the metropolitan novelists, whose limited, superficial or external perspective on black Africa they improved by offering what he sees as an intimate, internal or local knowledge born of the writers' long experience of the continent: 'Les vrais romanciers coloniaux sont des habitants du pays, qui ont vécu longtemps au contact des gens et des choses qu'ils entreprennent de décrire, non plus tant du dehors, que du dedans.'[23] Lebel situates this internal or home-grown perspective on black Africa in the novels of Robert Randau, which, in his view, went beyond mere landscape description to focus on the inhabitants of the colonies. And as Europeans inhabited the colonies, Randau made them the subject of his novels, describing their reaction to the tropical environment and the changes they underwent in consequence.

> Un grand romancier africain, Robert Randau, s'est donné à tâche de peindre ces coloniaux formés et parfois déformés par le milieu spécial dans lequel ils évoluent...Il représente bien le type de romancier colonial, étant né à la colonie, y vivant ordinairement, y puisant enfin toute son inspiration et même, en plus d'un cas, ses moyens d'expression.[24]

Lebel's analysis further reveals that if Randau's novels dealt mainly with European characters shaped by their colonising project in black Africa, other colonial novels drew attention to the indigenous African population. This was the case with Chaumel's *Aminata femme noire* (1923), Guéhard's *La campagne de la brousse* (1927) or Roger's

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[23] Ibid., p. 140.

La maîtresse noire (1928), where the relationship between Europeans and their African mistresses enabled the authors to explore what Lebel calls the mind of the black mistress: 'A la faveur de la liaison racontée, les auteurs coloniaux s'attachent à étudier l'âme de la petite épouse indigène et ses transformations au contact du blanc, car, cette fois, c'est l'indigène qui peu à peu s'européanise.'[25]

Lebel identifies the final stage in the articulation of a home-grown perspective on black Africa in such works as André Demaison's *Diato* (1923) which seemingly sought to present directly native Africans in their traditional setting, untouched as yet by the white man's civilising presence and governed by their specific modes of thought and action. In his comments on the particular merits of André Demaison's tragic tale in *Diato* of a polygamous African husband, Lebel hails the author's ability to write an African story from an African viewpoint and in an African style:

> Nous avons là une histoire purement indigène, vue du côté indigène, et pensée avec la mentalité indigène. L'auteur qui pratique le pays depuis fort longtemps, n'ignore rien des coutumes, croyances et superstitions qui régissent la vie des noirs; d'autre part il connaît leur langue et rend leurs tournures de phrase avec aisance et à propos.[26]

What Demaison's supposedly intimate rendition of indigenous African life demonstrates is that to Lebel, French colonial novels on black Africa constituted a particular brand of literary products. They were not so much works of the imagination as vehicles of ethnographical and sociological information about the continent. This in his view made them valuable instruments designed to dissipate the centuries-old European ignorance of black Africa and to insert the latter, as it were, into human history. In short,

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[24] Ibid.,, p. 141.
[25] Ibid.,, pp. 141-142.
[26] Ibid.,, pp. 142-143.

to Lebel, the apparently conscientious and informed work of Randau, Demaison and other colonial novelists finally opened up the continent to the civilising gaze of Europe.

> Mêlés journellement à la vie locale, ils [les romanciers africains] ne s'intéressent plus, comme les touristes, aux originalités de surface, ils cherchent l'âme profonde du pays noir...ils sont les 'romanciers des races', dont les ouvrages ne sont plus des oeuvres d'imagination mais d'observation, s'inspirant des données de l'ethnographie, de la linguistique et du folklore pour révéler une humanité ignorée.[27]

A high point in this supposedly accurate and intimate depiction of black Africa was then the publication in 1926 of Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*. This was the first novel in French by an indigenous African. It is as if when the African natives themselves began to write in French, they provided by that very act an indigenous element that further enhanced the home-grown image of the continent embodied by the works of Randau and Demaison.[28]

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[27] Ibid., p. 143. Lebel's theory of colonial literature is explicitly stated on pages 86 and 87 of his book. It is worth recalling the following lines in which the critic defines colonial literature as a science that offers a precise, complete and practical knowledge of the physical and human realities of the colony: 'Le colonialisme en littérature est une forme du mouvement général qui porte les esprits vers une connaissance plus précise, plus complète, et plus pratique aussi des choses coloniales. De là le caractère documentaire des oeuvres nouvelles, non seulement dans la peinture exacte du milieu physique, mais surtout dans l'étude du milieu psychologique, qui est proprement le domaine de la littérature coloniale. Aux qualités qu'on exige de l'écrivain, il faut ajouter des qualités qui sont plus particulières au savant: c'est ainsi que le roman colonial qui va en quête de la connaissance d'âmes se rencontre avec les travaux des techniciens qui étudient la mentalité des primitives [...]. Il ne suffit pas de faire beau, il faut aussi faire vrai.' Lebel takes here for granted the primitivity and inferiority ascribed to the colonised. His reference to specialists of primitive mentality reminds us readily of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl whose theories of the irrational nature of the primitive mind were very much in vogue in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The theories posited an irreconcilable difference between the primitive, pre-logical and backward mind (natives of the colonies) and the logical, rational and civilised mind (Europeans). Given that the period in question saw the intensification of French and indeed European colonial expansion, it is easy to see that the ideas of Lévy-Bruhl provided a convenient argument for those who saw the harsh and ugly realities of territorial conquest in terms of France's civilising mission in backward and barbarous lands.

[28] Indeed on page 85 of his book, Lebel establishes three criteria one of which a literature must meet for it to be called colonial literature. The first criterion is that a literature must be written by Frenchmen who were born in the colonies or who had lived there from childhood. The second is that a literature must be the work of Frenchmen who have worked in the colonies long enough to have assimilated its ways. Finally, a literature must be written by the natives of the colonies and who must use French as their medium of expression.

The problem however is this: how does Lebel know that the colonial literary representations of black Africa are accurate? Where does his authority for such a claim come from? It is reasonable to assume that a possible foundation of his claim was what the novelists thought and said themselves about their art. Two theorists of the colonial novel who wrote under the name of Marius-Ary Leblond claimed that they and other like-minded writers sought above all to improve on Loti's exoticism, which they deemed inadequate and superficial. Their aim was to provide an intimate knowledge of the colonies: 'Aujourd'hui dans le roman colonial, nos camarades et nous entendons révéler l'intimité des races et des âmes de colons ou d'indigènes'.[29] Randau himself held similar views about the colonial novel, which he saw as a concrete embodiment of the lives of those who lived in the colony including of course himself: 'Le roman colonial, tel que nous l'entendons, présente au profane, non des fantoches, ou des personnes de théâtre, mais des êtres de chair et d'os, nous.'[30]

But such claims about the colonial novel being an embodiment of an intimate knowledge of the colonies do have a distinctively political twist to them. If Marius-Ary Leblond considered it necessary to revitalise and deepen Loti's brand of exoticism, it was mainly because they felt that in an epoch of imperial expansion and rivalry, their country needed to hold fast to its colonies in order to maintain its prestige: 'On sent que la France ne peut plus tenir son rang en Europe, ni peut-être même vivre, qu'en s'appuyant sur son empire d'outre-mer...D'où approfondissement de l'exotisme - qui était surtout chez Loti

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[29] M.-A Leblond, 'Après l'exotisme de Loti, le roman colonial', in *Le roman colonial, itinéraires et contacts de cultures*, vol. 7 (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1987), p. 192.
[30] R. Randau, 'La Littérature coloniale, hier et aujourd'hui', ibid., p. 203.

un deployment de décors'[31] Marius-Ary Leblond further emphasised this imperial foundation of their art by stating that French colonial literature was, as it were, a symbol of national unity: it transcended all regional divisions and was the valued outgrowth of France's greatness: 'La littérature coloniale ne s'oppose pas plus à Paris qu'à la province: elle s'inspire du génie de toute la France, de la France totale, de la Grande France.'[32]

And when Randau conceded that colonised peoples did have distinctive and viable cultures, his open-mindedness was prompted by a conviction that France's full and profitable control of the colonies depended on its intimate knowledge of them. The French colonial investor of tomorrow would be better placed than his father in that he would have within his reach better information about the colonies. That information which was readily available from sources like the colonial novel would allow him to see that the colonies were indeed a mosaic of cultures and peoples to which he would by implication have to adapt.

> Le Français de demain, qui établira ses affaires aux colonies, s'assurera mieux que ne le fit son père qu'il est là-bas autant de civilisations que de peuples. Il apprendra, et peut-être à ses dépens, que les lois de la psychologie ont des variantes.[33]

The point here is that the better the future French colonial investor knew the cultural context of his operations, the greater his success would be. The deeper France's knowledge of its colonies, the greater would be its control over them.

This ideological foundation of the colonial novel applies also to Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*, the very novel Lebel hails as marking the indigenous dimension of the colonial

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[31]Ibid., p.192.
[32]Ibid., p. 196.
[33] *Le roman colonial* (1987), p. 203.

writers' intimate knowledge of the black African scene. As Balandier has shown. Bakary Diallo came to writing by chance. He had been a herdsman and nothing had prepared him for writing. At the outbreak of the war of 1914-1918, he was recruited into the French army and it was after he had returned home to Senegal at the end of the war that he wrote the novel. Balandier in fact suggests that the novel may well have been the handiwork of a shadow writer, probably a Government official, who uncritically accepted France's 'civilising presence' in black Africa. This is reflected as Balandier points out in the title of the novel itself. The expression 'force-bonté' brings together the supposedly cardinal virtues of imperial France - its strength allied with its goodness for the greater good of the people it had colonised! Balandier further notes that by referring to himself in the book as 'un enfant du Gouvernement', Bakary Diallo appears to have learned his lesson on France's imperial benevolence well enough to pay a fitting homage in writing to a nation that had given him the thing he treasured most: French education.[34] It is easy to understand here Mohammed Kane's accusation formulated several decades later that Diallo's blind devotion to France made him overlook the injustices of colonial rule.[35]

What thus emerges is that published in 1931 at the height of France's colonial presence in black Africa, Lebel's work appears to be bound up with the very literary phenomenon

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[34] G. Balandier, 'La Littérature noire de langue française', in *Présence africaine* 8-9 (1950) 393-402 (p. 395).

[35] For more details, see B. Diallo, *Force-bonté* [1926], Nouvelle Edition, Preface de Mohammadou Kane, (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1985). It has to be said though that in a work she wrote nearly twenty years after Balandier's comments on Bakary Diallo and ten years before Kane's judgement of the author, Dorothy Blair offers new insight into the authorship of *Force-Bonté* with the help of information provided by Robert Delavignette, a former colonial administrator who knew Diallo well. She also points out that René Maran's *Batouala. Véritable roman nègre* preceded *Force-Bonté* (1921) by five years but that it was denied its status as the first novel to be written by a black author for various reasons. These included probably Maran's acerbic assessment of the colonial project in his book in contrast to Diallo's endorsement of it in his. Maran was of course a native of Martinique, although he was brought up partly in Gabon and spent much of his life as a colonial administrator in French Equatorial Africa. For more details

it sets out to describe. If Mercier does detach himself from the 17th - and 18th -century writers he discusses to point out their eurocentric views, Lebel detects no such views in the novels of Randau, Demaison and Bakary Diallo. Rather, he sees the novels as the natural and desirable outgrowth of his country's black African colonial project. In the end the dispassionate literary historian we expect to read becomes very much an advocate of Empire, who concludes his analysis on a note of patriotism that foregrounds an imperialist agenda, recalling, as it were, Marius-Ary Leblond's idea of a great France.

> La littérature coloniale montre le rayonnement de la force française, la puissante beauté de la plus grande France...Elle se charge de la vérité ethnique et s'attache à l'étude de problèmes psychologiques et sociaux d'où dépend la conduite des affaires politiques...C'est par la littérature coloniale que les Français connaissent l'existence de l'Empire et prennent conscience de la relation entre les diverses colonies éparses par le monde...C'est elle, enfin, qui tisse, par-dessus les liens matériels, entre la Métropole et ses enfants lointains, comme entre les différents essaims coloniaux eux-mêmes, les fils spirituels de la trame impériale.[36]

It is clear here that the colonial novels, which supposedly marked a high point of accuracy in perceptions and representations of black Africa, produced knowledge of the continent that smacks of Lebel's own belief in his country's greatness and imperial aspirations.

2. A Fundamentally Flawed Idea of Black Africa?

It should be borne in mind however that while Mercier and Lebel give prominence to a slow but conscientious and ultimately direct and positive apprehension of black Africa in French literature, other critics have developed perspectives in which such an apprehension is either entirely absent or, if envisaged at all, lies outside the literary

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on Blair's discussion of the authorship of *Force-Bonté*, see her *African Literature in French* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 15-18.

[36] *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France*, pp. 212-213.

corpora and periods investigated. In discussing this second category of critics, I will again limit my analysis to two studies, namely, Léon Fanoudh-Siefer's *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire*[37] and Ada Martinkus-Zemp's *Le blanc et le noir. Essai d'une description de la vision du noir par le blanc dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres*.[38] Taken together, the two books cover enough historical ground to constitute an alternative approach to the way Mercer and Lebel comprehend French literary representations of black Africa.[39]

Léon Fanoudh-Siefer argues that from the 19th century to the Second World War, myths casting black Africans and their continent reductively as backward and savage had been at work in French literature. In essence, he posits as misconceptions about the continent and its people the very literary images Lebel presents as embodiments of France's growing knowledge and increasingly accurate description of them. In other words, far from seeing in 19th - and early 20th-century French literature the origin and development

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[37] L. Fanoudh-Siefer, *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française, de 1800 à la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Paris, Klinksieck, 1968).

[38] A. Martinkus-Zemp, *Le blanc et le noir. Essai d'une description de la vision du noir par le blanc dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, A.-G Nizet, 1975).

[39] There are other studies besides those of Fanoudh-Siefer and Martinkus-Zemp which also emphasise the prevalence of a fundamentally flawed idea of black Africa in French Literature. There is for instance Léon-François Hoffmann's *Le nègre romantique. Personnage littéraire et obsession collective* (1973). This book considers literary works published between the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the July Monarchy of 1848. The critic examines French literary representations of the Negro in terms of what he calls a collective obsession. It has to be said that Hoffmann does not limit himself to material on black Africa. He draws on literary texts dealing with the West Indies as well. There is also Martine Astier-Loufti's *Littérature et colonialisme* (1971). This study focuses on French colonial expansion as perceived and represented in French novels from 1871 to1914 and discusses books set among other places in black Africa. One should mention as well Iyay Kimoni's *Une image du noir et de sa culture* (1980) which deals with French literary representations of black Africa from 1900 up to the interwar years. It can be seen that the three studies and indeed that of Martinkus-Zemp, which is limited to the inter-War years, have each a shorter time frame in relation to Fanoudh-Siefer's book. The latter covers practically a period of a hundred and fifty years. This considerable time span subsumes in general terms the period covered by each of the other books. To read Fanoudh-Siefer's *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire* in conjunction with any one of the four other books - in this case Martinkus-Zemp's *Le blanc et le noir* - will adequately illustrate in our view the general thrust of all the works taken together, which is, French stereotypical representations of black people and their continent from about the late 18th century and early 19th century up to the Second World War.

of a clearer and fuller representation of black Africa. Fanoudh-Siefer sees in it the birth and growth of a fundamentally reductive and ethnocentric idea of the continent: an idea which only began to be discredited in his view in post-War France.

In probing this flawed idea of black Africa, Fanoudh-Siefer focuses in the first place on a number of early 19th-century writers in whom he locates the yet fledgling and disparate strands of the myths. More precisely, in the writings of Mme Dard, Mme de Duras, Baron Roger and Eugène Fromentin, the critic uncovers what he calls a confused and contradictory attitude towards Africa, depicted at one point as a legendary and mysterious place, at another as a grandiose and sublime continent, and elsewhere as a hostile and inhospitable environment. As for attitudes to the inhabitants of the continent, Fanoudh-Siefer finds in the authors simplistic and preconceived stereotypes such as the puppet kinglets of savage and superstitious black Africa, the simple-minded, childlike African, the lazy, happy-go-lucky African enamoured of music and dance and the African devoid of artistic or aesthetic taste.[40]

Secondly, Fanoudh-siefer shows how these embryonic and disparate strands of the myths of savagery and backwardness are given full and unified expression by Pierre Loti in his late 19th-century novel *Le roman d'un spahi.* We have said that Lebel places Loti's book among what he takes to be the early and imperfect forms of France's direct and intimate colonial literary representations of black Africa. By contrast, Fanoudh-Siefer sees the novel as a masterpiece of cultural stereotyping, where Loti transforms his

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[40] *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire* , pp. 19-49. The literary texts the critic examines in this section of his three-part analysis include Mme Dard's *La chaumière africaine* (1824), Mme Duras's *Ourika* (1824), Mérimée's *Tamango* (1829), Baron Roger's *Kélédor*, René Caillé's *Le journal d'un voyage a Tombouctou* (1830) and Eugène Fromentin's *Une année dans le sahel* (1859). Fanoudh-Siefer salutes the open-

observations of a specific African reality into a sweeping and profoundly dark vision of the continent and its people. This means that to the critic, Senegal as portrayed in the novel is not so much a differentiated physical and human reality as an elaborate metaphor for black Africa projected and rejected as a continent of deadly sunshine, of stifling and intolerable heat, of fevers and tornadoes, of wild animals, of bizarre, unruly and ferocious people, of cannibals and witches.[41] In discussing the transmutation in Loti's novel of the specific into the general, of reality into myth, Fanoudh-Siefer writes most explicitly :

> Par ce processus de généralisation qui a conduit le lecteur de Loti de Saint-Louis du Sénégal au Soudan, à la Nubie et à l'Afrique intégrale, tout en prenant en chemin une dimension de plus en plus épaisse d'incertitude géographique, d'anonymat, de légende et de mystère, Pierre Loti bâtit le mythe de l'Afrique, un mythe curieux qui est à la fois traditionnel et moderne. L'aspect moderne du mythe consiste en une représentation facile de l'Afrique, en une série d'images d'Epinal qui tiennent lieu de connaissance...Le caractère traditionnel de cette vision mythique est accentué par l'incursion fréquente de l'auteur dans une sorte de poésie cosmique. A maintes reprises, en effet, Loti compare l'Afrique à un monde en formation, à un monde d'avant la création, et c'est là que nous saisissons le véritable passage de la réalité au mythe, le mythe étant ici la primitivité, la barbarie et la sauvagerie de l'Afrique.[42]

The critic then assesses the impact of Loti's idea of a savage and a backward Africa on early 20th-century French colonial writings. He maintains that by giving a unified expression to the scattered strands of the myth found in the works of early 19th-century authors, Loti created a model of cross-cultural representation that directly influenced 20th-century French colonial novelists. These writers reproduced the same skewed image of the continent and its people, in keeping, as it were, with the supremacist ideology of colonialism. In other words, the novelists were in Fanoudh-Siefer's opinion part and parcel of an entrenched cultural, social and political order, and the image of black Africa

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mindedness and objectivity in that early period of both Baron Roger and René Caillé. However their attitude to black Africa seems to have been the exception rather than the rule.

they reworked in their novels responded perfectly to the need they had to justify the system to which they belonged. He writes :

> [...] Il ne faut pas perdre de vue que la littérature coloniale a été écrite par des écrivains appartenant avant tout à un système, à une époque qui avait bonne conscience, fière de sa mission civilisatrice: très souvent la littérature tendra consciemment, quelques rares fois à son insu, vers une justification péremptoire de la colonisation, le courant littéraire allant ainsi à la rencontre d'objectifs politiques.[43]

More specifically, in representing black Africa, which they construed as the inferior opposite of Europe, the colonial novelists produced in turn the image of a continent of harsh climatic conditions, where the tropical sun reigns supreme, generating deadly fevers and tornadoes and emasculating all that it touches.[44] As regards the tropical flora and fauna, they conveyed the idea of a continent of dense, impenetrable forests made up of trees of monstrous dimensions, and in which strange and predatory animals pullulate.[45] In the case of the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, the critic draws attention to the same exaggeratedly unidirectional pattern of representation. The novelists, it would appear, saw the black skin among other things as evidence of the Africans' inferiority and degradation: a sign of the devil they were and a justification for making them a subject race.[46]

But like Mercier's and Lebel's idea of an increasingly positive French image of black Africa, Fanoudh-Siefer's idea of a pervasively warped French literary perception of the

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[41] Ibid., pp. 59-100.
[42] Ibid., p. 104.
[43] Ibid., p. 120. The colonial authors the critic appraises are largely those Lebel classifies in his study into two groups, that is, the 'romanciers métropolitains' and the 'romanciers africain'. Fanoudh-Siefer makes no such distinction between the writers, for in his opinion they all depicted black Africa and its people in terms of Loti's mythical vision of the continent.
[44] Ibid., p. 119-136.
[45] Ibid., p. 137-140.
[46] Ibid., pp. 143-153.

continent has its problems too. If the thrust of Mercier's analysis tends to whitewash the Eurocentric foundation of the images it appraises and if Lebel's work is in fact blind to such Eurocentricism and glorifies France's imperial ambitions, Fanoudh-Siefer's study seems to take the opposite direction by reading French literary texts in a way that denies the latter a capacity for cross-cultural empathy. Indeed calling into question the validity of works such as Fanoudh-Siefer's that emphasise stereotypical images of black Africa, Yao Amela proposes a reading of Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire and Rimbaud as an alternative canon of positive cross-cultural perception. He accuses Fanoudh-Siefer and other like-minded critics of failing to consider such great writers and of rescuing second-rate literary pieces from the oblivion they deserve just to prove a point.[47] Amela seems to have a point here. For in justifying his choice of material, Fanoudh-Siefer does stress the importance of minor works for his project. In his view, minor works are more likely to mirror public opinion - the basis of all myths - than works of genius which do give full expression to myths but do not necessarily confine themselves to this as they are by their nature works of exceptional quality.

> Ce ne sont pas les génies littéraires qui font les mythes, ils les expriment simplement avec plénitude. Car le mythe est anonyme [...], et ce sont justement les auteurs de seconde zone qui contribuent de façon décisive à sa cristallisation: à ce titre, ils sont pour nous plus représentatifs de la conscience collective que les grands écrivains ou le génies dont la personnalité est par définition exceptionnelle.[48]

If, as the critic states, there is something more to works of genius than being merely a reflection of unexamined beliefs and assumptions, then does a study of literary representations of myths which excludes these great works not lay itself open to

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[47] Yao Amela, 'Quelques grands auteurs: Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire et Rimbaud' *Notre librairi*e, 90 (1987), 40-47.

accusations of bias? For given their exceptional quality their treatment of myth may well be an alternative to the way these are directly replicated in the minor works Fanoudh-Siefer singles out for treatment.

Fanoudh-Siefer's book is not however an irredeemably gloomy read. The critic does conclude his analysis on a positive note. If he finds no sustained and clear-cut alternative within his corpus to the myths he examines, he hails in his conclusion what he sees as the onset of a process of demythologisation in French literature. To him, an important consequence of the war was a radical questioning by a number of French intellectuals of the age-old negative European assumptions about black Africa. These intellectuals included such prestigious names as Sartre, Gide, Balandier and Monod. In a variety of articles published in 1947 in the maiden issue of the journal *Présence africaine*, these men distanced themselves from such negative assumptions, throwing into relief the essential humanity of the African and proclaiming his contribution to world civilisation. Fanoudh-Siefer writes:

> Tous les articles du premier numéro de la revue 'Présence Africaine', écrits par des hommes qui font tous autorité, sont des aveux, des confessions qui tendent à la réhabilitation du Nègre...Que nous lisions 'Avant-propos' par André Gide, 'Etapes' par Théodore Monod, 'L'inconnue noire' par M. Griaule, 'Présence noire' par M. J-P. Sartre, 'L'Afrique participante' par M. P. Masson-Oursel, 'Le noir est un homme' par M. G. Balandier..., c'est au même effort émouvant que nous assistons pour balayer les préjugés, pour ébranler les comportements stéréotypés, routiniers et paresseux: au même effort pour reconaître l'apport de la civilisation africaine, pour rendre au nègre ce qui lui est dû et qui lui a été longtemps refusé. Quand on considère les prises de position lucides et courageuses de ces hommes de grande envergure, on peut avoir l'impression que l'élite française allait à Canossa et que l'Occident plaidait coupable.[49]

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[48] *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire*, p. 13.
[49] Ibid., pp. 195-196.

Indeed the journal *Présence africaine* which Fanoudh-Siefer mentions and which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, was a major landmark in the history of Negritude. Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas were the most notable initiators of the movement and their writings can be seen as the intellectual dimension of the drive towards African political independence which came to fruition, as pointed out earlier in our reference to Nkrumah and Sékou Touré, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[50] Indeed when one commentator states that Francophone African literary works from the 1930s onwards can be read as a negation of and a necessary corrective to the denigration of black Africa by European writers, he recognises the role played byAfricans in representing themselves, in reappropriating and defining their history and culture.[51] By his reference to the writings of the French intellectuals in *Présence africaine*, Fanoudh-Siefer is thus making the point that under the influence of the emancipatory cultural discourse of Negritude, these people initiated a demythologised cross-cultural perspective that in his view was previously lacking in French literary representations of black Africa.

But perhaps just as his focus on minor literary works in foregrounding a pervasive myth about black Africa has its problems, so does this notion of a demythologised French cross-cultural perspective with which he concludes his study. In the first place, the

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[50] Lilyan Kesteloot gives a detailed account of the emergence of Negro-African literature in her work *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature* (Bruxelles, Ed. de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1977). Belinda Jack provides a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the history and theory of the literature in question in *Negritude and Literary Criticism: The History and Theory of Negro-African Literature in French* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996).

[51] J. Jurt, 'L'image de l'Afrique et des africains dans la littérature française. L'état actuel des recherches', in *Oeuvres et Critiques*, III.2-IV.1 (Paris, Ed. Jean-Michel Place, 1978-1979), 219-228.. And it has to be said that the role played by Africans in defining and affirming their racial and cultural identity was not the exclusive preserve of poets, novelists and dramatists. The Senegalese historian, philosopher and physicist Cheikh Anta Diop examined in two seminal works what he saw as evidence of an indisputable spiritual and cultural link between Ancient Egypt and black Africa, his aim being to give back to his continent by way of historical research the dignity and respect denied it by its European colonisers. See for example *Nations*

concept of Negritude itself was the object of much controversy. Indeed much as they recognised the historical necessity of self-definition and self-affirmation out of which the concept grew, intellectuals outside Francophone Africa viewed it with scepticism. A case in point was the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele. Hailing from a country where the black artist was silenced by a repressive political regime and looking for ways of getting himself heard, he had little patience with a concept that in his view tended to dwell on the grandeur of Africa's past. To Mphahlele, for all the quality of its poetry, Negritude was sheer intellectual talk, inapplicable to the practical needs of living in apartheid South Africa. In a similar vein, the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka wittily remarked that a tiger did not proclaim its tigritude but pounced on its prey to devour it. Among Francophone African intellectuals themselves, reactions to the concept were mixed and at times clearly antagonistic. Stanislas Adetovi undertook a systematic onslaught on the concept, showing its impotence as a tool for the profound economic and political change needed in the overwhelmingly poor, formerly colonised, African societies.[52] By identifying with Negritude, to what extent do the post-War writings of the French intellectual elite that Fanoudh-Siefer hails avoid the pitfalls associated with the concept? In other words, if critics of Negritude have seen in the concept the danger of a new myth about Africa, have French intellectuals influenced by the concept not ended up remythologising the continent in their very effort to do away with age-old cultural prejudices and biases?

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nègres et culture, Présence Africaine (Paris, 1954), and *Antériorité des civilisations nègres: mythe ou vérité historique*, (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1967).

[52] For details of the three critics' positions on Negritude, see E. Mphahlele, *The African Image* (1962), W. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) and S. Adotevi, *Négritude et Négrologues* (1972).

Fanoudh-Siefer does not of course raise this issue. In any case it appears on reading him that the prestige, authority and good faith of the French intellectuals he mentions guaranteed the health of their cross-cultural perspective. This brings me to another problem. Fanoudh-Siefer seems to make a distinction between skewed knowledge or myth that he finds in the minor authors he investigates, and demythologised knowledge or truth that he associates with the post-War writings of the French intellectual elite. By the intellectual clout they commanded, Balandier, Griaule, Monod and Sartre appeared to him to offer a picture of Africa that contrasted with the unquestioned assumptions and beliefs that continued to permeate other strata of French society even after the war.

> La grande secousse mondiale a été une occasion pour donner un coup de boutoir dans le mythe du nègre qui ne deviendra plus dès lors qu'un mort en sursis, du moins dans l'esprit de l'élite occidentale, car les autres couches sociales en resteront pratiquement au stade de l'entre-deux-guerres, où le mythe du nègre alors dans sa plénitude, s'était insinué perfidement dans presque tous les esprits, conditionnant ainsi l'opinion de plusieurs générations, à qui on avait fait croire dès l'enfance que le nègre était un primitif privé de la lumière de l'esprit et un sauvage indigne de l'humanité.[53]

This distinction between the elite and the larger French public in their attitudes to black Africa is taken up by Guy Michaud, whose preface to Fanoudh-Siefer's book salutes the positive cross-cultural perspective initiated by Balandier and others in these terms:

> Ce n'est guère qu'au lendemain de la deuxième guerre mondiale qu'a été entrepris parallèlement au processus de décolonisation, un effort sincère de démythification... Les travaux de Georges Balandier, les articles de Sartre, de Roland Barthes et de quelques autres ont largement contribué à assainir les relations entre les peuples et les purger de tout l'imaginaire qu'elles colportent à notre insu. C'est là une entreprise d'hygiène collective dont l'importance ne peut échapper à personne.[54]

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[53] *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire* , pp. 191-192.
[54] Ibid., p. 9.

Of course, conscious of the seemingly enduring nature of European negative perceptions of black Africa, Fanoudh-Siefer does ask whether the process of demythologisation will ever be completed: 'Depuis quelque temps, l'Afrique est à la mode, objet de convoitise; certaines valeurs commencent d'être révisées; la démythification est amorcée, mais pourra-t-elle jamais être totale?'[55] But perhaps an important question he does not ask is this: is the French intellectuals' attitude to black Africa itself a case of an unproblematic approach to difference?

Like Fanoudh-Siefer's *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire*, Martinkus-Zemp's *Le blanc et Le noir* contradicts Mercier's and Lebel's view of a linear progression in accuracy and empathy of European perceptions of black Africa by positing in turn the prevalence of a grossly distorted French literary representation of the continent. But she too raises the possibility of a more positive cross-cultural perspective, which she locates beyond her corpus.

Focusing on a narrower time frame of just two decades which perhaps allows for greater coherence, Martinkus examines an impressive number of French colonial novels and travel books (forty-two in all) produced in the inter-War years, some of which both Lebel and Fanoudh-Siefer incorporate in the wider time frames of their respective analyses. These are the books Lebel qualifies as 'African novels' by virtue of the fact that their authors lived and wrote mainly in the colonies; books which Fanoudh-Siefer however sees as deepening European myths of savagery and backwardness which had crystallised according to him in Loti's *Le roman d'un spahi*.

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[55] Ibid, p. 15.

Martinkus-Zemp approaches her material from a clearly synchronic standpoint: a perspective justified in her opinion by what she refers to as the a-historical nature of the material itself. The inter-War years which coincided with the height of French imperial dominance in black Africa gave rise to a body of literary texts characterised by a uniform pattern of cross-cultural perception transcending, as it were, the specificity of every author and of every text. She writes:

> Parus dans l'entre-deux-guerres, tous nos ouvrages présentent un caractère a-historique, l'action qui s'y déroule n'est pas décrite comme appartenant au passé et ne porte pas de marques notables d'historicité. La guerre de 1914-1918, par exemple, est un repère dans le temps et sert de prétexte à quelque intrigue.[56]

What is implied is the authors' essentialist vision of black Africa. They saw the continent as a timeless, stagnant reality contrasting sharply with an equally unchanging European reality which however served as a normative cultural paradigm through which the African reality was filtered, defined and understood.

> La société européenne et ses valeurs culturelles constituent ce point fixe à partir duquel les auteurs des ouvrages de l'entre-deux-guerres portent explicitement ou implicitement, leurs jugements de valeur. Pour eux, il n'existe qu'un système de référence: leur propre société. Dans cette société tout est ordre; ailleurs c'est la démesure, le grouillement, la confusion. L'Europe est le type idéal, le modèle de toute société humaine: elle est la norme, le reste n'étant qu'écart ou déviation.[57]

In other words, instead of approaching with the humility necessary for understanding a cultural phenomenon that obviously defied European habits of thought, the writers simply registered their own cultural self-image. In so doing they deepened the gap that separated them from Africa.

> L'Afrique noire est ainsi évaluée par opposition aux normes européennes, et l'auteur blanc [...] s'efforcera de trouver l'écart maximum entre la normalité et

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[56] *Le blanc et le noir*, pp. 13-14.
[57] Ibid., p. 216.

> l'anormalité, non seulement parce que c'est ce qui le frappe le plus, non seulement par complaisance pour le lecteur, mais encore parce que de la sorte il se rassure lui-même en accentuant la suprématie, qu'il pose comme objective, de sa propre société.[58]

Perceived thus as a timeless aberration of a timeless European norm, the black Africa that Martinkus-Zemp finds in her corpus is a continent which in her judgement is never fully and objectively portrayed. It would seem that the closer the French writers were to Africa, the greater their difficulty in coming to terms with it. As she points out, if Africa seen from Europe appealed to the writers by the very mystery conferred on it by distance, Africa perceived from close quarters, that is, from within the colony, lost all its charm and simply became the negative underside of what they desired to find.

> L'attitude du Blanc dépend de la distance qui le sépare de l'Afrique et de l'Africain. De loin l'Afrique et l'Africain sont beaux; de près ils sont laids. Tant que le Blanc ne participe pas à la vie africaine, l'Afrique lui apparaît sous un jour enchanteur. Il s'en approche et le charme disparaît. Le Blanc aimerait l'Afrique vue de loin, seulement il est aussi obligé de la voir de près. Le Blanc préférerait une Afrique à la vie de laquelle il ne participerait pas, il y est pourtant engagé .[59]

Thus even when the writers depicted Africa in terms that may be called positive, they all too often displayed in the very depiction their sense of the racial and cultural gulf separating that continent from their own and of the latter's ascendancy. For instance, presenting the Fulani as more refined both in mind and body than other native Africans, the writers stressed above all the non-African origins of that ethnic group.[60] Indeed the novelists considered the Fulani to be Orientals. What they meant was that the Fulani were

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[58] Ibid., p. 217.
[59] Ibid., p.. 219.
[60] The Fulani called 'Peuls' by the French and 'Fulas' or 'Ful' by the Germans are a major ethnic group in West Africa. They are found in all the countries of the subregion and beyond. Indeed the Fulani live also in Chad, Cameroun, the Central African Republic and Sudan. They attracted the attention of early European travellers to the continent by their unique physical features, their nomadic life style and their role in the politics of the West African subregion in the 18th and 19th centuries during which they championed the cause of Islam. Significant communities of the group live today in Northern Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal, Northern Cameroun and Niger where they exert considerable political, economic and cultural influence.

relatively closer to Europeans, if only because their presumed Asian origins placed them in a racial and cultural order that was higher than the order to which the much darker and so more backward natives of Africa supposedly belonged.

> Le Blanc situe le Peul en Orient, qui plus qu'une aire géographique est une époque. L'Orient est délimité dans l'espace et dans le temps. C'est le berceau d'une civilisation évocatrice des fastes; c'est, par excellence, le pays de la féodalité, avec sa noblesse, sa vie de cour. L'Orient a toujours fasciné l'Européen. Ainsi le Peul apparaît comme un non-Noir, supérieur au Noir et plus proche du Blanc.[61]

In short, the writers' positive depiction of the Fulani was in essence an exercise in racial and cultural self-congratulation.

The exercise in self-congratulation was by implication more pronounced when the writers came to portray in racial terms other native Africans. Placed at the bottom of the racial and cultural hierarchy, these natives were cast as sub-humans, who apparently had less in common with other men than with animals and whose existence was proof as it were of the superhuman qualities of their European colonizers.

> Il nous est apparu qu'au regard du Blanc, la sous-humanité s'exprime par une identification possible avec l'animal, ce qui est le cas, dans une certaine mesure, du Noir des forêts; le Noir de la savane empiète déjà sur l'humanité; les Peuls, quant à eux, sont des hommes. Le Blanc, au sommet de la hiérarchie des valeurs, se sent ainsi investi de la qualité de sur-homme.[62]

Additionally, the presumed racial and cultural ascendancy of Europeans impinged on the way the writers accounted for the status and function assigned to black Africans in the specific social, political and economic context of the colony. The peasants and artisans who worked in the traditional African setting and the labourers, porters and boatmen operating within the European-type colonial economic order, performed tasks that

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[61] *Le blanc et Le noir*, p. 39.
[62] Ibid., pp. 212-213.

conformed, as it were, to their inferior racial status. Those Africans who by their activities asserted their independence vis-à-vis the colonial order were regarded as misfits and an affront to morality, and thus doomed to disappear.

> Ce Noir, ce sous-homme implicite, peut-il être 'récupéré'? Les classes laborieuses africaines se composent de ceux qui continuent leur travail traditionnel (les paysans et les artisans) et ceux qui [font] un travail manuel dans le cadre de l'économie européenne...: manoeuvres-instruments, porteurs-animaux, piroguiers-paysages. Les irrécupérables sont ceux qui ne peuvent trouver leur place dans une société conçue à la manière européenne: ce sont les sorciers [...] et les marchands dont la présence est un affront à la morale, à l'esthétique, et qui sont condamnés à disparaître.[63]

In a social and political sense, the highest positions considered normal for Africans were those of houseboys and compliant traditional chiefs who, by readily pandering to the proclivities of their superiors, responded ideally to the colonial masters' desire to involve in the governance of the colony only those Africans who accepted without question the will of the European coloniser.[64] Thus, Africans who by virtue of their education aspired to some form of recognition and equality were scorned for being pretentious, while their attempts to live like Europeans, whose way of life they had been taught to regard as the civilised norm, were qualified as ridiculous.[65] In other words, as Martinkus-Zemp maintains, the writers' judgement of the status and merits of Africans was racially motivated and not based on an objective assessment of their abilities and role in society. Everything depended, it would seem, on whether the Africans were subservient to their colonisers, whether they admired and accepted them as their racial superiors.

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., p. 215

> Le jugement du Blanc est ethnocentrique. Il ne dépend pas des critères objectifs - la place que le Noir occupe dans la société -, mais il résulte des appréciations d'inter-relations subjectives: l'attitude du Noir vis-à vis du Blanc, son degré de soumission, d'admiration du Blanc.[66]

In the final analysis, representations of Africa in French literature in the inter-War years reflected, in this critic's opinion, the contradictions of the European colonial project within which those representations occurred. As she argues, if that project pursued in principle the humanitarian ideals of spreading the presumed blessings of European civilisation to the dark corners of the world, in practice, it created a society of inter-racial and cultural disharmony and incomprehension. That disharmony and incomprehension then impinged on the way the colonial writers related to matters of the self and of the other across the racial and cultural divide.

> Le Blanc est prêt à accepter une société double où les Blancs vivraient leur vie et les Noirs la leur. Et là, le Blanc se trouve dans une situation impossible: il veut les Noirs chez les Noirs, or il est venu en Afrique pour leur apporter la Civilisation, la Religion, pour les éduquer, les "humaniser". C'est la mission d'être de la colonisation, cette colonisation que dans son for intérieur le Blanc se refuse à voir réussir, car elle impliquerait l'intégration des Noirs dans la société blanche. La position théorique du Blanc est une chose, sa conviction intime en est une autre. La colonisation dans ses prémisses, était condamnée à l'échec.[67]

Martinkus-Zemp's approach lends itself to the same criticisms I have raised against Fanoudh-Siefer in that by seeking to foreground the stereotypical nature of the images of black Africa, she proposes a reading of the French inter-War literary texts that fixes into a rule the impossibility of a less skewed representation of the racial and cultural other. It should be remembered that some of the works she discusses were in fact considered in the context of their times as radical departures from colonial modes of cross-cultural representation. This brings to mind the works of André Gide, Albert Londres and René

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[66] Ibid.

Maran whose experiences of black Africa became the subject of books that attracted the fury of the colonial establishment, costing Maran his position as an administrator in the French colonial service.[68] Of course I am not suggesting by any means that these three authors' attitudes to black Africa are an unimpeachable model of cross-cultural representation. Studies have shown how these authors replay the cultural assumptions and ideological motivations that underpinned the very colonial system they sought to criticise.[69] Their attempt to overturn colonial habits of thought should however not be silenced especially if the critical exercice involved has as its material the full range of French literary depictions of black Africa in the inter-War years.[70]

However, like Fanoudh-Siefer though perhaps less explicitly so, Martinkus-Zemp does mention the possibility of a change in perceptions and representations of black Africa. Indeed while she does not relate her study to the emergence of an emancipatory African discourse but claims simply to look at African stereotypes at a specific point in French literature, the fact remains that a key reason she adduces for the prevalence of the stereotypes in her corpus is the colonial writers' inability to outgrow the European pseudo-scientific racial and cultural theories of the 19th century. The theories, she points out, interpreted human history in evolutionary terms, mapping out its progress from savagery to civilisation with the implication that the greater the technical achievements of

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[67] Ibid., p. 219.

[68] The books in question are René Maran's *Batouala* (1921), André Gide's *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and *Le retour du Tchad* (1928) Albert Londres' *Terre d'ébène: La traite des noirs* (1929) and Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* (1931), all of which draw attention to the underside of France's imperium in black Africa.

[69] For the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in Gide's denunciation of the ugly realities of life in the colony, see for instance Robert de Saint-Jean's article 'Deux témoignages sur les colonies: Las Casas et André Gide,' in *La revue hebdomadaire*, 47 (1927), 358-64, and reprinted in *BAAG*, 107 (1995), 475-7.

[70] It is interesting to note that Fanoudh-Siefer does make reference in his introduction to the significance of Gide's, Londres' and Maran's cross-cultural perspectives (*Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire,* pp. 14 -

a society, the more advanced that race or that society was. Martinkus-Zemp maintains that progress in ethnology including works by the Frenchman Marcel Griaule had in the first half of the 20th century largely discredited those racial conceptions of human history. It appears however that the writers she investigates were yet to understand the significance of that progress.

> Le développement des théories ethnologiques de caractère plus ou moins scientifique laisse indifférents les auteurs que nous étudions dans notre exposé, qui, dans la mesure où ils ne sont pas des scientifiques, sont en retard sur leur siècle...Ils ne connaissent qu'une civilisation, la Civilisation qui s'oppose à tout ce qui n'est pas l'Occident et qui est la Sauvagerie. Pour en sortir, il faut que celui qui la vit se soumette à la Civilisation. Nous retrouvons ici, on le voit, le schéma de G. Klemn. L'écrivain blanc de l'entre-deux-guerres, fidèle dans l'ensemble à la vision du monde des siècles classiques, ne semble pas être allé, dans le meilleur des cas, au-delà des conceptions propagées par l'évolutionnisme.[71]

As these words suggest, a change in literary perceptions of black Africa is judged to be a matter for the future, predicated on a prior assimilation of ideas from more scientifically oriented disciplines pertaining to the continent. Should one then assume that once those ideas have filtered down to literary artists of the post-War years an improved and fuller picture of black Africa will emerge and close the chapter of racial and cultural stereotypes?[72] That seems to be her implication, but as I have suggested, it is problematic.

What thus emerges in the studies of both Fanoudh-Siefer and Martinkus-Zemp is a model of positive cross-cultural representation that is placed much further on in time than the model used by Mercier and Lebel. To recapitulate, Mercier chooses Bernardin de

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15). However since the perspectives do not entirely fit into his thesis of a pervasive myth, he inevitably discounts them in his corpus.

[71] *Le blanc et Le noir*, p. 10.

[72] In point of fact, Martinkus-Zemp argues that the prevalence of racial and cultural stereotypes in her corpus stemmed from the fact that French ethnological research concerning black Africa did not take off under the pioneering efforts of Marcel Griaule until a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War (Ibid., p. 12).

Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* as the high point of the progression towards accuracy and empathy in the corpus he examines, while Lebel, the advocate of colonialism, locates that point in the colonial novels of the early 20th century. Fanoudh-Siefer's cut-off point is the Second World War beyond which a newer and more sympathetic French cross-cultural perspective seems to open up alongside black Africa's own attempt at cultural self-definition and self-affirmation. Martinkus-Zemp for her part does not seek to relate her work to the black emancipatory discourse of Negritude. None the less she sees developments in such fields as sociology and ethnology in the inter-War years as a possible source of inverting in the future the racial and cultural prejudices that still mar perceptions of black Africa. But what sense should one make of these ever-shifting boundaries of positive cross-cultural perception? Do the post-War French literary texts lying outside the corpora examined by the four critics bear witness to the model of positive representation they all posit?

3. A Changing Image of Black Africa in Post-War French Writings?

As I have shown, Lebel makes colonialism the condition for an intimate, positive and accurate cross-cultural representation. Given that the post-War years have witnessed the dislocation of France's black African Empire and not its consolidation, how does one consider works like Grainville's *Les flamboyants* and Le Clézio's *Onitsha*, published respectively in 1976 and 1991, in relation to say Demaison's *Diato*, written in 1923? Is one to assume that the first two novels offer less credible cross-cultural images on the ground that they belong to a post-imperial French context devoid of the direct physical contact with black Africa that André Demaison and other colonial novelists living in the continent on a permanent basis apparently enjoyed?

One could say of course that the attainment of political independence by French colonies in Africa in the post-War era has not led to a complete and irreversible erasure of the power of the former metropolis. It is indeed no secret that France has been, and still is in many respects, a key influence in black Africa, to which it is tied by a number of cultural, economic and political institutions and arrangements. There is for instance La Francophonie, a multinational organisation binding France and other French-speaking countries, many of which were up until 1960 French African colonies.[73] Although La Francophonie is ostensibly cultural in inspiration and purpose, the weight of France as befits a former imperial centre and the birthplace of the French language is certainly equal to none within the organisation. Also, there is the issue of France's economic influence epitomised by the pegging of the CFA Franc, used widely in French-speaking black Africa, to the French Franc, and now the Euro. The presence of French military contingents in places like the Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Djibouti, based of course on bilateral agreements with these states, is none the less another pointer to the enduring impact of Empire. If one adds to this communications between Europe and Africa in this age of air travel, the satellite telephone and television and the internet, it would appear reasonable to assume that black Africa is still very much accessible to Europeans, perhaps more than ever before. In short, the Empire may be dead in principle but the pull of what used to be its centre is very much felt today - albeit in an altered form - in what used to be its black African periphery.[74]

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[73] For an overview of the history, institutional structure and future prospects of La Francophonie, see M. Tétu, *La francophonie, histoire, problématique et perspectives* (Paris, Hachette, 1988).

[74] For an insight into France's continuing direct hegemonic pull on black Africa, see in particular G. Martin, 'Continuity and Change in Franco-African Relations', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33, 1 (1995), 1-20, and X. Renou, 'A New French Policy for Africa?', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20, 1 (2002), 5-27.

Are French literary texts produced in the context of neo-colonial relations then aesthetic embodiments of such relations? If so, do such embodiments constitute an accurate and positive description of black Africa in the logic and spirit of Lebel's assessment of the nature of French colonial novels? To put the question differently, are Grainville's *Les flamboyants* and Le Clézio's *Onitsha* modified echoes of Demaison's *Diato*, fine-tuned by a new group of 'romanciers africains', whose 'presence' in Africa enables them to spin yet another 'home-grown' image of the continent from the second half of the 20th century onwards?

But to accept Lebel's interpretation of the French colonial novel and use it to give an account of the post-War French novel relating to black Africa, is to espouse the illusion that the entire French colonial project and its current after-effects in the continent have been entirely above board. Indeed it is to overlook the emergence of Negritude as a counter-hegemonic discourse that called into question the very principles underpinning Lebel's interpretation of the aesthetic dimension of colonialism. In point of fact in a recent assessment of Bakary Diallo's *Force-bonté* - the very novel Lebel presents as encapsulating the indigenous dimension of the colonial novel's intimate portrayal of Africa - Abiola Irele makes a case for that book's deeply subversive, counter-hegemonic thrust, thus refuting earlier claims of its uncritical endorsement of French colonial ideology. He writes:

> [On] closer inspection, the book appears to be something other than the naïve eulogy of French colonialism it has generally been taken to be. When it is realized that the latter part of the book has to do with his odyssey as he seeks proper medical attention after suffering severe injuries at the front during the First World War, it becomes clear that his real intention in telling his story was to make public his mistreatment by the French military authorities. It is this objective that is dissimulated by the excessive and even self-abasing terms of Diallo's hymn of

> praise for the French. In short, Diallo's book is a deeply subversive work, an element [...] that gradually emerges as central to his narrative.[75]

Does it then mean that post-War French literary depictions of black Africa are best explained in terms of the disruptions of colonial modes of cross-cultural perception that Fanoudh-Siefer identifies at the close of his investigation of what he posits as the grossly flawed idea of black Africa; disruptions which date back in the light of Irele's assessment of Bakary Diallo's book, to the 1920s, finding a particular resonance later in Negritude? But I have noted that one defect associated with Negritude is what its critics judge to be its essentialised, anachronistic vision of black Africa.

It should be understood that a key point that unites the otherwise opposed approaches of Lebel and Martinkus-Zemp is the two critics' predication of an accurate depiction of black Africa on a writer's possession of a dependable ethnological and sociological knowledge of the continent. The difference of course is that Lebel already finds such knowledge at work in the novels of André Demaison while Martinkus-Zemp underscores its deficiency in the works she examines. But does a writer's knowledge and use of ethnographical material necessarily insure him against racial and cultural bias? Assuming that the writers of the post-War era are in a more enviable position relating to the availability of sociological and ethnological data, do they necessarily transcend in their representations of black Africa the cultural assumptions that vitiated the picture of the continent in the novels of the inter-War years?

Perhaps the post-War French essays and novels I will examine in this thesis are not the unqualified opposite of the pre-War essays and novels. Perhaps the historical link

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[75] F. Abiola Irele, 'In Search of Camara Laye', *Research in African Literatures*, 37, 1 (2006), 110-127 (p.

between the two sets of works has never really been completely disrupted. If so, should one qualify them as sites that relate to difference in negative and positive terms in the same breath? In other words, if the post-War French writings are to a certain extent conditioned by their own past - their colonial origin - should the image of black Africa they contain then be viewed as a site of conflicting responses to difference, each clamouring for attention?

The conflicting attitudes can be seen at work in the early post-War French essays themselves, particularly those published in the 1947 maiden issue of *Présence africaine* that Fanoudh-Siefer mentions. I will revisit some of the essays in question in the next and subsequent chapters of the thesis to re-assess the arguments they advance and to relate these to other French writings pertaining to black Africa in the last half century. It is my hope that such an analysis will give the reader an insight into the problematic responses to difference that characterise the essays and the novels examined in the thesis as a whole.

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Chapter II

Anti-Colonialism And Cultural Self-Criticism

Section A

Non-Fiction

A direct consequence of the active support given to France by its black African colonies during the Second World War was an explicit recognition, by the two sides of the political divide in France at the time, of the crucial importance of these colonies in the life of the nation. The Vichy regime and the resistance movement both saluted the colonies for what they saw in their varying ways as the colonies' loyalty to France after 1940.[1] Indeed in appreciation of that loyalty and to further galvanise Africa's support for his cause, General de Gaulle, speaking at the Brazzaville Conference of 1944, announced his country's ardent desire for colonial reforms. That desire was given a legal foundation soon after the war within the framework of the 1946 French constitution. The constitution sought to overhaul the old colonial system based on the absolute political and cultural ascendancy of the metropolis, by defining a restructured political partnership that took cognizance of the racial, cultural and geographical diversity that characterised France and its colonies taken as a unit. Called *L'Union française*, the new partnership aimed to promote unity within diversity and vice versa, whereby France and its non-European partners would pool their efforts and resources together to develop their

[1] *L'idée coloniale en France*, p. 200.

respective civilisations while fostering their collective well-being and security. The people of France and those of the colonies were to be treated as equals, having the same rights and duties irrespective of religious and racial differences.

It should not be assumed, however, that black Africans were henceforth in practice the equals of their white counterparts in mainland France. The imperial closure remained in place. As a matter of fact, General de Gaulle made no bones in his speech at the Brazzaville Conference about the point that while France was ardently committed to effect needful reforms to take on board the social and political aspirations of its colonial subjects, it did not envisage and would not tolerate the concretisation of those aspirations outside its control.[2] The 1946 constitution was itself very clear about France's leading role within the proposed French Union: 'Fidèle à sa mission traditionnelle, la France entend conduire les peuples dont elle a pris la charge à la liberté de s'administrer eux-mêmes et de gérer leurs propres affaires'.[3] In fact we know from history that after the war France was in no way prepared to let go of its empire; it even used force to repress early instances of nationalist revolt in places like Algeria and Madagascar.[4] What this means is that the onus fell on colonised peoples themselves, now more conscious than ever in the wake of the war of the profound injustice of foreign tutelage, to set the stage for their political emancipation, which they achieved officially, as far as black Africa was concerned, a decade or so later in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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[2] For a full text of General de Gaulle's opening address at the Brazzaville Conference, see 'Discours de Brazzaville' http://gaullisme.free.fr/DGBrazzaville.htm [accessed 4 December 2004].
[3] For more details, see 'Le Préambule de la Constitution du 17 octobre 1946' http://www,elysee/francais/les_textes_fondateurs/ [acessed 4 December 2004].
[4] For discussions of France's use of military means to strengthen its hold after the war on its imperial possessions in the Middle East, the Far East and Africa, see J. D. Hargreaves' *Decolonization in Africa*, London, Longman, 1988 and J. P. D. Dunbabin's *The Post-Imperial Age: The Great Powers and the Wider World*, London, Longman, 1994.

Yet if for all their readiness to embark on colonial reforms French political actors epitomised by de Gaulle never questioned during and after the war the primacy of French presence and rule in its colonies, many white intellectuals openly identified with the cause of black people. Indeed as early as 1947 such prestigious figures as the writer André Gide, the ethnologists Marcel Griaule and Georges Balandier, the natural scientist Théodore Monod and the philosopher and critic Jean-Paul Sartre contributed to the maiden issue of the first black African journal *Présence africaine*, founded by the Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop and launched that year simultaneously in Paris and Dakar (then the administrative capital of French West Africa). The articles dealt with matters of cultural bias and racial prejudice and thus called into question the assumptions and beliefs that tended to legitimise Europe's relationship with black Africa. In the concluding portions of his *Le mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire* Fanoudh-Siefer underlines what he considers to be an act of collective self-confession on the part of the authors of the articles.[5]

This collective admission of guilt in relation to Europe's responses to cultural difference did not stop with the first number of *Présence africaine*. Subsequent numbers featured again the names of Griaule, Monod and Balandier alongside many others including for instance the geographer Jacques Richard-Molard, whose researches on various aspects of black Africa's geography are interspersed with comments that disavowed European negative preconceptions about the continent. Richard-Molard's works appeared posthumously in 1954 in the fifteenth number of *Présence africaine*.

Since black Africa's independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the self-interrogation has continued, exemplified by such names as René Dumont, the agronomist

[5] See above, p. 56.

and specialist of third world issues and one-time candidate for the French presidency. In his books *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (1962) and *Pour l'Afrique, j'accuse* (1986), Dumont calls into question among other things France's post-1960 policies and activities in the continent. Similarly, the sociologist François de Negroni singles out for treatment in his *Les colonies de vacances: portrait du coopérant français dans le tiers monde* (1977), France's continued appropriation and exploitation of the third world through its programme of technical assistance. The latest manifestations of such collective self-questioning are two recent works by François-Xavier Verschave. The first book, provocatively entitled *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République*, appeared in 1998 and the second, *Noir silence, qui arrêtera la Françafrique ?* in 2000. In them, Verschave accuses France's political elite of hijacking black Africa's independence in pursuit of their country's national interests.

This chapter examines in its first section the contributions by Gide, Sartre, Griaule, Balandier and others on the black African theme published in *Présence africaine*. The chapter also discusses essays by Dumont, de Negroni and Verschave mentioned above. The main aim is to investigate the attitudes and positions taken by a range of intellectuals on black Africa in the decade leading to independence and thereafter. An appraisal of such attitudes and positions at this point will set the stage for a better understanding of the collective self-interrogation undertaken in the fictional works by Georges Conchon, Patrick Grainville, Paule Constant and Le Clézio which I will examine in the second section of the chapter. Their works of imagination echo the attitudes and positions taken within the narrower, specialised frameworks of the essays.

My analysis is not so much a quantitative survey of the articles and books by French intellectuals on black Africa as a tentative exploration of a certain observable quality the works possess, namely their unmistakable critical stance on cultural assumptions and beliefs in a historical context shaped by colonial control and its after-effects. I will therefore focus on a limited number of essays published between 1947 to 2000, as a case study in mapping out how French intellectuals relate to cultural difference in their attempt to re-assess their country's involvement with black Africa. More specifically, I will take a close look at the articles contained in the first, fifth, eighth, ninth and fifteenth numbers of *Présence africaine*. By their focus - explicit or otherwise - on cross-cultural issues, these provide an opportunity to observe how their authors deal with misconceptions that often colour perceptions and representations of difference. Alongside these numbers of *Présence africaine* and the books by Dumont, de Negroni and Verschave, I will discuss other relevant works: Sartre's *Situations III* and *Situations V*, Balandier's *L'Afrique ambiguë* and Barthes' *Mythologies*, all published in the post-War period.

1. The Imperative of Modernity?

Since *Présence africaine* is a key source of the essays considered in this and subsequent chapters of the thesis, it is important to take a close look in the first place at the aims and objectives of the journal as spelt out by Alioune Diop in the inaugural issue, in order to locate Diop's own position at the time on his continent's cultural heritage and to see in what ways that position relates to post-War French intellectual attitudes to his continent.

Diop wrote at the time that his journal was driven by no ideological imperative: 'Cette revue ne se place sous l'obédience d'aucune idéologie philosophique ou politique. Elle veut s'ouvrir à la collaboration de tous les hommes de bonne volonté (blancs, jaunes ou noirs), susceptibles de nous aider à définir l'originalité africaine et de hâter son insertion dans le monde moderne.[6] The journal's three-part format itself, as Diop then conceived it, conformed to this broad aim of instituting a cross-cultural dialogue on black Africa. The second and by far the largest section of the journal was to be reserved for literary works by Africans. The first section was meant for studies on African culture and civilisation (implicitly by specialists of whatever racial and cultural origin in the field), while the third section was to feature reviews of books on the Negro world in general.[7] In asking potential contributors to help define Africa's cultural specificity and identify ways for its speedy integration into modernity, Diop seemed to adopt a quite ambiguous attitude towards his own culture. Speaking in the name of a new African elite torn between Europe and its home continent, Diop stressed further in his article the need for a cultural synthesis, suggesting that however valuable black Africa's cultural specificity was in other ways, and indeed however appropriate it had been for past societies, it was now in certain respects inadequate and anachronistic, lacking what he saw as Europe's dynamic, creative and productive impulse.

> [L']humanité aujourd'hui comprend deux groupes distincts: d'une part, une minorité d'êtres agissants, productifs, créateurs: l'Europe. En face d'elle, les hommes d'outre-mer beaucoup plus nombreux. Ils sont en général moins actifs, peu productifs (du moins leur productivité ne répond-elle pas au rythme des temps modernes). Ils sont 'le fardeau de l'homme blanc'.[8]

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[6] A. Diop, 'Niam n'goura ou la raison d'être de Présence Africaine', *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947), 7-14 (p. 7).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Interestingly however, Diop's diffidence regarding his culture and open admiration of Europe did not prevent him from criticising the latter. As a matter of fact, while praising Europe for its indefatigable energy and creative impulse, Diop questioned in the same breath the use to which Europe had put those qualities in what he saw as its hostile and aggressive dealings with other cultures. In this way, he made a case for a more cooperative approach to difference on the part of Europe for, as he puts it, the common good of humanity.[9]

Diop may have had good reasons for sounding diffident about his culture and for admiring and criticising Europe at the same time. Lilyan Kesteloot suggests that Diop's diffidence about black Africa's capacity to address all by itself its needs in the modern age stemmed from the fact that the Senegalese intellectual approached his culture with the objectivity and lucidity required for reshaping it to suit new demands. She further argues that if Diop admired Europe for its supposedly more active and creative genius, it was partly because he needed to tread carefully to protect his journal as he was aware of the fate that had befallen earlier journals founded by black intellectuals, journals judged to be subversive and banned as a result.[10]

The aims and objectives of *Présence africaine* evolved, and Diop himself later emphasised the necessary ideological thrust of his journal, which in the politically

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[9] Ibid., p. 9.

[10] *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature* (1977). The journals in question were *Légitime Défense* and *Tropiques*. The first issue of *Légitime Défense*, which appeared in Paris in 1932, was the work of a group of young Martinican intellectuals led by Etienne Léro. Léro and his group were vehemently critical of the servile adherence of West Indian writers to French literary norms and practices and advocated for a distinctive West Indian literary voice. The political implications of their stance were of course not lost on the authorities. Consequently, there was to be no second issue of the journal. *Tropiques* for its part was published from 1941 to 1943 in Martinique, under the inspiration of Aimé Césaire who had gone back home from Paris. A comprehensive appraisal of the origins, aims and importance of these and other journals relating to the Negro-African cultural specificity debate is available also in Belinda Jack's *Negritude and Literary Criticism* (1996).

charged climate of the mid 1950s onwards - the heyday of African nationalism - became the cultural mouthpiece for the continent's quest for political and social liberation and transformation. It is important to mention in this respect that if in its inaugural issue *Présence africaine* aimed to define and promote Africa's cultural heritage and enlisted in doing so the goodwill and services of reputable French intellectuals, some of whom like Gide, Sartre and Camus made up its exclusively European Comité de patronage, the journal quietly abandoned - a sign of the times - the said European Comité de patronage from 1955. It then went on to organise the following year the First World Congress of Black Writers and Artists. In his opening speech, Diop set the tone of the deliberations that were to follow, stressing the inevitable link between cultural liberation and political and social emancipation for a continent and its people whose history had been marked by the indignities of slavery and colonisation orchestrated by the West.[11] The black intellectual and artist, Diop argued, had now come of age, free to consider and interpret his continent's relationship with the West on his own terms and in accordance with the heartfelt need to denounce 'le racisme et l'impérialisme de l'Occident'.[12] That denunciation would go on, Diop added, until the destabilising impact of imperial dominance gave way to a world order created out of a free association of people of all races and all cultures.

But such radical questioning of Europe's imperial project and the concomitant assertion of black people's cultural and political consciousness still has its problems. In an important collection of essays entitled *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and*

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[11] A. Diop, 'Discours d'ouverture', *Présence africaine*, 8-9-10 (1956), 9-18.
[12] Ibid. p. 17.

the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987,[13] commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the journal, the editor, V. Y. Mudimbe and a host of other distinguished Africanists from France, the USA and Africa recognise the journal's achievement in creating a space for '"a surreptitious speech" in which a distinct "space" is made for Africa'.[14] Yet far from engaging in indiscriminate praise, the authors of the commemorative essays highlight what they judge as weaknesses and limitations of the intellectual space created by the journal. Thus their objective is not 'a naïve canonization of *Présence Africaine* but a critical reading of its context, characteristics and significance'.[15] Their point is that if the journal provided a forum for the definition and promotion of black cultural identity, it could not escape the contradictions and ambiguities of its own condition. Written in French, published in France, addressed to a French and French-educated African audience, and thus shaped by the very Western cultural space whose hegemony it sought covertly to undermine, *Présence africaine*'s 'surreptitious voice', as Mudimbe points out, 'faces Western culture in the name of an absolute alterity; yet this very alterity seems to spring from the Western space'.[16]

Mudimbe's observation leads us to this: if African interpreters of their culture for all their claim to an absolute alterity still speak - however marginally - from within a Western cultural space, where does one then place the positions and attitudes of European interpreters of African culture? By indicating in the call he made in 1947 for an inter-racial dialogue on black Africa the apparent inadequacies of his own culture as well as

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[13] V. Y. Mudimbe (ed.), *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1992). Another commentary regarding the origin, preoccupations and evolution of the journal worth mentioning is Salah D. Hassan, 'Inaugural Issues: the Cultural Politics of the Early *Présence Africaine*', in *Research in African Literatures*, 30, 2 (1999), 194-221.

[14] Mudimbe, *The Surreptitious Speech*, p. 435.

[15] Ibid., p. xviii.

[16] Ibid., p. 436.

the shortcomings of Europe in the use of its supposedly creative energy, did Diop not throw a difficult challenge to a potential white contributor? Clearly, if called upon as a white intellectual to appraise a culture in comparison with which one's own was posited as superior by virtue of its being the embodiment of modernity, would one not run the risk of succumbing to the pitfall of cultural chauvinism? This question is crucial. It brings into focus a key dimension of the underlying cross-cultural attitudes adopted by the authors of the essays discussed in the chapter, namely their sustained and explicit attempt at cultural self-criticism: a disavowal of the supremacist mentality that tended to legitimise Europe's colonial and neo-colonial action and a resulting anathematisation of that colonial and neo-colonial action itself. Such cultural self-criticism and anti-colonialism seem to be a pre-condition, a sort of obligatory passage in trying to reach out to a hitherto misunderstood difference .

2. Said's Concept of Representation

To examine closely the anti-colonial and cultural self-critical attitude mentioned above, I will first go back for a methodological signpost to Said's *Orientalism.* A key concept Said uses in evaluating the nature and quality of the Western Orientalist tradition he investigates is 'representation', through which he emphasises what he sees as the fundamentally flawed, externalised image of the Orient that tradition offers. He argues that Western scholars and writers of Empire approach the Orient as outsiders, whose culture's historical antagonism to and dominance of the latter lead them to produce

knowledge that he calls '*representations*, not "natural" depictions of the Orient'.[17] This is knowledge produced by and in turn productive of the West's own superior self-image and hegemonic purposes, and is articulated in a variety of media, including scholarly and imaginative writings, which are inflected by the various kinds of power (political, intellectual, cultural and moral) that the West has wielded and continues to wield over non-Western regions of the world. Said in fact goes further to identify in textual terms features through which such externalised, dominating perspective on the Orient can be observed and assessed. In so doing he uses two methodological devices to give an account of Western writers' individual and collective approaches to the Orient. The first device he calls 'strategic location', which is 'a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about'.[18] The second he calls 'strategic formation', which is 'a way of analysing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large'.[19] Said's use of the notion of strategy to describe both individual and collective Western authorial and textual elaborations of the Oriental theme is motivated by his belief that the authors involved face the Orient in terms of a problem to be solved. This leads to issues such as: 'how to get hold of it, how to approach it, how to be defeated or overwhelmed by its solemnity, its scope, its awful dimensions'.[20] The point Said is making is that what matters is 'not the correctness of the representation or its fidelity to some great original'[21] but how the authors set about, within the context of their own culture's antagonistic and

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[17] *Orientalism*, p. 21. The emphases are Said's.
[18] Ibid., p. 20.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid. p. 21.

dominating relationship with the Orient, describing, or rather, representing the latter. And the way an author locates himself in relation to the Orient can be determined by 'the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the types of structures he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text - all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf'.[22]

But are the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in a Western writer's text on non-Western cultures and civilisations, always a function of that writer's hegemonic cultural provenance? The point is that by taking for granted a writer's involvement in the power structures of his or her culture, one may lose sight of or at the very least underplay the ways in which the images, themes and motifs that writer deploys call into question his or her continent's relationship with other continents. As this section of the chapter focuses specifically on non-fictional works, I will leave the issue of narration aside until the next section devoted to novels. In the meantime, I will examine a number of interrelated themes to demonstrate how the essays considered here acquire, to adopt Said's phrase, referential power among themselves in problematising (not endorsing, and here I differ from Said) at one level Europe's relationship with black Africa. For coherence and ease of exposition, these themes may be summarised under three headings. These are an economically predatory Europe, a politically manipulative and oppressive Europe, and a culturally arrogant and self-assertive Europe.

I am not suggesting by any means that the essays studied give equal weight and space to issues relating to economic predation, socio-political manipulation and oppression and

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[22] Ibid. p. 20.

cultural arrogance and self-assertion. The points of emphasis vary from one text to another. In exploring each of the three themes, I will consider only those essays in which that theme is most significantly handled. And in keeping with the interconnectedness of the three themes, I will be referring to some of the essays more than once, if and when the illustration of any of the themes calls for that.

3. Economic Predation

As I indicated in the introduction to this thesis, a key argument for France's overseas expansionist policy was that colonies were a necessity for industrial Europe. Jules Ferry had argued that colonial expansion was the prerogative of the industrialised and productive nations, who needed to look overseas for new avenues of capital investment.[23] An important feature of the essays considered in this chapter is their overt questioning of this economic justification of empire; a collective self-critical attitude that foregrounds a desire and an attempt to denounce the crimes committed in the name of that argument. These crimes are the ruthless exploitation of black Africa's human and material resources, and they are evident from the earliest moments of Europe's contact with Africa to the most recent phase of that contact. This point comes across clearly when one reads side by side Gide's brief yet interesting piece in the November 1947 issue of *Présence africance*, his 'Avant-propos', Sartre's *Situations III* and *Situations V*, published respectively in 1949 and 1964, Dumont's *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*, Negroni's *Les colonies de vacances*, and Verschave's *La Françafrique* and *Noir silence* all four relating to post-1960 neo-colonial situations.

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[23] *L'idée coloniale en France*, p. 46.

Gide's piece sets the tone of this unflattering assessment of the materialistic motives behind Europe's relationship with black Africa. In his earlier *Voyage au Congo*[24] and *Le Retour du Tchad*[25] Gide, confronted with what he saw as the excesses and aberrations of his country's imperial presence and activities in Africa, had this to say: 'Désormais une immense plainte m'habite; je sais des choses dont je ne puis pas prendre part. Quel démon m'a poussé en Afrique? Qu'allais-je donc chercher dans ce pays? J'étais tranquille. A présent je sais ; je dois parler'.[26] Perhaps the worst embodiment of the excesses Gide felt compelled to speak about seems to be the big concessionary companies, to which the colonial administration in Paris had ceded large territories in Equatorial Africa but which had apparently simply milked the human and material resources of those territories, giving nothing in return. Gide's condemnation of the companies is categorical:

> Qu'est-ce que ces Grandes Compagnies, en échange, ont fait pour le pays? Rien. Les concessions furent accordées dans l'espoir que les compagnies 'feraient valoir' le pays. Elle l'ont exploité, ce qui n'est pas la même chose: saigné, presque comme une orange dont on va bientôt rejeter la peau vide.[27]

In his 'Avant-Propos', Gide again takes up the theme of the exploitation of black Africa's material and human resources. In a rather terse statement, he reviews the whole history of Europe's contact with Africa, referring, without calling them by their names, to episodes like Europe's trans-Atlantic trade in African slaves and to its subsequent colonisation of Africa motivated like the slave trade by material gain. Recalling the words of Rabelais who once said: 'l'Afrique apporte toujours quelque chose de rare', Gide enumerates the unique resources that had propelled Europe

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[24] A. Gide, *Voyage au Congo* (Paris, Gallimard, 1927).
[25] A. Gide, *Le retour du Tchad* (Paris, Gallimard, 1928).
[26] *Voyage au Congo*, pp. 96-97.
[27] Ibid.,p. 78.

towards Africa and its people, and then comments sarcastically on the cynicism that underlay the drive towards the resources in question.

> Produits précieux que ne fournissaient pas nos terres tempérées: ébène, ivoire, animaux bizarres ou terribles. Mais surtout le bétail humain offrait la possibilité de profits considérables. L'Afrique méritait donc qu'on s'occupât d'elle. Non que l'on estimât alors qu'on eût rien à apprendre d'elle et de ses peuples arriérés, mais il y avait chez elle et chez eux, sans doute, beaucoup à prendre et à piller.[28]

But for a more sustained denunciation of Europe's predatory activities, one must turn to Sartre, Dumont, de Negroni and Verschave. Benefiting from the hindsight that Gide writing in 1947 obviously lacked, they link up in their essays written between the early 1960s and the late 1990s what they cast as Europe's exploitation of pre-colonial, colonial and/or post-colonial Africa. Sartre's *Situations V*, subtitled 'colonialisme et néo-colonialisme' brings together essays most of which actually appeared initially in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in the second half of the 1950s, that is, in the very heat of the bloodiest episode of French decolonisation - the Algerian war of independence. Many of them deal with the French Algerian situation itself and convey a clear sense of their author's uncompromising stance on his country's involvement in that region of Africa. Yet the conclusions Sartre reaches in the essays are easily applicable to post-1945 black African situations. Indeed while drawing on the specifics of an embattled French Algeria of the mid-1950s, one of the essays in the volume entitled 'Le colonialisme est un système' clearly provides, beyond those specifics and from an unmistakably Marxist standpoint, an insight into how colonialism as a system of economic exploitation works, the Algerian situation being in Sartre's view 'l'exemple le plus clair et le plus lisible du système colonial'.[29] In

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[28] A. Gide, 'Avant-propos', *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947) 3-6 (p. 3).
[29] Sartre, *Situations V*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 27.

this way, Sartre exposes the scandalous operations of a bi-continental economic system designed to promote the interests of French capitalism and its agents abroad – 'les colons', as he calls them, meaning the colonial authorities. It is important to recall here his reading of Jules Ferry. Sartre underlines the cynicism that underlay Jules Ferry's economistic conception and justification of colonialism, offering damning statistical evidence to show that far from contributing to the social and economic development of those places where such capital was invested, the colonies functioned in reality as part of a rigorously conceived and merciless exploitative socio-economic mechanism. They merely served as outlets for manufactured products from the metropolis to be bought not by the natives but by transplanted Europeans who alone had the purchasing power to do so, and who offered in return raw material from the colonies that the metropolitan industries needed in order to operate; raw material obtained at low cost by the readily available local labour force. Caught in this infernal circle of economic exploitation are the natives of the colonies: landless, a source of cheap labour, impoverished, and often unemployed owing to European mechanized modes of production.

Like Gide, Dumont touches on his continent's self-seeking attitude in the early moments of the cross-cultural encounter, and then like Sartre acknowledges the colonial dimension of that attitude before examining its post-colonial manifestations. Indeed in both *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* and *Pour l'Afrique, j'accuse*, Dumont, an agronomist with a keen interest and long involvement with post-1960 Africa, relates to the continent in technical/developmental terms, claiming that black Africa's socio-economic difficulties cannot be fully understood and analysed without taking into consideration the

part played by Europeans in causing the difficulties. He deplores the fact that many Europeans all too easily consider black Africans to be primitive and lazy people, liars and thieves and to be thus ultimately responsible for their backwardness. What seems important to Dumont is that far from resulting in a peaceful and mutually beneficial cross-cultural encounter, Europe's contact with black Africa from the fifteenth century onwards brutally interrupted whatever course Africa's age-old homegrown cultures and civilisations might have taken, ushering in in their place an era of criminal exploitation whose effects are felt in the continent to this day. In fact, going much further than Gide does in his 'Avant-propos' in terms of details, Dumont mentions the destructive impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: the raids made in search of potential slaves and the internecine wars issuing from such raids, the horrors of the slave camps where the victims waited to be transported to the Americas, the even greater horrors of the sea voyage in which the victims died in significant numbers, and the risks those who survived the voyage ran from diseases and malnutrition inseparable from the sordid conditions in which they lived and laboured as slaves. In addition to slaves, Europe looted from Africa such precious commodities as ivory, gold, rubber and, as Dumont puts it, 'des autres vraies richesses', in contradistinction to what he sees as the comparatively worthless and at times very dangerous items that Europe gave in exchange: beads, cheap clothes and jewellery, second-hand guns and gunpowder and, worst of all, alcohol. Europe's subsequent colonisation of black Africa did not result in any fair deal for the continent either. Indeed like Sartre, Dumont stresses the metropolis's monopolistic hold on the colonies' economy, which served as a source of quick and easy profits in much the same way as pre-colonial Africa's human and material resources had attracted European

slave traders and fortune hunters. Quoting directly Jean Dresch - like him a third-world specialist - to make his point, Dumont sums up Europe's monopolistic hold on the economy of colonial Africa in these terms:

> La traite consiste en gros à tirer d'un pays les produits d'exportation et à y vendre des produits importés aux indigènes pourvus d'argents, grâce à la vente des produits exportés. Circuit très élémentaire, qui réserve autant que possible le marché à la métropole et condamne la colonie à ne produire que des matières premières, sans les transformer sur place.[30]

Black Africa's accession to political independence from the late 1950s onwards did not result in the eradication of the unequal trade relations between France and its colonies. Citing the case of Madagascar which he visited in the summer of 1961, Dumont argues that Europe's exploitation of Africa's resources is in no way a thing of past. The dominance of the trade sector over the industrial sector seemed to characterise post-1960 African situations and thus replayed the commercial imbalances between centre and periphery inherent in colonial situations. Dumont considers this dominance of trade over industry to be the essential characteristic of under-development, that is, the main obstacle to black Africa's economic development in the post-colonial era. Dumont goes on to deplore the role played by Western capitalism in holding Africa down through rules and regulations formulated and imposed by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. Such policies in his view spring from capitalist, neo-liberal economic ideas and practices far removed from the peculiar cultural, social and political realities and needs of the third world.

Negroni makes similar points in *Les colonies de vacances*. True to its subtitle 'portrait du coopérant français dans le Tiers-Monde', the work focuses specifically on the French

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[30] *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (Paris, Seuil, 1973), p. 28.

technical assistant, whose activities in the third world come under the author's withering, satirical gaze. The work seeks to demystify the concept of 'coopérant français' itself, which is taken beyond its habitual, restricted sense of France's technical or professional aid to developing countries, to become a framework for understanding the sociological, psychological and ideological dimensions of a specific brand of trans-national relations. The author argues that the European and specifically French actors of these relations constitute beyond their official and professional role as technical assistants, a distinctive social group which relates to its cross-cultural environment in ways that amount to specific modes of Western appropriation of difference. In exploring the question of appropriation, Negroni refers to the group as an exclusive club or society of temporarily transplanted beings and compares the way the club members are recruited at home and deployed overseas to the operations of modern-day international tourism. To Negroni, the French technical assistant's contact and involvement with the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia is basically, as the title of his book clearly spells out, a trans-national leisure-oriented activity, marked by its own fissures and contradictions. These are related to the status of the actors within the metropolitan society they temporarily leave behind and the way these actors respond to the realities of underdevelopment confronting them in African and Asian communities. Where responses to third-world societies are concerned, the fissures and contradictions seem to turn into changing, indeed differing appropriations of difference. These appropriations range from an exoticist and hedonistic apprehension of African and Asian societies construed as a paradigm of difference, through a selfless, humanitarian commitment to assisting these societies now recognized to be poor and underdeveloped, to a felt need for co-opting the Asian and African as an

active agent in the developmental process, and to doubts about the efficacy and utility of the assistance offered. In their extreme form, such doubts become a wholesale rejection of Western discourse of progress and development. At this point, the technical assistant seeks not just to co-opt the African or Asian partner in development but to achieve complete identification with the partner through total self-annihilation. He thus becomes an ardent crusader against Western imperialism, targeting above all its latest, post-1960 phase: French technical assistance, the very institution he represents. This does not however disrupt the fundamental unequal relationship in which France pursues its neo-liberal economic interests in Africa or Asia. Thus even the iconoclastic technical assistant who wages war on the institution he represents does so from within the luxury of a 'Club Coopération', whose continued growth and expansion world wide results from its strict adherence to what Negroni scathingly calls '[les] sages principes de l'économie néo-libérale: investissements légers en équipement, faibles retombées financières sur le pays [African or Asian] et rapatriement des bénéfices, exploitation sauvage jusqu'à épuisement'.[31] These words resemble almost to the letter what Gide in the late 1920s saw as European concessionary companies squeezing Africa dry.

This denunciation of France's neo-colonial economic activities finds its most recent formulation in Verschave's two books and in statements and interviews given by the author following their publication. Verschave proceeds from the assumptions that colonisation was a system put in place by Europe of appropriating black Africa's riches and that the system remains in place even after black Africa's official accession to independence. He denounces the activities of French multi-national corporations like Elf, Bouygues, Bolloré and Dumez and alludes to the questionable conduct of the arms

[31] *Les colonies de vacances* (Paris, Editions Hallier, 1977), p. 275.

industry and the secret service, which in collusion with French government officials and corrupt African leaders have been spinning an ever-growing networks of shady deals that go beyond France's traditional sphere of influence in the continent; these deals benefit individuals or groups of individuals to the detriment of black Africa and its peoples. He gives voice to his fear that increasing links between these predatory France-Africa networks and similar networks spun in Britain, the United States, South Africa and Russia might lead to a globalised system of criminal exploitation he calls 'Mafia-Afrique'.[32]

4. Political Subjugation and Manipulation

Directly related to and indeed fostering Europe's culpable post-1945 dealings with black Africa's resources is what further emerges in Sartre, Dumont and Verschave as the political subjugation and manipulation of Africa by Europe, and France in particular. As mentioned earlier, a second argument advanced by Jules Ferry and others in support of France's overseas colonial project was that it was a source of national self-regeneration: it would enable France to regain its honour and respect as a world power compromised by the humiliation of 1870 and would by implication assuage the pain of the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. What Sartre, Dumont and Verschave show is that far from enhancing France's image, the colonial project and its after-effects resulted in the confiscation of the political freedoms of colonised Africans and the social deprivation and tensions such loss of political freedoms involves. Dumont calls into question in the

[32] 'De la Françafrique à la Mafiafrique : Francois-Xavier Verschave, Entretien avec Enrico Portia', 1-5, accessed 12 May 2003 at: http://www.amnistia.net/news/articles/intvversc.htm.

first place Europe's assertion of its control through military means over black Africa in the late nineteenth century. He speaks of 'les massacres et les ruines accumulées, le plus souvent inutilement';[33] massacres and ruins that exacerbated in his view an already bad situation: a black Africa already ravaged by the Atlantic Slave Trade. He is critical of Jules Ferry who had claimed that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* was not written for the people of Equatorial Africa; he then quotes from a variety of sources including an English historian, W. W. Howitt, author of *Colonisation and Christianity* (1838), a French General, H. Meynier, author of *l'Afrique noire* (1911), and the André Gide of *Voyage au Congo* and *Le retour du Tchad* himself, to further illustrate the arrogance, violence and tyranny of European colonial conquest. That conquest itself was followed, Dumont argues, by another period of tyranny, namely '*la paix coloniale*, qui n'était pas exempte de servilité. Seule la plus extrême docilité était tolérée'.[34]

Sartre is no less forthright in denouncing the oppression and violence Dumont associates with colonial rule. His stance is perhaps best approached from a short comment on France's relations with the black world entitled 'Présence noire', published like Gide's 'Avant-propos' in the first number of *Présence africaine*.[35] He begins his critique by saluting the timeliness of Alioune Diop's review. While Germany, the USSR and the United States had at some point or other commanded the attention of France, black Africa had generally been the absent other. A consequence of this marginal importance of black Africa was in Sartre's view a certain self-congratulatory attitude in France about race relations, translated into feelings of indignation relating to the treatment meted out to black communities in the United States. Sartre points out that it

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[33] *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*, p. 24.
[34] Ibid., pp. 26-27.
[35] Sartre, 'Présence noire', *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947), 28-29.

was indeed when the French felt convinced about their tolerance towards black people and most indignant about racial segregation in other countries that they were most laughable. For to Sartre, those black people who managed to come to France were in fact very few in number and moreover had had to go through rather dubious and discriminatory procedures of selection and filtering. He then adds rather stingingly that these students from the colonies were in fact hostages, or rather symbols, designed to promote and so justify France's civilising mission abroad. In other words, every act of goodwill, sympathy, friendship and respect shown to black students in France was in Sartre's view meant to atone for the indignity to which their people in the colonies were subjected. Sartre then hopes that *Présence africaine* will provide an account of the simple facts of colonial dominance. To him, the evils of colonisation required no amplification.

But perhaps it is in 'Le colonialisme est un système' that Sartre most stridently denounces colonialism as a repressive and manipulative political tool, drawing attention beyond the specifics of the Algerian situation to the political mechanism of imperial control. Sartre shows this mechanism at work by identifying a range of strategies through which France destroyed for its own self-seeking purposes the centuries-old social and political structures of indigenous societies, for instance by using force at the slightest provocation to dispossess colonised people of their lands. And when the use of force proved less satisfactory, France generously offered the natives of the colonies its civil code, which guarantees individual freedom and initiative. The generous offer was in fact a potent weapon of dispossession in a society where property was traditionally collectively owned; property which in the context of the new dispensation was atomised,

allowing speculators - European settlers of course - to buy land that was now on offer. Such deliberate destruction of traditional structures was moreover an effective means of suppressing the forces of native resistance and opposition to colonialism, now replaced by what Sartre calls 'une poussière d'individu'.[36] Additionally, the manipulation and subversion of colonised societies took the form of linguistic control. If in Europe claims of national identity were made in terms of a shared language, colonised natives were refused the use of their languages: from 1830 onwards Arabic was considered in the case of Algeria a foreign language. Worse still, the French administration sidelined the Arabs by confiscating their religion, recruiting and paying elements from within the Islamic society to destabilise the latter. The separation of state and religion was a republican privilege, a luxury meant for the metropolis alone, for in the repressive logic of colonial expansion and control, 'la République française ne peut pas se permettre d'être républicaine'.[37] The implication here is that by forcefully imposing itself on the natives of Algeria and elsewhere, France negated in essence the democratic principles of governance on which it had prided itself since the Revolution of 1789.

Sartre and Dumont both underscore the problematic nature of black Africa's independence, pointing out the emergence of new forms of political control in the context of that independence itself. I will consider first an essay by Sartre entitled 'Lumumba et le néo-colonialisme'.[38] Sartre claims that Congo's independence achieved on 30 June 1960 was right from the beginning a flawed enterprise: it was an independence that was prescribed by the Belgian coloniser who sought to take back with one hand what he had

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[36] *Situations V*, p. 33.
[37] Ibid., p. 39.
[38] Sartre's 'Lumumba et le néo-colonialisme' prefaces *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba* (Présence Africaine, 1963). The preface also features in *Situations V* (Gallimard, 1964), this time as 'La Pensée Politique de Patrice Lumumba'. This analysis is based on the *Situation V* version of the essay.

given with the other. Because Lumumba thought of independence in terms of complete and unfettered political freedom for his country and continent, he became a liability to the ex-coloniser and other like-minded European nations including Britain and France as well as white supremacists regimes in such neighbouring African countries as what was then Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, who all saw in Lumumba's declared pan-Africanism a threat to their longstanding economic and political interests in the continent. Lumumba's and indeed Africa's tragedy was that the former European colonial powers wanted to relinquish direct management of their colonies to a ruling African elite of their own choosing, through whom they would as before control the continent's geopolitical resources. Capitalising on the ethnic divisions within the former colony, the neo-colonial forces encouraged separatist movements born out of those divisions. That led to a situation where Lumumba, in reality powerless, was made to be a dictator: his centralist and unitary vision of an independent Congo clashed with the autonomist designs and the personal ambitions of other Congolese, politicians and military officers alike who, much more amenable to European capitalist interests, finally won the day. 'Les Belges, les Anglais, les grandes compagnies [...] ont fait assassiner Lumumba par leurs hommes de mains, Kasavubu, Tshombé et Munongo',[39] Sartre writes, claiming that the years 1960 and 1961 which witnessed Lumumba's rule served in fact as a moment of political and economic re-adjustment as traditional forms of colonial control gave way to a neo-colonial order in which African leaders handpicked by the West enabled the latter to conveniently manipulate Congo and indeed the rest of Africa for its own selfish ends.

Focusing specifically on post-1960 French-African relations, Dumont for his part argues that if black Africa had a bad start with its independence, it was partly because

[39] *Situations V*, p. 243.

France had manipulated to its advantage the very process of decolonisation. He contends that instead of allowing the newly independent and economically fragile African countries to merge into a stronger, more economically viable single political unit, France chose to drive a wedge between them. In other words, using the time-tested strategy of divide and rule, France has pursued in independent Africa its own hegemonic interests as an important world power, encouraging such influential African leaders as the late Houphouët Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire to work against the creation of a federation and to keep at a distance Guinea, whose leader had dared to vote in 1958 against de Gaulle's restructed colonial project of a community of semi-autonomous countries centred on France.[40] And like Sartre who accuses French colonial administration of deliberately marginalizing the language of the natives of Algeria, Dumont calls into question the priority and support given by France to the teaching of the French language in its ex-colonies of black Africa, as such a policy sidelined the promotion of indigenous African languages in schools thereby maintaining and perpetuating through cultural and linguistic means the ascendancy of the former metropolis.[41]

Verschave is perhaps even more virulent in condemning France's post-1960 political manipulation of black Africa. Over and beyond his attack on his country's economic activities in the continent, he criminalises France's African politics in general, stressing the cynicism of the highest levels of government including all past and present post-War French presidents themselves. The titles *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République* and *Noir silence, qui arrêtera la Françafrique?* [42] convey clearly Verschave's

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[40] *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*, p. 69.
[41] *Pour l'Afrique, j'accuse*, p. 257.
[42] F.-X Verschave, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République* (Paris, Stock, 1998),; *Noir Silence, qui arrêtera la Françafrique ?* (Paris, Les Arènes, 2000).

antipathy to the actors of France's foreign policy towards Africa. He does not hesitate to name the politicians he criticises; an attitude that made him the object of several lawsuits. For instance when the first book was published, the former French interior minister Charles Pasqua sued the author for libel. The case however resulted in Verschave paying only symbolic damages.[43] He traces the origin of France's meddling with African affairs to no less a figure than Charles de Gaulle, the French head of state who oversaw Africa's accession to self-rule. It is his contention that while de Gaulle officially acceded to Africa's demand for independence, he covertly instructed his special adviser on African affairs, Jacques Foccart, to ensure the continent's continued dependence on France. Foccart set about his task using methods that Verschave describes as 'illégales, occultes, inavouables', as they included electoral fraud, political assassinations and outright war.[44] Foccart's goal was to entrench in power corrupt African leaders ready to do business with their French mentors and godfathers. It is this hidden, unofficial but to him the most important dimension of post-War Franch-African relations that Verschave calls 'Françafrique': an ungainly activity of neo-colonial control that subsequent French presidents including Giscard d'Estaing, Mitterand, and Jacques Chirac and their respective governments have consolidated. Verschave claims indeed that if up to the mid 1970s a single, state network of neo-colonial control operated under the guidance of Foccart, other networks have ever since proliferated, involving as discussed earlier the

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[43] See Verschave's comments on the outcomes of this case in his preface to *Noir silence* (Paris, Les Arènes, 2000), 9-14. A few months after *Noir silence* itself was published Verschave was again taken to court, this time by three African heads of state who were angered by the references he makes in the book to their at best dubious relationship with French Government officials. Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazaville, Omar Bongo of Gabon and Idriss Déby of Chad brought the case against the author, taking advantage of a law enacted in 1881, which made it a crime to offend a foreign head of state. The court however dismissed the case on the ground that the law contravened the European Convention of Human Rights, which protects freedom of speech.

[44] See Alain Mathieu, 'Danger pour la démocratie (une interview de Francois-Xavier Verschave)', 1-4, accessed 16 September 2003, at: http://www.lcr-rouge.org/archives/011801/pleinfeu.html.

French secret service and a range of multinational companies acting at times in concert with one other and with the state and at other times against one another for the control and exploitation of Africa's natural and geopolitical resources.

In *Noir silence*, Verschave describes what he sees as the increasingly complicated and wider dimension of France's neo-colonial politics in black Africa. In an interview he gave after the work was published, he admitted that he considered his first book to represent all that he needed to say about France's secret and criminal manipulation of its ex-colonies. The civil war that broke out in Congo-Brazzaville in the late 1990s led him to revisit his position. For he saw in that upheaval a secret war waged by France; a war characterised by human right violations far greater than those committed in the wars of Kosovo, East Timor and Chechnya combined; a war whose coverage in the media however made no mention of the pivotal role played in it by France. Verschave denounces this silence surrounding what he calls France's criminal African policy and goes on to show the wider implications of that policy in such other conflict-ridden countries as Congo-Kinshasa, Angola, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.[45] He unmasks for instance the networks' backing for the former Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, in pursuit of its geopolitical interests in the West African sub-region.[46]

5. Cultural Arrogance

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[45] In an earlier work entitled *Complicité de génocide? La politique de la France au Rwanda* (Paris, La Découverte, 1994), and in portions of *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la la République*, Verschave unmasks what he regards as France's disastrous role in the Rwandan genocide.

[46] Earlier, in a chapter of *La Françafrique*, the author draws attention to his country's hegemonic ambitions in such former British colonies as Nigeria. According to him, France actively supported, militarily and financially, the secessionists of Biafra in the Nigerian civil war. The goal of that support was to check that populous and potentially wealthy English-speaking country's possible hegemonic influence over its poorer and less populated French-speaking West African neighbours. In another chapter of the same book, Verschave describes the 'France-Africa' networks' involvement with Charles Taylor of Liberia; a point he takes up again in *Noir silence*.

A third dimension of post-War French intellectuals' critical attitude to their country's and continent's relations with black Africa is their conscious and explicit attempt to distance themselves from the cultural and racial assumptions, biases and prejudices that tended to lend legitimacy to the economic exploitation and political subjugation and manipulation discussed above. To show this cultural self-distancing act at work, I will go back to the 1947 number of *Présence africaine*. Here, many of the contributions made by metropolitan French intellectuals are characterized by an explicit repudiation of the biases and prejudices that often colour perceptions of difference across the cultural divide. This cultural self-critical attitude in fact underpins not only articles contained in subsequent numbers of the journal but more substantial pieces like Sartre's *Situations III*, Balandier's *Afrique ambiguë* and Barthes' *Mythologies*.

As I noted in my earlier discussion, a third argument advanced in the late nineteenth century by supporters of France's overseas expansionist project was the moral need for Europe to spread the virtues of Western, Christian, and technologically advanced civilization to the dark corners of the earth; a duty that was proclaimed as France's *mission civilisatrice* abroad. The foundation of that mission was the doctrine of assimilation: a colonial theory whose advocates reached the decision in the two colonial congresses held in 1889 and 1890 that French policy should 'propagate among the natives the language, the methods of work, and progressively, the spirit and civilization of France'.[47] This desire to impose on Africans a civilisation that would transform them

[47] See R. O. Collins, 'Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Rule', accessed 20 February 2003 at: <http://husky1.stmarys.ca~wmills/course317/Fr_readings.html> . Related articles on the subject can be read on the subject include Martin Lewis' 'One Hundred Million Frenchmen: The Assimilation Theory in French Colonial Policy' and 'An Assessment of Assimilation', and Betts' 'The Ideal and the Reality of

into better people is in fact a key point Gide raises in his 'Avant-propos'. Indeed another dimension of Europe's relationship with Africa that he identifies is the condescending pity felt by some Europeans for supposedly poor and hapless black people whom, he ironises, 'c'était notre devoir d'élever jusqu'à nous'.[48] Gide then identifies a third and apparently less problematic dimension of relations between the two continents, which he defines as a period of awakening in which Europe suddenly realised that the Africans it had despised and brutalised for centuries had something meaningful to say and teach after all: 'Nous comprenons aujourd'hui que ces méprisés d'hier ont peut-être, eux aussi, quelque chose à dire, qu'il n'y a pas seulement à chercher à les instruire, mais encore à les écouter'.[49] This realisation leads Gide to posit that the value and quality assigned to any given culture and civilisation are always relative. Indeed it is his contention that the value and quality of one's culture and civilisation are things one normally takes for granted, but they do not and should not deny the value and quality of other cultures and civilisations. Gide in fact stresses the need for cultural exchange, which he sees as a means of cultural renewal and enrichment.

Sartre is even more forceful in disavowing European cultural arrogance. In the face of the newly emergent black writing in French, he stresses the decrepit state of that language in the metropolis. French loses its ascendancy as a cultural and linguistic medium to become 'notre vieille culture cérémonieuse; embarrassée dans ses traditions et son étiquette'.[50] Sartre in fact explicitly warns against the temptation of seeing black writing in French as a homage to France and her culture. In his opinion, African and Caribbean

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Assimilation and Association'. For further analyses of French colonial theories, policies and practices, see Robert O. Collins, James M. Burns and Erik K. Ching (eds.) *Historical Problems of Imperial Africa* (Princeton, Markus Wiener, 1994).

[48] *Présence africaine*, no 1, 1947, p. 3.

[49] Ibid., p. 3.

[50] Ibid., p. 29.

writing in French dislocated the norms and practices of metropolitan literature, producing a new literary phenomenon that was at one level a source of remorse for French people; remorse caused by African and Caribbean writers' denunciation of France's culpable colonial action. Sartre's position on European cultural arrogance is most stridently expressed in 'Orphée noir'.[51] He views the emergence of black literary voices as the final act of humiliation for a culturally arrogant Europe. Having been dethroned from world leadership by the Soviet Union and the United States after the war, Europe still hoped to see its glory reflected in its relationship with its colonies. But to Sartre, there was no longer any adoration and servility to be expected from colonised people who now judged and saw through those who had subjected them to their will and had enjoyed the privilege of seeing and judging them for several millennia: 'Aujourd'hui ces hommes noirs nous regardent et notre regard rentre dans nos yeux, des torches noires, à leur tour, éclairent le monde et nos têtes blanches ne sont plus que de petits lampions balancés par le vent.'[52] With the collapse of its prestige and authority, Europe was no more the essence of being: it was now a geographical accident - a mere peninsula that Asia pushed into the Atlantic Ocean. In a reversal of circumstances, it was Europe, not Africa, which was now marginal, its whiteness a liability, or in Sartre's own words, 'un maillot blanc, usé aux coudes et aux genoux,'[53] whose owner would be better off if he took it off in order to be simply human.

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[51] 'Orphée noir' was published initially in 1948 as preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (Paris, PUF, 1948). A detailed account of the article's complexity and far-reaching influence on the history and theory of Negro-African writing in French is offered in Belinda Jack's *Negritude and Literary Criticism* (1996). My analysis of the article is based on the 1949 Gallimard edition of essays by Sartre entitled *Situations III*.

[52] Sartre, *Situations III* (Paris, Gallimard, 1949), pp. 229-230.

[53] Ibid. p. 230.

A parallel cultural self-critical attitude is at work in Barthes' *Mythologies*. The work explores the nature and function of signification in a society permeated by the assumptions and beliefs of a dominant bourgeois class; assumptions and beliefs held up by force of habit as immutable truths but which Barthes unmasks as ideological constructs, reflecting the prejudices and biases of a historically determined social group and mediated by such manifestations of mass culture as newspapers, magazines, films and popular pastimes. As to the specific issue of France's African colonial project, the work throws into relief through Barthes' commentaries on Parisian newspaper stories about Africa, racist attitudes to the continent and the ideological foundation of the European tutelage under which it was placed. One such commentary is 'Bichon chez les Nègres'.[54] The essay was inspired by a story carried in the mid 1950s in the widely-read Parisian newspaper *Match*. The story told of the adventure in Africa of a young white couple and their baby Bichon, who was just a few months old. Bichon's parents were teachers and their trip to Africa was motivated by a desire to paint. To Barthes, their adventure epitomised Europe's myth about black Africa's savagery: a dangerous continent where cannibals, wild animals, diseases, torrents and other natural hazards constantly threaten human life. For the white adventurer to survive in such circumstances, courage was of the essence, and according to the story, Bichon and his parents possessed courage in no small measure. As Barthes puts it, the whole adventure had the makings of a military expedition: the intrepid white heroes whose superiority was taken for granted confronted and triumphed unscathed over every obstacle. Young Bichon possessed weapons of unrivalled potency, namely his innocence and his being

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[54] R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1957), 66-67.

white. These qualities placed him beyond the reach of the dark forces of Africa, which he bent, god-like, to his will. By his courage, Bichon was already a patriot, promoting his country's prestige in distant lands when most babies of his age settled for anodyne adventures in the Bois de Boulogne back home. What was thus at work in the story, Barthes suggests, was an imperialist agenda: the European was endowed with qualities that made him a natural conqueror of barbarous lands. But these qualities, Barthes argues, were of doubtful origin and purpose. The adventure in which they were displayed was nothing more than an exercise in futility: devoid of any altruistic, humanitarian concern, the adventure's only value was the publicity it occasioned in much the same way as spectacular sporting feats gratuitously exhibit instances of courage and achievement. What was more, the Africa that emerged was some vague, mysterious and supposedly dangerous place very much in character with what Barthes saw as the bourgeois' inability to imagine the other outside the self-serving values and qualities they took for granted. This inability culminated as it were in an infantile, ludicrous and biased perspective on black Africa, in a story that fittingly featured a baby as its hero.

Balandier's *Afrique ambiguë* for its part provides a sociological perspective on an Africa caught between its centuries-old cultural heritage and European modernity. By its length, the three hundred-page study is by far a more substantial piece of work than Gide's 'Avant-propos', Sartre's 'Présence noire' and 'Orphée noir' and Barthes' 'Bichon chez les Nègres' put together. Yet in a way *Afrique ambiguë* is itself an attempt to counter European cultural arrogance regarding black Africa. This brings us to an important point. Balandier notes that of his childhood memories the most enduring was a photograph a classmate of his had received from an uncle who had gone to French

Equatorial Africa to seek his fortune. The photograph featured a hunting scene in which a man of powerful build, his shirt open at the chest, wielded a gun and was flanked by another hunter (a black subordinate of his) who had in his hand the severed head of a gorilla, shot at point blank range in the forehead. Balandier then comments on the impact the scene had on him and his classmate: 'Ce tableau de chasse nous fascina. Nous fîmes le serment de nous enfuir - plus tard - pour aller rejoindre cet oncle invincible, symbole de la puissance mâle et de l'aventure'.[55] The words 'oncle invincible' and 'symbole de la puissance mâle et de l'aventure' remind us clearly of the supremacy over Africa attributed to the white protagonists in the Bichon story. The book can thus be read as an attempt by its author to outgrow and undo the glamorous, romantic idea of European prowess in dangerous Africa, which underpinned his childhood impressions about the continent. For if as he argues those impressions marked the beginning of what was to become a life-long involvement with Africa, his contact with the continent from 1946 onwards (1946 was the year he first visited Africa) seemed to engender an attachment so deep as to make his childhood fantasies out of place.

> Est-ce le souvenir de cette scène d'enfance qui m'a conduit jusqu'à ce lieu précis du Gabon, proche du fleuve Ogooué, où la ligne idéale de l'équateur coupe une haute forêt envahie par l'odeur des fourmis-cadavres? Je me pose cette question comme si la réponse qu'elle appelle pouvait simplement justifier ma carrière, mes voyages, ma passion d'expériences déroutantes [...]. Tout change cependant dès l'instant ou j'évoque les Africains qui furent autant mes compagnons de méditations que mes informateurs.[56]

Balandier's attempt to distance himself from his childhood preconceptions comes out in the very way he understood his role as an ethnologist. To him, an ethnologist was that specialist whose study of peoples and cultures other than his own made him, like the very

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[55] *Afrique ambiguë* (Paris, Plon, 1957), p. 5.
[56] Ibid.

peoples he investigated, a marginal being, whose findings and convictions were often at variance with prevailing views. Thus in his account of the social, economic, political and cultural forces at work across sub-Saharan Africa from the late 1940s to the late 1950s - the urban centres of Dakar, Conakry and Brazzaville, the roads and railways, the mining activities in upper Guinea and in the Nigerian middle belt, the churches, or the customs and traditions of the Kissi and the Kono of the forested regions of Guinea and the Lebu of Senegal - Balandier constantly judges his own culture. He points out for instance that the modernisation of African societies brought on by the supposedly civilising influence of Europe's colonial project was no more than skin-deep, superimposed on a centuries-old cultural heritage. If anything the so-called civilising influence had in the author's view a rather corrosive impact on the traditional fabric of the societies he describes.

Commenting on what in his view was a well-established institution of marriage among the Lebu, Balandier deplores how the advent of monetary economics had bastardised that institution, transforming what was once a dependable instrument of social regulation and cohesion into a financial, profit-making affair.[57] The point here is that arriving in Africa in the immediate aftermath of a war that had left Europe in ruins, Balandier expected to find in the continent an antidote to his technologically advanced yet self-destructive civilisation: an Africa of primordial times and primeval forces, in the spirit of his reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which he had looked upon as a guide, but which like his childhood impressions now seemed to him inadequate for understanding a continent constrained by colonialism to reinvent itself.[58]

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[57] Ibid., pp. 31-32.
[58] Ibid., p. 10.

Balandier's sociological piece on a black Africa torn between its traditions and European modernity may seem a world removed from Verschave's virulently polemical works, both of which criminalise Europe's political and economic relations with black Africa. But an unmistakable point of convergence between these works and the other essays examined above is a desire to own up collectively to a deeply flawed cross-cultural encounter; an encounter characterised in the opinion of the authors by the economic plunder, political manipulation and cultural inferiorisation of black Africa. What will now be explored are the ways in which this act of collective self-denunciation operates in novelistic terms in the works of Conchon, Grainville, Constant and Le Clézio, which deal with colonial and post-colonial black African situations.

Section B

Fiction

J.-M. Moura stresses the inherently nomadic or de-centred nature of literary representations of difference as opposed to the closure that colonialism in its design to rule over native cultures and peoples imposes on these. His point is that such representations do not have a one-to-one relationship with the historical and social circumstances of empire against whose backdrop they are set.[59] I endorse the specificity of the literary instance that Moura underlines and will argue in this section that as unique and differentiated cultural products, the novels of Conchon, Grainville, Constant and Le Clézio take even further in their imaginative domains post-War French intellectual

[59] See above, p. 20.

responses to Europe's colonial relationship with Africa. More specifically, I will explore how these novelists elaborate within the framework of their books' fictionality, the anti-colonial and cultural self-critical attitudes displayed in the essays by Sartre, Balandier, Verschave and others examined above.

I will examine two interrelated structural or textual features of the novels chosen. These are the system of characters and the narrative viewpoint(s) adopted in each. It is the interplay of the two features in the novels that captures best a sense of how their authors problematise their continent's involvement with black Africa. Of course as I noted earlier, Said identifies narrative voice as one of the textual strategies through which a Western writer's location to the Oriental material he writes about can be determined. But since narrative voice does not necessarily always coincide with the angle or angles from which the story is told (which may involve those of the author, his hero and other characters as well), I consider narrative viewpoint as a more useful textual or structural device in mapping out views on difference in novels grounded in cross-cultural encounters. For clarity of exposition, I will examine the implications and effects of the interplay of character and narrative viewpoint under three interrelated and overlapping headings, as for the essays. Here, the headings are: colonial and neo-colonial economic closure, colonial and neo-colonial social and political closure, and colonial and neo-colonial cultural closure. The term closure refers to the constraints inherent in colonial control; emphasis is placed on the ways in which such constraints are perceived, described or judged within the narrative framework and the system of characters.

The novels differ from one another in the emphasis they place on the economic, socio-political and cultural dimensions of colonial and neo-colonial closure. I will therefore

limit the discussion of each dimension to the novel or novels in which that dimension is manifestly evident. Secondly, in conveying a sense of the intersections of the dimensions, some characters and scenes may be referred to more than once.

6. Colonial and Neo-Colonial Economic Closure

Le Clézio and Constant are the two whose novels draw attention most explicitly to the economically exploitative dimension of ties with black Africa. If like Conchon and Grainville they also deal with the social, political and cultural implications of those cross-continental ties, it is the economically predatory aspect that readers of Le Clézio and Constant are perhaps sensitive to in the first place.

In an interview with Pierre Boncenne Le Clézio declared himself to be a 'citoyen français-mauricien appartenant à la culture occidentale', thus laying claim to a Western cultural heritage and giving a clue to his origins - his descent from a family whose forebear had migrated from Brittany in the eighteenth century to settle in L'Ile de France (later Mauritius).[60] This provides an insight into a key dimension of his literary output as a whole, namely its broad geographical and cultural sweep, reaching far beyond its original European space to become a complex historical, cultural and topographical expanse, informed by the author's experience, real or imagined, of places as different as Nice (his birthplace), Nigeria, Panama, Mexico, the Maghreb and the Indian Ocean islands of Rodrigues and Mauritius.

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[60] Citation from *Lire* and comments on Le Clézio's family history by Germaine Brée. For full details, see Brée's *Le Monde Fabuleux de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 1990), p. 14.

This experience of multiple geographies and cultures and of the diverse histories they carry forges in Le Clézio a hybrid, changing, and indeed changeable sense of self. For if he sees himself as being culturally a Westerner, he claims elsewhere: 'Je ne sais pas trop comment cela est possible, mais c'est ainsi, je suis un indien'. Here he lays aside his Western cultural identity to assume a Panamanian Amerindian one.[61]

One consequence of all this is a sustained attempt at collective self-distancing, motivated by the need he feels to address the problems arising from his culture's encounter with and subsequent control of other cultures, peoples and regions of the world. For if Le Clézio's readily admits that he is culturally a Westerner, it is not always in positive terms that such a claim is made. More often than not it is a much larger sense of belonging that he posits, leading him to question in his writing the very European identity to which he openly lays claim. Such collective self-questioning crystallises in one instance into an uncompromising denunciation of his culture's economically exploitative relationship with other cultures and is evident in his early writing itself, in particular his *Le livre des fuites*, published in 1969, following his first two novels *Le procès-verbal* (1963) and *Le déluge* (1966).[62] The chief character in *Le livre des fuites* is a certain Jeune Homme Hogan, who takes on several other identities in his peregrinations across several continents. His restlessness and ever-shifting identities have however a unifying element: an absolute refusal of Europe, in particular an outright abhorrence and condemnation of what stands out as Europe's criminal exploitation of other cultures and peoples. There is obviously an echo here of the uncompromising anti-colonial stance and

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[61] The quotation is from Le Clézio's essay *Haï* (Geneva, Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1971), p. 7, one of three texts related to his contact in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Embera Indians of Panama. The other texts are *Mydriase* (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1973) and 'Le génie datura', *Les Cahiers du chemin*, 17 (le 15 janvier 1973), p. 95-129.

[62] For an overview of Le Clézio's early works, see Brée's *Le Monde Fabuleux de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 1990).

tone of Sartre or Verschave. Indeed to Hogan Europeans have always stolen something in material, intellectual and spiritual terms from other cultures and peoples, whether they present themselves in the guise of tourists, missionaries, explorers, journalists, sailors, hunters of animal skins, colonisers, messengers of peace and civilisation, economists, cultural institutes, anthropologists, revolutionaries, mountaineers, or whatever; names against all of whom he erupts: 'JE VOUS HAIS', inscribing in capital letters the depth of the repugnance and hatred he feels for a culture whose representatives he condemns elsewhere in his vituperative outburst as 'possesseurs', 'accapareurs', 'nuages de sauterelles', 'troupe de rats ivres d'extraordinaire'.[63]

It is against this backdrop of condemnation of Europe's criminal exploitation of the rest of humanity that the novel *Onitsha*, which appeared some twenty-two years later, is first approached here. The only work by Le Clézio to date to have a largely black African setting, *Onitsha* foregrounds through its narrative viewpoints and characters an image of a continent of ungainly economic operations, whose net result is human misery and environmental degradation.

Onitsha centres round a family, the Allens, in the context of post-War Nigeria in the declining years of British rule. The Allens' pan-European roots and the circumstances of their lives parallel those of Le Clézio and his own family, giving the work an unmistakable autobiographical flavour. In 1948, aged eight, Le Clézio actually accompanied his mother and brother from Nice to Nigeria where his father was stationed as a medical doctor.[64] In the novel, the child protagonist Fintan is twelve. His father

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[63] *Le livre des fuites*, p. 256.

[64] For information on Le Clézio's visit to Africa during his childhood, see *Magazine littéraire*, 362 (1998), 15-62 (pp. 23 and 33). See also Le Clézio's recent, more explicitly autobiographical piece, *L'Africain* (Paris, Mercure de France, 2004). Here, the author provides a sort of documentary testimony to his African

Geoffroy, an engineer-turned-business agent with a burning passion for archaeology, is British but speaks French to Fintan. The mother, Marie-Luisa, whom Fintan fondly calls Maou, is Italian. The story is about how as individuals and as a family they come to live in Onitsha, an important market town situated on the banks of the river Niger in Eastern Nigeria.[65]

The dominant voice in the novel is that of a heterodiegetic narrator.[66] The main story spanning a period of twenty years (from March 1948 to the spring of 1969), begins with a sea journey from the river port of Bordeaux as Fintan and his mother set out on board an old ship for Onitsha via much of the West Coast of Africa, to join Geoffroy. As the journey unfolds the story moves back to the weeks and months preceding the sea voyage, then on to the voyage itself, culminating in their arrival in Onitsha. It then chronicles their difficulties as husband, wife and child try to adjust to each other and to the wider physical, cultural and social environment in which they now live, followed by their forced departure a year later to Europe, Fintan's school days in Britain, his father's illness and subsequent death, and reports of the Biafran war of secession, with which the story closes.

But although told by a heterodiegetic narrator, the story is presented mainly from the perspectives of its three European protagonists, whose reaction to their surroundings, the

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experience. The book is interspersed with family photos, which add a visual dimension to the events he details.

[65] A brief but very informative statement on the changing face of Onitsha from the days of the early European traders and missionaries right through to the Second World War and beyond, is found in Emmanuel. N. Obiechina's *Onitsha Market Literature* (London, Heinemann, 1972), pp. 3-9.

[66] I draw here on G. Genette's seminal studies on narrative, in particular his 'Discours du récit', in *Figures III* (Paris, Seuil, 1972) 65-273, and his *Nouveau Discours du récit* (Paris, Seuil, 1983), aspects of which elaborate and clarify concepts relating to narrative voice and viewpoint. 'Heterodiegetic' is a term he devises for a narrator who is outside his own narrative, in contradistinction to 'homodiegetic', which refers to a narrator located within his narrative, typical of stories told in the first person. Another important category is the 'autodiegetic'. This describes a narrator who is inside his narrative and is at the same time its principal protagonist.

people they encounter, be these Africans or other Europeans, and the events and actions that unfold before their eyes, bring into focus the unequal power relations between Europe and black Africa. There are other reactions and comments on situations within the novel that are attributable only to the unnamed narrator. The protagonists' attitudes and reactions to the colonial African world they inhabit and the narrator's own comments and judgments add up to what I call the novelist's cultural self-distancing attitude. It is an attitude that conveys his unmasking and disavowal of Europe's reprehensible dealings with black Africa. Illuminating Fintan's and his parents' strictly fictional experience of black Africa are the facts of European domination; facts not of course restated in the raw but echoed, modulated or otherwise shaped to suit Le Clézio's overall fictional design.

This leads to the complex structure of the novel itself. One major narrative strand concerns the journey of Fintan and his mother to Onitsha, their time there and their subsequent return to Europe. Within that narrative strand is embedded (a case of interior duplication or *mise en abyme*) a second narrative strand, with a larger temporal frame and springing from Geoffrey's great obsession with Africa's past. His real motive for coming to Africa is in fact a scholarly one: to search for the missing link - material and human, physical and spiritual - between present-day West Africa and Ancient Egypt. This takes the reader back well beyond the post-War starting point of the main narrative strand to the Ancient Kingdom of Cush in the fourth century AD. The novel evokes in legendary and mythical mode the sacking of the Cushite city of Meroe and the flight southwards of its Queen, Candace, in search of a new home for her people. But it also relates with a touch of realism this time, events drawn from British military campaigns and rule in South Eastern Nigeria in the early twentieth century.

This broad and complex temporal frame throws into relief a dark chapter in Africa's history, namely the violence of European exploitation exemplified in the first instance by the unmasking of Europe's economic motives in its dealings with black Africa. This leads me to the opening paragraph of the novel itself. It contains a narrative perspective that is much larger than the protagonists', which in any case it implicitly encompasses. The paragraph begins with these words:

> Le *Surabaya*, un navire de cinq mille trois cent tonneaux, déjà vieux de la Holland Africa Line, venait de quitter les eaux sales de l'estuaire de la Gironde et fasait route vers la côte ouest de l'Afrique, et Fintan regardait sa mère comme si c'était pour la première fois'.[67]

The voice in the sentence is that of an unnamed narrator, and the narrative perspective that emerges is the narrator's as well. Through them, the reader visualises a departing ship and two of its passengers, one of whom is named. While the sentence announces the onset of what might be called an ordinary or routine sea voyage from Europe to Africa, it in fact re-enacts a key relationship between Europe and the West coast of Africa: a centuries-old trade link between the two continents symbolised here fittingly by an ageing ship which as the story unfolds docks at major sea-ports along the coast. The coast along which the Surabaya journeys is part and parcel of a geographical space which the Egyptian political economist Samir Amin calls 'Africa of the colonial trade economy'; a term he uses to describe imperial and capitalist Europe's systematised, monopolistic hold on black Africa.[68] This economic subjugation of the continent which began in the late nineteenth century was preceded, Amin argues, by what he calls the mercantilist period, that is, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during which black

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[67] *Onitsha*, p. 13.
[68] Samir Amin, 'Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa - Origins and Contemporary Forms', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 4 (1972), 503-524 (p. 504).

Africa's coastal regions provided the vital, human ingredient needed to sustain the European-controlled plantation economies of the Americas. Little wonder that the island of Gorée situated near Dakar, Senegal which Dumont mentions in his comments on the tragedy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, provides a focal point in *Onitsha* for an overt commiseration for the suffering the victims of that tragedy endured and an unequivocal condemnation of those held responsible for it. Significantly, the Surabaya's first port of call in its slow journey along the coast of Africa is Dakar, where some of its passengers disembark, giving an opportunity to undertake a brief sightseeing. The stopover culminates in a visit to Gorée where child and mother see for themselves the vestiges of the infamous trade. The relation of the event is dominated as is the case of much of the novel by the voice of the anonymous narrator, and the sadness and revulsion that narrator feels concicide with Maou's attitude in the face of the physical reminder of the inhuman trade.

But Dakar, to which Maou wishes to return to take refuge from these memories, seems to offer no better alternative. Her journey to Africa occurs at a time when Dakar like other sea and river ports along the coast including Takoradi in Ghana, Lomé in Togo, Cotonou in Dahomey and Port Harcourt in Nigeria - all of which are mentioned in the text - constitutes a hub of the import-export trade characterising the Africa of the colonial trade economy that Amin speaks of. That trade economy as Amin has it, 'organised the African societies so that they produced exports - on the best possible terms, from the point of view of the mother country - which only provided a very low and stagnating return to local labour'.[69] The point about Dakar is that these commercial operations seem

[69]Amin further examines Europe's domination of colonial African economies in his *L'Afrique de l'ouest bloquée. L'économie politique de la colonisation - 1880-1970*, (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1971).

to generate stains - both physical and moral - that make the very air in the city unbreathable. Hence the revulsion Maou feels in her contact with the city; revulsion summed up by the word 'odeur', taken both literally and metaphorically.

> Sur les quais de Dakar, il n' y avait que les barils d'huile, et l'odeur [d'arachide] jusqu'au centre du ciel, Maou disait qu'elle avait envie de vomir. 'Ah, pourquoi ça sent si fort?' Le navire déchargeait des merchandises, il y avait le grincement du mât, les cris des dockers [...] Et l'odeur qui ne cessait jamais, pareille à un nuage invisible. Même les draps, même les habits, même la paume des mains en étaient imprégnés.[70]

The dock workers, like their fellow Senegalese gendarmes who scrutinise their actions, are clearly cogs in the wheel of a large commercial enterprise, which reduces them to mere naked bodies 'ruisselants de sueur'[71] or to sounds juxtaposed with the grinding sound of a ship's mast.

Compared to what obtains in Sembène Ousmane's *Le docker noir* (1956) the situation of the dockworker as evoked in *Onitsha* may seem inconsequential, being no more than a passing reference in a description of an African port scene. Yet the image of the dockworker that results from that description should be understood nonetheless as a function of the novel's critical stance on colonial exploitation processes to which he is subjected. If in general European characters in the novel might seem more roundly portrayed in terms of having distinctive personalities, they elicit more often than not under the narrator's critical gaze faceless like the dockworkers, but eliciting derision rather than sympathy. The burly, red-faced, uncouth and repugnant Florizel, always sweating and drinking beer, is a seasoned modern-day fortune hunter who, the narrator states, criss-crosses Africa selling Swiss watches (not conducting slave raids, one might

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[70] *Onitsha.*, p. 38.
[71] Ibid., p. 37.

add, as his seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors once did). He relishes his successes in these terms: 'l'Afrique est une grande dame, elle m'a tout donné'.[72] One may well take Florizel's relationship with Africa to stand for the wider colonial economic situation in which that continent, cast as a female partner, is valued for the favours it readily grants Europe, seen as an enterprising male lover.

Constant goes perhaps even farther than Le Clézio in questioning Europe's economic relations with black Africa as she explores in her books both the colonial and neo-colonial dimensions of such relations. Constant in fact spent a considerable part of her childhood in the continent as her father, like Le Clézio's, served in colonial Africa as a doctor. Unsurprisingly black Africa provides the setting for her very first novel *Ouregano* (1980). Two other novels on the African theme, *Balta* and *White spirit*, appeared in 1983 and 1989 respectively. *White spirit* earned Constant a host of prestigious literary awards including the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie française.[73] *Ouregano* is set in an imaginary French African possession of the mid-nineteen-fifties, that is towards the end of the colonial era, while the events related in both *Balta* and *White spirit* occur in the context of post-colonial Africa. Read together the three novels provide a link between the colonial and post-colonial phases of France's presence in the continent. I will limit my investigation to *Ouregano* and *White Spirit* to illustrate the author's handling of issues pertaining to the economic dimension of Europe's colonial and post-colonial relations with black Africa.

As Gill Rye rightly observes, Constant has objected to promoting a political or ideological agenda in the books, claiming that her only aim is to rework in fictional terms

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[72] Ibid., p. 47.
[73] Additionally, she won the Prix Goncourt in 1998 for her novel *Confidence pour confidence* published that year by Gallimard.

her impressions about a continent that she had visited at different moments in her life.[74] Yet it seems to me that taken as instances of postcolonial discursive practice, Constant's African books do lend themselves to a political/ideological interpretation, irrespective of what she says about them. In fact, when one considers a comparison Constant makes between the former French Asian colony of Laos and tropical Africa, it becomes clear that her interest in the latter is not just a question of aesthetics. Her interest is also political in that her words indicate if only implicitly, a concern about Europe's domination of Africa. First she says: 'J'avais connu les tropiques africaines, féroces et pauvres. Le Laos m'est apparu bien au contraire comme une terre empreinte de douceur et de sérénité. Une sorte de paradis terrestre, luxueux dans sa façon d'être civilisé'.[75] Asked further whether Asia has impacted on her writing, she adds: 'Non [...] Car je n'ai pas ressenti dans la façon d'être des gens cette confrontation violente qui imprègne ma littérature. C'est pourquoi je ne peux pas dire que l'Asie a pu entrer dans mon écriture'.[76] In another context, Constant states: 'Les univers de tous mes romans sont concentrationnaires',[77] emphasising further the stifling and oppressive physical and human space that she associates with her books. Indeed if as she claims her writing is characterised by a violent confrontation with the realities upon which it draws, then one must assume that her depiction of black Africa - a place she remembers in her own words as, 'féroce et pauvre' - epitomises that violent confrontation. And the confrontation is not just a question of geography as the term 'les tropiques africaines' seems to imply. It is

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[74] Gill Rye, 'The (Im) possible Ethics of Reading: Identity, Difference, Violence and Responsibility (Paule Constant's *White Spirit*)', *French Studies*, LIV, 3 (2001), 327-37 (p. 333). Rye's observation is based on the views Constant expresses in an interview reported in *L'Officiel de l'Afrique*, 10 (1983-1984) pp. 34-35.
[75] See G. Drouot, 'Paule Constant, écrivain', 1-2 (pp. 1-2), accessed 18 January 2001 at: <http://www.laolink.com/informat/html/french/rénovateur/profils/paulec.html>
[76] Ibid., p. 2.
[77] See Catherine Argand, 'Paule Constant', *Lire* (avril 1998): 1-8 (p.1), accessed 9 June 2004 at: <http://www.lire.fr/portrait.asp?idC=34415&idR+201&idTC=5&idG=>

also a question of economic, social and political realities that are shaped in part at least by Europe's presence or influence in the continent.

Like *Onitsha*, the opening portions of *Ouregano* and indeed the rest of the novel are dominated by the voice of an unnamed heterodiegetic narrator, through whom the reader is introduced to the key actors of Europe's presence in a remote colonial administrative district whose name the novel bears. But again like *Onitsha* the dominant voice of the narrator does not result in that narrator's exclusive hold on the perspective from which the story is told. The events related and the scenes described are to a significant extent seen through the eyes of the novel's only positive character: its gifted child heroine Tiffany, who is much younger than Le Clézio's Fintan, at only eight. Tiffany's striking quality is her perspicacity, which enables her to 'ressentir l'humanité qui l'entoure, les événements, les lieux à la façon d'un médium',[78] and in so doing to pass judgement on the adult world around her. The reader's attention is constantly drawn to a world of suffering and isolation, of indifference and inertia, of intolerance and violence, and of disease and death: a place of anomy that is very much a symbol of the decline and decay of European colonial power; a place one reviewer of the novel appropriately calls 'l'enfer d'un huis-clos équatorial'.[79] The chief actors, known more for their inadequacies and failures than for any positive qualities or successes, include Dubois, a district officer, Bonenfant, a district judge, Captain Murano, a military doctor and Tiffany's father, and Albert Refons, a colonial school director, all of whom are French.

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[78] See the back back cover of Gallimard's 1980 edition of *Ouregano*.
[79] See Gérard Clavreuil's comments on Constant's *Ouregano* and *Balta* in 'Notes de lectures', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 129-149 (p.138). Clavreuil's words echo no doubt Constant's own words 'Les univers de tous mes romans sont concentrationnaires', cited earlier.

To this list I will add the name of Alexandrou, a Greek trader. Even though he is not part of the colonial administrative hierarchy by virtue of his nationality, he is nevertheless keenly aware of his being white and a European, and, he seizes with relish an opportunity to lord it over another European, a Frenchman called Beretti, who becomes his handyman. He takes Beretti into his service to make up for his subservient position in relation to Dubois the district administrator and his wife. But Alexandrou is in fact a prime mover in one respect. He is the chief commercial actor. Placed in the position of a middleman, he liaises on a day-to-day basis with members of the colonial administrative hierarchy and the subjected Africans alike. His operations in relation to the rulers and the ruled, and as viewed by the unnamed heterodiegetic narrator, give an insight into the essentially exploitative nature of a rural colonial economy.

To expand on the exploitative nature of that economy, I first need to turn yet again to Samir Amin. In addition to the Africa of the colonial trade economy, which he associates with the West African coast and its hinterland, Amin identifies a second macro-economic region that he calls Africa of the concession-owning companies. That region situated in the Congo River basin comprises the former French and Belgian possessions of Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Gabon and the Central African Republic. Amin's main argument is that if French and Belgian colonial policies and practices differed from one another, they nevertheless shared in that region of Africa 'genuine similarities in the mode of colonial exploitation'.[80] Unlike the West African coast and its hinterland where conditions, both demographic and socio-cultural, suited the creation of a regulated

[80] S. Amin, 'Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa - Origins and Contemporary Forms', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 4 (1972) 503-524, (p. 504).

export-oriented economy, such conditions were absent in the territories of the Congo River basin. Amin notes:

> The low density of population and the lack of sufficient African hierarchies made the colonial trade model non-viable. Discouraged, the colonial authorities gave the country to any adventurer who would agree to try "to get something out of it" without resources - since adventure does not attract capital.[81]

But Amin does point out that attempts were made in the fifties (ironically just as European empires in black Africa were about to disintegrate) to introduce aspects of the colonial trade economy in the French and Belgian central African territories, thus leading to a situation where economic adventurism co-existed with experiments in capital investiment.

The heterodiegetic narrator's perspective on events conveys a clear sense of this double mode of colonial exploitation. Of course the novel does not attempt to call into question the activities of a specific concession-owning company or companies, in contrast to Gide's *Voyages au Congo*. Yet Alexandrou's hold on the local economy throws into relief the inefficiency of the colonial administration and the self-seeking activities of adventurous and unscrupulous individuals. The power he exercises is one he attains by default. Dubois, the administrator, resents taking action of any sort, leaving the Greek trader to regulate among other matters the demand for and supply of food, medicine and educational material in Ouregano. Alexandrou takes full advantage of his power and privilege, which he uses to assert his authority over the likes of Murano and Refons who both fail to obtain from him the funds they need for their hospital and school. But perhaps more importantly, Alexandrou uses his power and privilege to strengthen his dubious business concerns. He sells with impunity commodities of questionable quality

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[81] Ibid., p. 524.

and value: his shop, the only one in Ouregano, is in fact an outlet for expired products from Europe, for which he charges extortionately. Additionally, it is an unwritten policy of Alexandrou's and indeed a measure of his disregard for the natives of Ouregano never to give change to his African customers who pay for the items they buy with notes. This is irrespective of the value - real or imagined - of the items bought.

If Ouregano emerges in the text as the playground of Alexandrou's dubious individual economic interests, it is also presented - briefly but tellingly - as a plantation economy: a world of two opposed spatial realities. On the one hand, there are the solid European houses - symbols of European presence and power - built incidentally in stone, situated on hills and surrounded by plantations. On the other hand, there are the modest dwellings of an indigenous African population. These are huts situated in the plains, packed together tightly behind a wall of dried mud and over which, as the narrator puts it, the European houses seem to keep watch. The point here is that the inhabitants of the huts make up a readily available source of cheap labour for the European-owned plantations. And in Alexandrou's scheme of things, it is essential that this population of labourers should be put under surveillance even in the conduct of basic commercial activities to basic health and fiscal control.

The intersection of individual economic adventurism and a larger form of economic exploitation is in fact at the heart of the image of a post-colonial African society depicted in *White spirit*. This novel is set in a politically independent African country whose sprawling and populous capital city is called La Mégalo, but the events described and the actions of the characters that inhabit the novel give the impression that where Europe's

economic ties with black Africa are concerned, little in essence has changed, the official demise of colonial rule notwithstanding.

This perceived continuity of Europe's culpable action on the post-colonial African economic scene might be explained in terms of the negative way the narrator considers the actions and activities of a host of European characters in the story. The narrator's hostility is evident in the satirical tone of the novel, beginning with the opening lines themselves. Here, as in *Onitsha*, the starting point is a sea journey. An ageing, rust-ridden steamer called 'LA VOLONTÉ DE DIEU', owned, like the Surabaya, by a European trading company, sets out, laden with passengers and goods, from the port of Bordeaux and heads for Africa. The difference however is this: while the tone of the opening lines of *Onitsha* seem to mirror by its simplicity the innocence and naivety of its child hero Fintan, *White spirit* assaults the reader from the start with its humorous, condemnatory thrust. 'LA VOLONTÉ DE DIEU' is a misnomer: if anything, the ship that bears that name seems to embody the noxious, not benevolent, will of its passengers: a rapacious breed of fortune seekers who depend on the bi-continental trade link for their very survival.

> Le bateau s'appelait LA VOLONTÉ DE DIEU, il trafiquait pépère entre l'Afrique et la métropole, chargé à noir, chargé à blanc, love-boat pour comité d'entreprise ou bateau-hôpital pour charity business, poubelle-machine par tous les temps. Sous la coque l'Occident prenait l'eau, mais le trafique continuait parce que c'était l'intérêt du capitaine et de bien d'autres encore, planteurs, commerçants ou fonctionnaires, qui vivaient accrochés à sa carcasse comme des coquillages bouffeurs de rouille, de ferraille et de catastrophe.[82]

The words 'il trafiquait', 'le trafique continuait' and 'poubelle-machine par tous les temps' can be seen as ways by which the author through her narrator conveys a sense of the ship's unlawful and destructive activities. Among the ship's human and material

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[82] *White spirit* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988), p. 11.

content is a band of young French recruits who, on the promise of rapid wealth, enter the service of 'LA RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN'. This is a company that specialises in import and export trade with branches in Africa. Possessed of little or no administrative competence or experience, the recruits are to take over those branches as 'directors'! Directing or managing branches of a company purporting to be the resource of the African is quite simply a charade, as Victor, one of the recruits, soon learns upon taking up his post. His hope of making his pile in Africa proves to be an illusion. He is despatched to a branch of the company situated in 'LE VILLAGE-MODÈLE', a rural outback whose distinguishing characteristic is, ironically, not some standard of excellence but its remoteness and isolation. Here, feeling helpless and abandoned, he runs a store whose raison d'être and mode of operation seem to him to defy common sense. To his dismay the supplies he receives constitute products that have actually expired or have no relevant, practical use, except one: environmental pollution. The products arrive, as the narrator scathingly frames it, 'avec leur vices cachés, leur rouille, leurs fils dénudés, leurs bouchons tordus, leurs couvercles troués, leur pourriture, leur moisi et bien d'autres aberrations qui ne pouvaient pas se voir, se toucher ou se sentir', [83] and in so doing, they transform Africa into an industrial European wasteland.

This sale of expired, environmentally noxious industrial European products reminds the reader of course of Alexandrou's business operations in the colonial world of *Ouregano*. What is interesting about that novel and *White spirit* taken together is that some of the characters in one text reappear in the other. This structural reduplication, typical of Constant's technique and comparable to the structure of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, further reinforces the impression of the enduring impact on the post-colonial African

[83] Ibid., p. 108.

scene of colonial trade practices. An important player in *White Spirit* whose activities include the procurement of goods for the 'RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN' and the recruitment of personnel to run the company's branches in Africa is Beretti, a name that brings to mind Alexandrou's handyman in *Ouregano*. The difference seems to be that while the Beretti of *Ouregano* operates within the confines of a rural colonial district in Africa, the Beretti of *White spirit* is a person that has grown in stature in a world of dubious trans-continental activities. He moves between Europe and Africa, parading, in the words of the narrator, as 'Monsieur Beretti, directeur de ceci, président de cela, avec tout ça imprimé en fausse gravure sur une carte de visite épinglée à sa porte'.[84] Alexandrou himself reappears in *White Spirit* as 'le Papa de la RESSOURCE',[85] the owner and moving spirit behind the company and master of the company's main warehouse located in Port-Banane, formerly the colonial capital of a now independent African country in which the novel is set. One can assume from this that his business concerns have expanded with time. Interestingly, Alexandrou seems to have expanded in physical terms as well. Described as 'terrible obèse',[86] he appears to have eaten himself fat and now lives as a recluse, confined, like some pre-historic beast on display in a museum, to a refrigerated box, away from noise and heat. Unable to move without help, he relies on servants to help him lie down or rise up. Yet he continues to supervise the operations of his business, giving orders by signs and instructing Beretti as to where to place the new victims - the so-called directors of the various branches of the 'RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN'.

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[84] Ibid., p. 16.
[85] Ibid., p. 39.
[86] Ibid.

The importation and disposal of Europe's industrial waste in which Alexandrou, Beretti and Victor are involved coexists with a second and no less reprehensible economic activity: European-owned plantations. Constant mentioned these briefly in *Ouregano*, and she takes up the subject again in *White spirit* and gives it a fuller treatment, stressing the impact on African societies of the cultivation of crops designed for consumption in Europe. The mayor of Port-Banane is a European, a certain César de Marino who controls thousands of hectares of banana plantations. He also owns the ship 'LA VOLONTÉ DE DIEU' whose main port of call is of course Port-Banane. César's situation as a European mayor of a town in a politically independent African country may seem anachronistic, but such anachronism should be taken for its symbolic value: Europe's continued influence in Africa. Couched in terms of the cultivation and management of a particular export crop, that influence is seen to be profoundly negative. Like Dakar in *Onitsha*, Port-Banane has a personality all its own. It is the only centre of the banana trade: a trade the new political authorities regard as an epidemic, against which the rest of the country has to be protected, in particular the capital and larger commercial centre La Mégalo, where, as the narrator states, 'la banane avait déjà ruiné les routes, mis les finances en déroute, détruit le climat'.[87] Those involved in the cultivation and commercialisation of banana are compared as they disembark from Europe to plague victims. They are unwelcome in the capital where their wealth is viewed as reeking of banana. Indeed they are confined to Port-Banane, their natural habitat, from which ships anchor at a distance to avoid its contagion. A place of

[87] Ibid., p. 36.

warehouses, banks and brothels, Port-Banane symbolises corruption and decay and is likened to 'une ville de western, sans la poussière mais avec la pourriture'.[88]

Lastly, the banana crop is itself associated with rot and disease. Like a malignant tumour, it pervades and pollutes the physical and human environment. The arrival of 'LA VOLONTÉ DE DIEU' in Port-Banane coincides with a strike by dockworkers in the ports of Europe, making the exportation of the banana that has been harvested impossible. The narrator's abhorrence of the environmental eyesore resulting from the situation is unmistakable. The rotting heap of banana is denounced as 'un crassier, un gigantesque terril, une masse brune gélatineuse, putride, qui glissait vers la mer en un long fleuve visqueux un massif de bananes putréfiées. On ne dit pas l'odeur'.[89] This environmental nightmare notwithstanding and in spite of the point that the West as the narrator has it, now favours 'd'autres gâteries' in place of banana, the production of the crop goes on, blindly. The producers now select the best and most productive variety of the crop whose cancerous proliferation is conveyed emphatically through repetition and capitalisation:

> La banane-toute-saison-tout-terrain qui poussait partout, n'importe quand, banane à gogo, banane anarchique, banane menaçante, désorganisatrice de l'équilibre écologique, économique, sociologique. De plus en plus de bananes. Ni saison ni terre ni ciel, de la banane, DE LA BANANE, DE LA BANANE, rien d'autre.[90]

To recapitulate, read through the prism of such concepts as Amin's 'Africa of the colonial trade economy' and 'Africa of the concession-owning companies', *Onitsha* and *Ouregano* throw into relief by the interplay of character and narrative viewpoint their authors' critical stance on the way Europe milks for its own ends black Africa's

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., p. 34.
[90] Ibid., p. 35.

resources; an interplay which reworks in aesthetic terms the polemical thrust of Gide's, Dumont's Sartre's and Verschave's essays, with their emphasis on the predatory economics of colonial and neo-colonial control.

7. Colonial and Neo-Colonial Social and Political Closure

In this section, for clarity and conciseness of exposition, I will discuss the four novelists around two main interconnected points. The first point is the searing denunciation of race relations in the colonial or neo-colonial societies they depict and of the social inequalities and tensions inherent in those relations. The second is their uncompromising stance on the violence of colonial conquest and the intrigues of colonial and neo-colonial rule.

a. Race Relations/Social Inequalities and Tensions

In *Onitsha* the protagonists' own attitudes to issues do not necessarily coincide with the author's own position on them. The are various instances in which Fintan and his mother and even his father all too readily, not to say imprudently, make a show of their shock and indignation at any indication of Europe' mistreatment of Africa. In this way, they display a lack of the maturity and sophistication needed to adjust to the realities of life in a colony. Indeed as one recent reviewer of the novel puts it, Fintan's perspective on the colonial situation and on the ways that the European characters adapt to their

surroundings bears the stamp of the 'unworldly morality of the innocent'.[91] Yet the same reviewer argues that the young protagonist's view of the same situation and surroundings offers fresh and valuable insights into these things.[92]

Naive as Fintan may be in his reactions to instances of colonial abuse, the reader is more likely to share the indignation he feels than to remain neutral or be drawn to the perpetrators of the abuse. Fintan's dislike of the officers that he encounters on the Surabaya stems from the gap that separates him from the insensitive and racially prejudiced world order to which they belong, and whose workings are felt from the outset, in the way the great majority of Europeans on board the Surabaya - passengers and seamen alike - react to the presence of African passengers. Fintan takes to the latter instinctively and is moved to pity on learning from his mother that to pay for their passage from port to another, they undertake to remove rust from the ageing ship's hull using small pointed hammers as tools. By contrast, the European adults are detached from the African passengers. When finally one of the colonial officers, a certain Gerald Simpson, speaks of the latter, he does so with the superior air of a connoisseur. Yet what he comes up with are generalisations such as, 'Ces gens-là...Ils voyagent tout le temps, ils vont de ville en ville, sont capables de vendre n'importe quoi'.[93] Even worse is his habit of speaking pidgin English in a way clearly intended to mock African speakers of that language. He indulges this habit during a birthday party thrown for Rosalind, the wife of a British officer. Shocked by what he regards as Simpson's shameful conduct, Fintan leaves the party and joins the company of those excluded from it: the African men,

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[91] See the comments on Alison Anderson's English translation of the novel, accessed 26 April 2002 at: <http: //www.powells.com/biblio/9300-93200/0803279663.html>.
[92] Ibid.
[93] *Onitsha*, p. 47.

women and children who under the watchful eyes of the quartermaster, have unobtrusively come on board the ship for the journey to the next port of call. Fintan's action may seem pointless, not to say puerile, as it does not in real terms bring any change to the colonial order. Yet by choosing albeit momentarily to abandon his own to fraternise with the African passengers, he points to a sane and decent mode of cross-cultural interaction cruelly absent in a world dominated by the likes of Simpson.

The contrast between a white child protagonist's sensitivity to the Africans he encounters and white adults' intolerance of and detachment from them is particularly striking in the works of Constant. As noted earlier, Tiffany through her precocious awareness of the world around her, functions alongside the novel's heterodiegetic narrator, as an important focal plane. The adults around her fail to understand a child they consider obstinate, vicious and lazy, but whose conduct in fact springs from the fact that she is a far too sensitive and independent observer to fit readily into their scheme of things. That is perhaps best explained in terms of her teacher's attitude. Elise Refons hates in her pupil what she deems an obnoxious, disorientating characteristic: 'ce côté qui échappait à l'enfance, sans pour autant être récupéré ni par l'âge adulte ni par ces âges intermédiaires que l'on dit ingrats'.[94] For this she rebukes and harasses Tiffany endlessly, seeking to bring her back 'à l'enfance dans le lieu exquis de la terreur et de la dépendance dont seuls les adultes sont les maîtres'.[95]

But what Elise Refons and Monsieur and Madame Murano fail to realise is that Tiffany's defiance stems directly from their indifference towards her: their failure as teacher or as parents to appreciate her feelings and cater to her needs. And perhaps more

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[94] *Ouregano*, p. 223.
[95] Ibid., p. 225.

importantly for our argument, her defiance seems to be the logical outcome of the way the particularly sensitive child that she is interacts with a wider world in which members of the white adult community occupy the morally untenable position of colonial overlords. Before accompanying her parents to Africa Tiffany had up to the age of seven lived with her grandparents, whose affection she had enjoyed. Her situation takes a downward turn upon joining her parents; they are at great pains to adjust themselves to her presence. The mother requires her to keep her distance at all times, impressing on her that she is big enough to be on her own and that children have absolutely nothing to do with adults. She keeps saying to her: 'pas D'HISTOIRES', words meant to caution Tiffany against mischief. This lack of parental warmth simply fosters in Tiffany in her dealings with adults in general, a sense of being out of place, an animal caught unawares in enemy territory. Quite naturally, she looks elsewhere for comfort and in so doing draws attention to the indignities of colonial rule.

A case in point is her experience of discrimination both on the adult/child axis and the Europe/Africa axis soon after she and her parents arrive in Ouregano. It is a mark of the importance of her father's position as chief medical doctor that the administrator and the judge, accompanied by their spouses, go to receive him and his family on landing at the airport in Ouregano (later Albert and Elise Refons will be denied this honour in that their position as teachers is not considered important enough by administrator and judge alike). Tiffany's parents themselves are quick to recognise the importance of social rank. The Judge and his wife want to be the first to invite them to their home. Tiffany's mother opts instead for the offer of hospitality by the administrator and his wife, as this seems to her to confer on her and her family greater honour by virtue of their hosts' position as the

first family of Ouregano. In a world where social rank or status is important enough to make families within the privileged European community itself vie for the acceptance of invitations extended to people new to Ouregano, the issue of difference along the conflated line of age and race is no doubt of particular significance. Indeed the seating arrangement in the car in which the administrator and his wife take their guests home seems to bear this point out clearly. Seated all alone in the third row, at a distance from her father, and even farther away from her mother and the administrator's wife, Tiffany senses around her an emptiness she is able to overcome only by relating to the person closest to her. This happens to be 'son premier nègre' - the very first African she encounters and over whom she seems to assert a proprietary right. Significantly, the space the African occupies in the vehicle is one he shares with boxes and suitcases, which he is meant to hold in place as the car speeds along. Yet instead of shrinking away from him in the same way that her parents and their hosts shrink from her, Tiffany instinctively befriends 'son premier nègre', placing her fingers in his hair for the human contact and warmth she needs. She immediately falls asleep, united if momentarily with the African in their collective isolation from a world which belongs to people who, as she later reflects, 'étaient blancs et puissants'[96] and, one should add, racist.

Yet Tiffany reaches out to her African classmates, in particular Moïse with whom she forges a relationship described as: 'une marche vers quelque chose de plus loin, une nécessité charnelle, un apaisement. Car il y avait de la tendresse à être là ensemble, et à n'être rien que d'être l'autre, le complément et le but'.[97] The relationship is of course doomed from the very beginning considering the irredeemably racially intolerant society

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[96] Ibid., p. 80.
[97] Ibid., p. 165.

in which the two children live. Its true value lies in the fact that it draws into sharper focus the unbridgeable chasm that separates the other European children from the African world they inhabit. Unruly and grossly lacking Tiffany's sensitivity empathy, the Bonenfant brothers delight in poking fun at their African classmates for walking to school. More importantly, Tiffany reacts positively to an old African woman, a leper, whose miserable condition touches her each day she sees her on her way to school. She instinctively reserves portions of her breakfast for her and gives her the food as a token of her love and care. Conversely, her relationship with the woman provides the Bonenfant brothers with another occasion to indulge in mockery; they mimic the old woman's movements and call to her in a manner that conveys their utter insensitivity to her situation.

The Bonenfant brothers' callous disregard of the plight of the leper comes as no surprise. Their behaviour constitutes perhaps a child's version of a more fundamental form of insensitivity: their father's conception of evil and the place of Africa in it. His observations of the African world in his capacity as judge lead him to pour scorn on Enlightenment theories of the 'Noble Savage' which tended to promote utopian visions of peoples and cultures untouched by European influence. The judge is particularly scornful of the eighteenth-century explorer Bougainville, whose cross-cultural vision he considers a mere delusion at variance with his experience of Africa. Bougainville's image of Tahiti may well be overly utopian, in line with the desires and expectations of the explorer's specific European audience. Yet in speaking about Africans, Bonenfant does even worse. If anything he offers a cross-cultural perspective that is as extreme in its denigration of

difference as perhaps Bougainville's is in its estimation of it. This is the judge's verdict on what he sees as the defining feature of Africa, namely:

> Les Nègres. Ça valait le déplacement, le séjour et la prolongation. Il le garantissait. Il valait mieux les voir qu'en entendre parler, cela dépassait tout. A crever de rire du matin au soir. Ah! les cons, les sales cons. Ils étaient là avec leurs mines, leurs manières, leurs trucs, qui croyaient-ils tromper?[98]

And the most riveting element of this African spectacle is what appears to Bonenfant to be the continent's quintessential insalubrity, epitomised by the prevalence of sleeping sickness; a disease he calls 'la merveille des merveilles'[99] and which he deems well suited to its African victims.

This hostility to difference takes a tragic turn in the drama played out between Beretti, Alexandrou's handyman, and the African doctor N'Diop, centring on their relationship with Marie-Rosalie, one of countless mixed-race children fathered by Alexandrou. Marie-Rosalie is just thirteen and destined for an uncertain future: her being half European is no asset, as her father, distant and unconcerned, cannot even distinguish her from other mixed-race daughters of his. She becomes an assistant to Beretti, who runs a bar/restaurant in the premises of a social club created exclusively by and for the Europeans of Ouregano. Completely amoral and utterly disrespectful of the girl, Beretti deflowers her without ceremony and from then on abuses her sexually whenever he so fancies. It is a measure of Beretti's contempt for the girl that he makes love to her without looking at her face, let alone giving her a kiss. Their lovemaking is in fact nothing more than a physical affair, brutish and short. Yet he flies into a murderous rage on suspecting an affair between the girl and N'Diop. The result is predictable. Beretti

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[98] Ibid., p. 74.
[99] Ibid.

who kills a black garage assistant of his in a moment of anger prior to his coming to Ouregano, kills N'Diop for daring to make love to the mistress of a white man. Unsurprisingly, he gets away with the murder. The administrator and the judge, who are well placed to hold him accountable for his action, quite simply do not wish to disturb what they see as the tranquil world over which they preside. N'Diop is buried unmourned, away from his native Senegal, in the service of a system which for all his education at the elite William Ponty school and his gifts as a poet, still judges him inferior to a Beretti - a white man after all, notwithstanding his vulgarity, bad temper and homicidal instincts.

Tiffany's friendship with Moïse and her kindness to the leper are the only saving grace in this world of generalised inter-racial animosity. Little wonder that the powers that be - her parents and the other adults - soon find an excuse to send her back to France, not to her doting grandparents but to a boarding school. In this way, they wash their hands of a child considered undesirable. Tiffany sees her departure as an act of deliverance from what she views at the moment of separation, as her France-bound plane takes off from the airport where they gather to bid her farewell, as 'des petits points blancs, la première apparition de la pourriture sur la viande, de la blanchaille, pas grand chose'.[100] This image of rot is no a ringing indictment of their pettiness towards her and indeed towards Africans whose lives they have contaminated with their undesirable presence.

As child heroes and as important loci of narrative viewpoint, Fintan and Tiffany constitute a needful counterpoint to the otherwise pervasive inter-racial disharmony characteristic of the colonial black African worlds depicted in *Onitsha* and *Ouregano*.

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[100] Ibid., p. 244.

The portrayal of race relations by Conchon in his 1964 Goncourt-winning *L'état sauvage*[101] also seems to benefit from having a young protagonist. Unlike Le Clézio and Constant who had first-hand experience of colonial Africa as children,[102] Conchon first came to Africa as a journalist at the age of thirty-four in the early years of African independence. He paid a short visit in 1959-1960 to the Central African Republic, which as Anne Kraft suggests, provides the setting for his novel.[103] One of his main characters and a key source of narrative viewpoint is a UNESCO expert named Avit, who though much older than both Fintan and Tiffany, aged twelve and eight respectively, is still in his mid twenties. In the post-colonial African context in which that experience is set, the racial biases and prejudices held (as in *Onitsha* and *Ouregano*) by the novel's older white protagonists seem to be at boiling point. The sudden change from tutelage to independence leaves the erstwhile white colonisers adrift. Their ascendancy now challenged by colonised people turned masters - officially at least - of their own continent, the colonisers act with bad faith, displaying a pettiness and an ill-will that brings to mind Tiffany's last glimpse of her adversaries judged as 'de la blanchaille, pas grand chose'.[104]

The new black political masters are themselves in some ways as racist as their white detractors. A case in point is their opposition to Patrice Doumbé, one of their own, who commits in their estimation the unforgivable sin of stepping out with a white woman: an act they judge as being a betrayal of one's people and a sell-out to the white enemy. Yet there is no denying that those deemed most responsible for the inter-racial hostility that

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[101] *L'état sauvage* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1964)
[102] See above, pp. 113, 118 and 119.
[103] See Kraft's comments on Conchon's novel in 'Notes de lectures', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 129-149 (p.137).
[104] See above, p. 136.

pervades the novel are its white protagonists. Their unflattering views of and culpable actions towards Africans draw forth at one level the disapproval of the heterodiegetic narrator and the chief protagonist, both of whom serve, as is the case in *Ouregano* and *Onitsha*, as complementary loci of narrative viewpoint.

Patrice Doumbé's love affair with a white woman, Laurence (incidentally the estranged wife of the chief protagonist Avit), and the tensions and violence that affair unleashes, echo the tensions and violence surrounding N'Diop's ill-fated attachment to the mixed-race girl Marie-Rosalie. The difference however is that while the inter-racial love affair constitutes one event among several others in *Ouregano*, it is *the* event in *L'état sauvage*. This is seen in the way the action of the latter unfolds. The novel charts out in one day and one night Avit's harrowing experience of Africa. He arrives on a cultural mission in Fort-Jacul, the capital of the independent state of Jacul, only to be told by the authorities there that he is not wanted and must return by the next plane. In waiting to obey his expulsion order, he discovers that his young wife who had deserted him and followed the glamorous adventurer Gravenoire to Africa in fact lives in Fort-Jacul. She now has a new partner, Doumbé, who is a medical doctor and government minister. Doumbé soon dies violently, following a confrontation with his political rivals whom he ridicules for seeking to discredit him by ordering the expulsion of his partner's ex-husband. The inter-racial tension generated by the murder places Laurence in danger. She escapes to Europe in the company, ironically, of her ex-husband. The novel has the trappings of classical tragedy, with its adherence to the unities of time, place and action.[105]

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[105] See Kraft's comments again in 'Notes de lectures', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 129-149 (p.138). The dramatic impact of these trappings on the relation of Avit's African adventure perhaps explains the novel's successful adaptation to the screen. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, Conchon established himself essentially as a novelist. His first work *Les grandes lessives* appeared in 1953 to be followed by others like

On almost every page of the book of comments and observations through which the heterodiegetic narrator and the chief protagonist react to instances of racial bigotry. The novel opens with two confrontational attitudes to racial difference. Avit the UNESCO official and third-world specialist (he holds a doctorate in his field) cuts at one level the figure of a sympathetic and liberal-minded European who has little appetite for his compatriots' usual diet of racial slurs and platitudes directed at Africans. In this he stands out as a needful counterpoint to the thirty-year-old Renard, an Air France agent in Fort-Jacul, who accompanies him from the airport to the city. Renard takes as a fact of nature the inherent superiority of his race, believing that 'la résistance à l'autorité noire est instinctive chez le Blanc'.[106] Thus when he tells Avit that the minister of information wants to see him, he expects him to react with indignation, to disobey orders from an authority that he, Renard, speaks of with undisguised contempt. But instead of showing annoyance, Avit feels flattered by the minister's request and burns with impatience to meet him.

Avit's enthusiasm for Africa seen in his positive reaction to the prospect of meeting the minister is matched only by the shock and frustration he feels when ordered by the minister to leave. He feels let down and unfairly treated considering his intellectual investment in, and commitment to, the third world. But he does not succumb to the racism of most of the white community, which engulfs even the moderate-seeming Renard. In the end Renard is as virulent in his contempt for Africa as he is in his anger

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Les honneurs de la guerre for which he earned the Prix Fénélon in 1956, *La corrida de la victoire*, awarded the Prix des Librairies in 1960 and of course the Goncourt-winning *L'état sauvage*. However, in the nineteen seventies, Conchon ventured into cinema and co-authored with Jean-Jacques Annaud the 1976 Oscar-winning *Black And White In Color*. *L'état sauvage* was adapted to the screen by Francis Girod in 1978.

[106] *L'état sauvage*, p. 13.

against Avit, whose liberal and friendly attitude to Africa he roundly and indeed quite hysterically condemns, taking it as a weakness, a sign of white degeneracy.

In summary, the young protagonists of *Onitsha*, *Ouregano* and *L'état sauvage* through their feelings, observations and actions abhor and reject the bigotry that impede social intercourse across the racial divide, suggesting the possibility of an alternative cross-cultural encounter which their older white compatriots are incapable of envisaging.

b. The Violence of Colonial Conquest/ the Intrigues and Inadequacies of Colonial and Neo-Colonial Rule

These same books together with Grainville's *Les flamboyants* and Constant's *White spirit* intersect at another level, that of political control, which is again reflected in the actions and attitudes of the characters they depict and indeed in the narrative perspectives they contain.

Onitsha focuses explicitly on the questionable means through which British power was established and maintained in colonial South Eastern Nigeria, in particular the destruction of Aro Chuku. This is a spiritual heartland of pre-colonial South-Eastern Nigeria and a place that had seemed an impregnable rock of native resistance to British forces. The expeditionary force comprised eighty-seven military officers, one thousand five hundred and fifty black recruits, and two thousand one hundred carriers. Within a few months they had brought Aro Chuku to its knees, silencing its much-feared oracle.

Following the destruction of Aro Chuku, Gerald Simpson the District Officer rules with an iron fist and gets Rally, the Resident, to provide him free of charge with the services

of black prisoners to make him a swimming pool. The convicts who are made to work from morning till dusk are a living symbol of colonial exploitation. Their revolt against their miserable condition is decisively repressed, culminating in a bloodbath. Fintan who witnesses the incident provides this chilling testimony to the murderous excesses of colonial rule: ' "Ils ont tiré, ils les ont tués, ils ont tiré sur des gens enchaînés"'.[107] He expresses his hatred of the people responsible, and longs to leave.

But Fintan has really no choice. His and his parents' departure from Onitsha to Europe has long become a foregone conclusion, even before the convicts' revolt. His parents (in particular his mother) are the only adult Europeans to fraternise with the natives of Onitsha, displaying in so doing their repugnance for the injustices of colonial rule. This places them inevitably on a collision course with the authorities; in the end they too fall victim to the workings of the repressive colonial machinery. Indeed from the moment Maou openly disapproves of the mistreatment of the convicts and demands in the presence of Simpson himself that they be given food, her husband's position in the United Africa Company hangs by a thread.

That Maou goes to meet Rodes instead of Simpson to intercede in her husband's favour shows her intuitive grasp of the source and nature of real power in Onitsha. Simpson the district officer is ostensibly the highest authority in Onitsha but real power seems to be in the hands of Rodes. Rodes, whose name inevitably recalls that of Ceil Rhodes is a recluse, living in what is described as a wooden palace situated at one end of Onitsha, away from other inhabitants, Europeans and African alike, his actual duties and status being a mystery. He is a polyglot, speaking a range of European and local African languages, and he possesses a well-equipped library

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[107] *Onitsha*, p. 237.

containing archaeological and anthropological studies on Africa as well as a collection of objects including masks from Benin, Niger and Senegal, all of which make him a sort of authority on African matters. He brings this home to Maou when he tells her of his having drawn her husband's attention to the possibility of Ancient Egyptian influence on Aro Chuku. Rodes seems to be a law unto himself: a godlike-figure, or rather, a secret agent, who has an eye on everything and seems to know everything about everybody.

But the power Rodes represents and defends is on the brink of collapse and no one is more aware of that fact than he. British power and prestige in the context of post-1948 Onitsha seem to have waned, epitomised by the decrepit state and subsequent sinking of that empire's most potent symbol - the battleship George Shotton. It is Rodes who himself takes Fintan to the ship, singing praises of its past accomplishments and calling it 'l'orgueil de l'empire' and 'le plus beau bateau du fleuve', but lamenting that now 'les arbres ont poussé dedans'.[108] Ironically, Rodes' own relationship with the dilapidated battleship in no way enhances the image of the empire in which he so stridently takes pride. Through him, the one-time 'orgueil de l'empire' becomes a place of unseemly activities where his black servant Okawho copulates with a prostitute Oya while in the manner of a voyeur, he, Rodes secretly looks on. One very stormy and wet night following the departure of both Okawho and Oya from Onitsha, the battleship sinks, leaving Fintan in no doubt as to the significance of the two events.

> Le George Shotton avait probablement sombré dans la nuit, il n'en restait plus rien. Fintan pensait que c'était mieux ainsi. Il se rappelait ce que Sabine Rodes répétait sur la chute de l'empire. Maintenant qu'Oya et Okawho étaient partis, tout allait

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[108] Ibid., p.152.

changer, disparaître comme l'épave, s'en aller dans les alluvions dorées du fleuve.[109]

Onitsha then relates to the issue of colonial authority in three ways: a condemnation of the very means - military conquest - used in bringing that authority into being, a rejection of the authority's day-to-day excesses, and an evocation of its symbolic demise. In *Ouregano* in the place of the self-assertive and action-minded Simpsons, Rallys and Rodes, there are the Dubois, the Bonenfant and the Refons who stand out by their inclination for inertia. Indeed the general thrust of the novel seems to be a meditation on the decay of authority - its weariness and languor, its inefficiencies and failings, its death-like stillness. The work can thus be read as an extended exploration of the theme of imperial decline, which in *Onitsha* is dealt with symbolically.

Tiffany's father, Captain Murano, and Beretti had both seen action in French Indochina. That shared experience of a war waged to contain native uprising against colonial rule leads Murano to absolve Beretti from blame for killing N'Diop. He feels very strongly that civil society has no business judging a man who, like him, had fought in a war - the ultimate test of heroism. But we know from history that as early as 1949 the part of French Indochina called Cochinchina (the other parts being Laos and Cambodia), had officially merged with Vietnam, ushering in an era of French imperial disintegration. Both Murano and Beretti are part of a declining colonial order which is nothing more than 'la première apparition de la pourriture sur la viande, de la blanchaille, pas grand chose'; an order which lives and breathes its own rot and demise.

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[109] Ibid., p. 261.

A closer look at Dubois in his capacity as chief 'porteur du pouvoir de l'empire' perhaps best illustrates this point. Dubois abhors taking decisions, leaving Alexandrou the Greek trader to preside over the administration's day-to-day transactions. Dubois' shirking of his responsibilities in fact springs from an underlying pessimism that he feels about the utility of action in the Africa that he governs, leading to sterility, in the face of which he has developed a self-deprecatory sense of irony and a resulting indifference to, or rather, calm acceptance of the inevitability of failure.

> Il avait de l'ironie, l'Administrateur, rien qui ne le touchât vraiment, il savait rire de tout, rien qui lui appartînt. Il n'avait jamais rien enfanté qui ressemblât à la vie, ni un enfant, ni une loi, ni une décision. Rien. Absolument Rien. [...][110] Rien n'était logique mais tout s'acceptait, tout était accepté. N'était-ce pas justement le but de la logique? Il devait veiller mais ne rien bouleverser. Il aimait ce rôle de témoin tendre et complaisant de la fatalité.[111]

This role of a calm, resigned observer of the spectacle of African misery that Dubois assigns himself and seeks to assign to other European actors on the African scene is central in understanding his relationship with the schoolteacher Albert Refons. Refons had been a student activist with left-wing ideas and sympathies. His arrival to run the schools of Ouregano with his wife creates a moment of anxiety and fear for Dubois. Seeing in the husband a kind of person '[qui] vous semait le désordre pour le plaisir,[112] he quite uncharacteristically moves to assert his authority. He spells out exactly what he requires Refons to do, which is, nothing other than 'reprendre la lourde machine [of colonial governance] et faire rouler sans se préoccuper de ses tenants et de ses aboutissants. Le reste était l'affaire des responsables [...]'.[113]

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[110] *Ouregano*, p. 54.
[111] Ibid., p. 137.
[112] Ibid., p. 42.
[113] Ibid.

In a world shaped by the heavy administrative machinery headed by Dubois, initiative and innovation are anathema and are stamped out immediately they rear their ugly heads. What one is left with is an endless round of receptions, with the Dubois, the Bonenfant and the Murano taking turn as hosts. The frequency of the receptions leaves the impression of a world moving in circles: a dead end where the so-called bearers of imperial power expend their energies into daily encounters that are at bottom a playground for rivalries, vanities and jealousies over and about trivialities.

Ironically, by his passivity, pessimistic cast of mind and his preoccupation with death, the agent of France's *mission civilisatrice* does nothing to alleviate the hunger, disease and death that he sees around him. In this way, he becomes part and parcel of the human misery he observes - the misery being the only thing that gives meaning to his existence and which is a secretion of his own morbid imagination. The death-obsessed colonial administrator is indeed a symbol, or more accurately, a purveyor of death in the Africa he rules.

Hence his attitude to Beretti's crime. To Dubois, by killing N'Diop Beretti simply does death's bidding; he is a mere agent. He is thus accountable for nothing and such matters as court trials and culpability are nothing other than 'de monstrueuses manoeuvres humaines,'[114] which strip away the dignity and sanctity with which death invests its victims. As an administrator fascinated by death's awesome power and inevitable triumph, Dubois promises himself to do all he can to ensure that nothing disturbs N'Diop's respose, in the same way that he leaves untouched the generalised misery he finds and gloats over in the entirety of his district.

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[114] Ibid., p. 206.

Ouregano's negative portrayal of the exercise of political power in the colonial world it depicts is echoed in *White spirit*'s handling of external political influence relating to the post-colonial Africa it describes. Dubois, the passive, death-obsessed administrator of Ouregano might seem to contrast sharply with César de Marino, the glamorous and self-assertive planter, ship-owner and mayor of Port-Banane. But like Dubois whose position of responsibility is undercut by his sterility in personal and professional terms, de Marino lives under a cloud. His machismo is dented by a physical impotence against which his material affluence and social standing as well as his desperate recourse to modern European and traditional African healing practices are of no avail. Thus like Dubois, he hangs over the African world he controls like a dead weight.

I noted earlier the inherent anachronism of de Marino's situation as a European mayor of a town in an independent African state and suggested that such anachronism should be read as a symbol of Europe's neo-colonial influence.[115] To leave a huge chunk of national territory including the erstwhile colonial capital in the hands of external business concerns for whatever reason seems to throw into doubt the very claim to national sovereignty. Moreover, the authorities of the state's new capital La Mégalo may have chosen to have nothing to do with the pestilential, banana-infested port city; yet it is clear that de Marino and his partners use their financial muscle to influence decisions. This raises the issue of the ungainly link between foreign capital investment and national politics. Indeed de Marino's first reflex in the face of the decomposing heap of banana is to reproach Guastavin (who had taken charge of

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[115] See above, p. 127.

operations while he was in Europe) in these terms: 'Tu aurais dû payer'.[116] When Guastavin states that he had paid all that was payable, giving a long list of people ranging from ministers to plantons, de Marino is still not impressed. He adds: 'Et le président?'[117] Apparently, Guastevin had not considered that possibility and duly admits this. Of course de Marino is being unfair to his partner, for he knows the problem stems from a strike action by dockworkers in Europe and that in such a situation the local authorities are as helpless as he. His words are nonetheless quite revealing. They give a glimpse of the unhealthy interconnectedness of foreign capital and local politics, recalling the murky world of international politics and finance that Verschave denounces as 'Françafrique' and 'Mafiafrique'.

Conchon's *L'état sauvage* for its part seems to raise the question of political leadership in the immediate aftermath of African independence. The Central African Republic was previously a French overseas territory known as Oubangui-Chari, which achieved a measure of self-rule in 1958 within the French Community but then took on its current name on acceding to full sovereignty two years later.[118] Conchon highlights the questionable nature of that sovereignty, which he casts in terms of puppet African regimes. This leads readers back to Sartre's 'Lumumba et le colonialisme'. I noted that to Sartre, the declared pan-Africanism of Congo's first prime minister cost him his life; he was put out of the way to facilitate the rise to power of leaders judged more amenable to Western economic and political

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[116] *White spirit*, p. 47.
[117] Ibid.
[118] See 'Central African Republic', *Atlapedia Online*, accessed 20 July 2003 at: http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/centafri.htm]

interests.[119] Gohanda Grégoire, the prime minister of Conchon's imaginary Central African state, cuts to perfection the figure of such puppet African leadership. A person of ridicule right from his very harsh-sounding name, he comes to power and prominence through no effort of his and is in consequence quite out of his depth. Indeed in contrast to Lumumba whose militancy had resulted in his imprisonment and subsequent assassination, Grégoire's great misfortune was, the narrator satirises,

> de n'avoir jamais crié contre la colonisation qu'avec l'aveu des colonisateurs. Décolonisé, il s'ennuyait prodigieusement. Pas un jour en prison, jamais traqué, à l'honneur de plus en plus, ce n'est pas ce qui forme un caractère. Il souffrait fort de ne plus aller que deux fois l'an à Paris, où il avait pris des habitudes, et enrageait même, quelquefois, de se voir pour ainsi dire transplanté dans son propre pays.[120]

We have here a case of a leader whose national self-esteem is non-existent having been eroded by the trauma of colonial servitude. A 'colonisé' at heart even after the event, Grégoire looks to the West for national self-definition and carries the scars of his depersonalised self to the ridiculous point of wishing he had been born an American - a black American - as that would have earned him the longevity he craves and which his apparently disease-infested and death-ridden African environment places beyond his reach. [121] It seems to be a measure of Conchon's disavowal of the psychological havoc wreaked by Europe's colonial enterprise that his post-colonial African leader looks back on Africa's experience of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as a blessing rather than the monstrosity that it was.

The issue of political control relating to an erstwhile European imperial centre and its former black African periphery may at first sight not seem a major concern in what I call Grainville's *oeuvre africaine*, made up of his 1976 Goncourt-winning *Les flamboyants*

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[119] See above, p. 97.
[120] *L'état sauvage*, p. 113.
[121] Ibid., pp. 114-115.

and his 1998 novel *Le tyran éternel*[122]. In point of fact, the two books are variations on what may be called the theme of political dictatorship *à l'africaine*. The chief protagonist of each of the novels is certainly no weakling like Conchon's servile and pliant Gohonda Grégoire. Tokor Yali Yulmata, hero of *Les flamboyants,* is the despotic ruler of an imaginary militarised African state situated like Conchon's Jacul and Constant's Ouregano somewhere in Central Africa. Houphouët-Boigny, the autodiegetic narrator of *Le tyran éternel*, is based on the personality of the late leader of the West African state of Côte d'Ivoire. His ghost keeps a watchful eye on his legacy of forty years of undisputed rule, threatened as he sees it by his detractors who have been emboldened by his physical demise. What he does in fact is to celebrate his achievements from beyond the grave. In other words, both Tokor Yali Yulmata and Houphouët-Boigny emerge as laws unto themselves, the excesses they perpetrate thus being as it were proof of their independence. Yet asked about the source of his interest in black Africa, Grainville leaves no doubt as to his concern among other things about France's untenable neo-colonial hold on that continent. Speaking in particular about France's complicity with the late Ivorian leader's tyrannical regime and with such monstrosities as the Rwandan genocide, Grainville states:

> Mon Houphouët [his narrator and principal character] célèbre son aventure, mais il déballe des trucs qui se tournent contre lui. Qui le trahissent, comme la collusion avec les Français en 1959, pour s'en prendre à une autre ethnie que la sienne (il est Baoulé), les Bété... Quand en 1963, il enferme ses opposants, la France tient la prison. Ce qu'on dit aujourd'hui sur l'implication de la France au Rwanda, c'est frappant.... En cas de coup d'Etat, la France était là pour l'empêcher militairement. C'est éclairant sur l'histoire de l'Afrique. On appelle ça le néocolonialisme. [123]

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[122] Patrick Grainville, *Les flamboyants* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976) ; *Le tyran éternel*, (Paris, Seuil, 1998).
[123] See G. Cherel, 'Patrick Grainville "Le roman baroque, c'est aller à l'excès, le mélange des genres, l'horreur du vide"', 1-8 (p. 4), accessed 5 June 2003, at: <http://www.regards.fr/archives/1998/199807/199807invol.html>

Grainville's words about his hero echo almost to the letter the thrust of Verschave's polemical pieces on France's hijacking of its former black African territories for its own hegemonic purposes. [124] As Grainville's own comments confirm and illustrate the presence and importance of the neo-colonial theme in *Le tyran éternel*, I will focus this discussion on *Les flamboyants*, first because it is the better-known of the two novels by virtue of having won the Prix Goncourt, and perhaps more importantly because compared to the other novels considered above, it is the only one to situate the issue of external political interference in Africa in the much wider context of the Cold War and the East-West ideological and political divide.

Early reactions to the novel already showed sensitivity to its hyperbolic cross-cultural vision. Paul Morel writing in *Le monde des livres* in 1976 referred to the book as 'un opéra oublié, baroque et bariolé'[125], while the sociologist Georges Balandier spoke in *Le nouvel observateur* that same year of 'un Ubu africaniste'.[126] Both Morel and Balandier were paying homage to the rich verbal texture of the work, the colorful and larger-than-life scenes and characters it displays, and its hero's intimate knowledge of the Africa he embodies and governs. Dugastes-Portes herself underscores the essentially poetical and mythical thrust of the novel. She claims that if the mundane realties of post-independent Africa do appear here and there in the text, the story related belongs in essence 'dans une temporalité mythique'[127] with Tokor pursuing 'une quête exaltée et mortifère'.[128] She adds:

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[124] See above, pp. 92-93; 98-100.
[125] See Dugast-Portes, 'Héros noirs, romans blancs dans la littérature française métrpolitaine', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 19-35 (p. 32).
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

> Pour tout événement, sont convoqués à la fois les savants noirs et blancs les plus compétents, les astrologues, les marabouts, les généraux et leurs cortège de tanks, de fusées, de mirages...Un syncrétisme mythologique digne de Saint John Perse, avec une constante polarisation sur le sacrifice cruel, inspiré des scènes qui mêlent les échos de l'Orient, du Bas-Empire, du culte vaudou.[129]

I will come to the poetic dimension of *Les flamboyants* in Chapters 3 and 4. What I will emphasise at this stage is that the larger-than-life stature of Tokor, reflected in his imposing physical build, his explosive energy, his volubility, his quest for ultimate knowledge and power, his gigantic and sumptuous palace-fortress and his vast and daring military operations, has as backdrop social and political realities which show Tokor to have feet of clay.

Tokor presides over a nation fractured along ethnic and ideological lines. Indeed for all his despotic grip on power, or perhaps because of it, he cuts the figure of an alienated, solitary leader at war with forces that overwhelm and destroy him in the end, at least physically. He is ill at ease in the portion of the country over which he reigns as in the portion outside his control. Yali is effectively cut in two: Mandouka is the capital and seat of power where Tokor's imposing palace-fortress, the Tindgili, stands. A special military corps, the royal guards, ensures his personal security. As the national administrative centre, Mandouka has a cosmopolitan side to it: Tokor does entertain foreign dignitaries drawn to his palace by the demands of politics and diplomacy and comprising in the Cold War context of the nineteen sixties and seventies (incidentally Tokor's reign ends in 1973), Europeans and Americans on the one hand and Russians on the other. The striking thing about Mandouka is indeed its opulence, or rather, its

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[129] Ibid. For an account of the mythical dimensions of Grainville's fictional worlds, see Rachel Edwards, *Myth and the Fiction of Michel Tournier and Patrick Grainville* (Lewiston,/Queenston/Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999). Edwards does not however discuss *Les flamboyants* and *Le tyran éternel*.

distinctively Western, market economy-orientated visage, evoked by allusions in the text to the presence of American, European and Japanese business, and by implication political, concerns. It is perhaps symptomatic of the presence of such concerns that the husband of Tokor's favourite mistress, Hélène, is a French engineer on contract with a copper mining company. The husband is of course despatched to a remote corner of the country, giving Tokor a free hand with his wife.

Tokor's closest foreign associate is William Irrigal, a young Scotman whose father, Lord Irrigal, is an ex-diplomat and an acquaintance of Tokor, having once been on a mission in Mandouka. William's own mission to Africa is ostensibly one of cultural immersion, but there seems to be more to it than perhaps Tokor and indeed William himself realise. For in the end it is not clear who needs whom most and to what end. Hélène, a curious observer of that relationship, most crucially formulates the enigmatic relationship between the African despot and his European guest in these terms:

> William, ce silencieux guide du roi, ange ou démon? [...] Tout le monde s'interroge sur les vrais rapports du roi et d'Irrigal. Quelle est la mission de ce muet flegmatique auprès du monarque? Que ferait-il [...]? Qu'accepterait-il? Q'ordonnait-il? [...] Qui était Irrigal? Peut-être aurait-elle l'audace d'interroger crûment le roi sur ce qu'il en était. Mais elle était convaincue que le roi lui-même ne connaissait guère le rôle destiné à William auprès de lui. L'étranger savait-il davantage la mission dont il avait été investi par un décret du hasard ou fatal?[130]

Of course Hélène who believes in witchcraft puts William's role and relationship down to the workings of unseen forces over which neither Tokor nor he himself has any control. This explanation seems reasonable given the mythical, or surreal thrust of the novel. Indeed the two protagonists undertake a strange adventure into the pristine surroundings of the Hourla, a vast, dense, almost impenetrable jungle, at Tokor's bidding, in search of

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[130] *Les flamboyants*, p. 149.

the Diorles, a sacred and mythical race whom the king seeks passionately to know and own. But William's enigmatic presence beside the African monarch may well be explained in the light of his background as a Westerner and son of a erstwhile diplomat: indeed the questions that Hélène raises about him are opened-ended enough to have as a possible answer the operations of external forces, forces that as it were place Tokor and his country under Western eyes.

As a matter of fact, Tokor is less at home presiding over his seat of power than waging war on enemy tribes in the remote reaches of his country, or more importantly in indulging his burning passion, his delirious wish to unravel the mystery of the Diorles. He feels bored and closed in in Mandouka, a city whose opulence and market-oriented economy (and the philosophy underlying it) he rejects. On first meeting William, he complains: 'On s'ennuie à Mandouka, on pense trop à l'argent, tous ces étrangers … Parfois je serais presque socialiste comme Lalaka.'[131] Lalaka is a colonel and Tokor's great political rival. His main base is in the north of the country which he transforms in his quiet yet ruthless and calculating way into a laboratory for experiments in socialism to serve as a bulwark against Torkor's Mandouka. Significantly, Tokor nicknames him le Tai-Ping, in reference to his socialist vision and practice, linking him with the 1851-1964 Chinese rebellion of the same name. That rebellion is generally judged to have laid the foundation of the institutionalised socialism that has been a distinguishing feature of life in China.[132] Quite logically, as the narrator points out, even though Lalaka 'est un sage, un philosophe, un socialiste, un homme d'État sensible, cultivé, épanoui. Un symbole et

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[131] Ibid., p. 33.

[132] Comments on the rebellion and extracts from the basic document of the Taiping Kingdom entitled *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* and first published in 1953, are available at: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taiping.html [accessed 1 August 2003].

un exemple convaincant, séduisant pour tous les pays des tropiques et de l'équateur',[133] in Europe and America, 'on le disait sournois, on l'estimait souvent, on l'admirait parfois, on ne l'aimait guère'.[134]

But if Tokor rejects the orientation of his city and seems to think for a moment that socialism might be a better option, he does not necessarily choose it. In point of fact, he is equally ill at ease with Lalaka '[qui] me gêne avec son communisme, son équilibre, son équanimité!'[135] Interestingly, Lalaka is himself no unfeeling ideologue and revolutionary. His vision of post-Tokor Yali does not have to entail the physical demise of Tokor, and he warns his supporters that if Mandouka and what it stands for are what they seek to destroy, Tokor as an embodiment of 'les puissances de l'irrationnel'[136] must at all cost be preserved. He claims: 'Notre socialisme périra sans cette parcelle du délire'.[137] Elsewhere, on first meeting William, he states: 'C'est justement parce que ma certitude n'est pas inébranlable que je veux que Yulmata vive, survive à la tourmente.'[138] Yet Lalaka's balancing act is doomed to fail. Tokor dies in the end, in the heat of Lalaka's ideologically driven insurrection that leaves a trail of destruction worthy of apocalypse. Thus is sacrificed on the altar of warring philosophies imported from outside that 'parcelle du délire' which both Lalaka and Tokor seem to recognise as the defining feature of their Africanness.

To sum up, the colonial world of *Onitsha* or *Ouregano* may be at a remove in terms of temporal setting from the post-colonial world of of *L'état sauvage*, *White Spirit* or *Les flamboyants*. Yet in both cases the characters' experience of Africa and their

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[133] *Les flamboyants*, p. 129.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., p. 39.
[136] Ibid., p. 106.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., p. 139.

actions on the African scene convey in fictional terms a clear sense of cross-cultural encounters whether marred by the violence of colonial conquest, by the repressive machinery of colonial control or by the debilitating impact of neo-colonialist designs on a nominally independent Africa; designs which in their extreme form as depicted in *Les flamboyants* transform that continent with devastating consequences into a theatre of ideological warfare that echoes the contemporary Cold War.

8. Colonial and Neo-Colonial Cultural Closure

a. Insensitive Christian Europe

Intertwined with the issues of colonial and neo-colonial economic and socio-political closures, is the much wider problem of the cultural impact of Europe's presence in black Africa. If as Elias has argued the sources of western society's sense of its superiority vis-à-vis other cultures include the level of its technology, the nature of its manners and the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world,[139] an important feature of the novels discussed here is their explicit rebuttal of such cultural self-righteousness and self-glorification with its attendant inferiorisation and vilification of difference. On display in *Onitsha* for instance is not so much the refinement of the representatives of a supposedly cultured Europe as their intolerance and aggressiveness. This leads the reader again to the tragedy of Aro Chuku. The inferior cultural status assigned to it by the invaders makes it amenable to conquest, possession, and, if necessary, obliteration. Indeed the express order given to the British forces to destroy the oracle and the community it serves derives its justification

[139] See above, pp. 26-27.

from the moral high ground taken by the invaders. Their target is not just a simple military or political objective to be destroyed. From the invaders' perspective, Aro Chuku 'est une engeance': a miserable and despicable lot, indeed 'un lieu maudit': a pagan shrine, a den of witchcraft, a moral eyesore and so an affront to the civilised, Christian, European standards that the invaders represent. They are obviously incapable of imagining and accepting that Aro Chuku could well be a valid if different cultural phenomenon with a structure and a history all its own.

Where do Christian standards of behaviour come in when it is clear that the racial slurs that the likes of Simpson throw at the Africans they encounter and the physical abuse to which they subject them are grounded in their estimation of the latter's inherent sub-human barbarism? When Simpson takes delight in ridiculing the African speakers of Pidgin English, that behaviour is not motivated by his pride in and unquestioned acceptance of a linguistic order judged beyond the reach of his cultural inferiors. And when Florizel seeks to scare Fintan and Maou who are travelling for the first time to Africa by tales of cannibalism, his attitude springs obviously not from a conviction about the brotherhood of men but from a certain conception of humanity that considers Africans and their way of life to be beyond the pale.

In *Ouregano*, Père Jean is a crusading evangelist who in what might seem a striking instance of self-abnegation and altruism commits his life 'à la conversion des populations les plus primitives dans les coins les plus perdus ou les plus inaccessibles'.[140] He sets about his task as a hardened ascetic: he travels on foot, poorly dressed and shod, lives on wild fruits, raw roots and bitter barks and polluted water. His credo is charity, the only thing he knows and recognises, and he speaks of

[140] *White spirit*, p. 125.

'les pauvres homes,' the only language he knows. Yet ironically what he achieves is not the salvation of the poor but the ceation of an unbridgeable gap between the latter and himself and indeed his God. Nothing shows this point clearly than the scene in *Ouregano* where the evangelist celebrates mass at the Muranos'. This calls forth some of the severest criticisms from the narrator, to whom the priest's condition, compared with that of the colonised people of Ouregano,

> était une pauvreté vivante et consentie [...], une pauvreté qui, à la façon du prêtre était habillé, misérablement certes, mais décemment [...]. La pauvreté qui faisait souffrir les habitants d'Ouregano et la maladie qui abîmait les corps était leur seul bien, le père Jean avait Dieu en prime et ne regardait que lui.[141]

The point is that in the priest's scheme of things, those whom he seeks to convert are no more than a means to an end; their supposed indigence and primitiveness fuel his masochistic quest for spiritual fulfilment. Significantly, the priest celebrates Holy Communion with his back to his audience, using as the narrator sarcastically notes, 'toutes ses forces mystiques'[142] to inject life into inanimate objects (the communion-cup and plate and the Eucharistic elements they contain) while being thoroughly oblivious of his surroundings which are teeming with life and vitality. Little wonder his audience remains unresponsive to his words and deeds: 'Tout était bien au fond: les hommes ne voyaient pas Dieu, le prêtre ne voyait pas les hommes et Dieu regardait ailleurs.'[143]

This indictment of Christian Europe's dealings with Africa is perhaps most strident in *White spirit*. Here, Père Jean's conversion of the natives undertaken at all costs and without due regard for their age, disposition and culture carries within it the seeds not

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[141] *Ouregano*, pp. 123-124.
[142] Ibid., p. 128.
[143] Ibid., p. 129.

only of the priest's own eventual violent demise but the demise of the broader social, political and cultural tutelage under which he operates. Of particular significance is the role of frère Emmanuel, a convert he brings into his fold at fifteen. Emmanuel embraces his new faith with the enthusiasm and vigour of his youth and is particularly thrilled by his name, which, the priest informs him, signifies 'messenger of God' and 'the chosen one'. What the evangelist seems unprepared for is that his young convert may channel his energy in other directions as well, in pursuit of other desires. Happy to the point of delirium in his newfound faith, Emmanuel nonetheless violates and impregnates another young convert, named Marie. Desperate to be forgiven, accepted and baptised, Emmanuel pesters him endlessly but to no avail. In the end, exasperated and disillusioned by his intransigence, he kills him and takes his place. Using his newfound power and influence among the other natives for insurrectional purposes, he emerges in the eyes of the management of the plantations as a threat to their interests.

Towards the end of the novel, Emmanuel leads the coolies out of the banana plantation. That event echoes the biblical episode in which Moses led the persecuted Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. His action is the logical outcome of what the narrator calls (in referring to the black evangelist elsewhere in the text) 'le produit d'une évangélisation avortée'[144]: a term that may well apply to Europe's African expansionist project as a whole. For Emmanuel's use of his new faith as an instrument of dissent and insurrection seems to enact in novelistic terms Africa's rebuttal of an economic, socio-political and cultural order imposed from outside.

b. Inhibiting and Ruinous Technological / Material Progress

[144] *White spirit*, p. 125.

In his *Afrique ambiguë*, Balandier bemoaned the corrosive impact of European modernity - the introduction of monetary economics - on what he viewed as the time-tested and socially cohesive marriage traditions of the Lebu ethnic group of Senegal.[145] The novels of Le Clézio, Constant and Grainville depict in no less unflattering terms aspects of that modernity - taken in the sense of technological/material progress. Le Clézio's critical stance on such a conception of human progress is already noticeable in his handling of the issue of economic predation. Fintan's preference of his African playmate's bare and hardened feet to his own 'fameuses chaussettes' and his 'grosses chaussures noires' throws into relief a quality of life that his continent's technologically advanced civilisation has apparently obliterated.

White spirit emphasises the erosion of that very environmental specificity. Guastavin's assessment of the impact of the crop whose cultivation he oversees is revealing. Part and parcel of the banana industry, he is nonetheless not entirely unaware of its disastrous environmental impact. On first meeting Victor, the young recruit working for the RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN at the VILLAGE MODÈLE, he bemoans the effects of climatic change that has resulted in the loss the seasons. He informs Victor that whereas there used to be an Africa of two seasons, the dry season with its overpowering sun and the rainy season characterised by cloudy skies, tornadoes and heavy rains, now, 'les plantations sur de telles superficies avaient tout bouleversé'.[146] The clouds have fled the skies and 'les arroseuses géantes avaient remplacé la pluie. Tous les jours, je dis bien, tous les jours que Dieu fait vous

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[145] See above, p. 107.
[146] *White spirit*, p. 66.

entendrez les arroseuses, et vous oublierez jusqu'au nom des saisons. Il [Guastavin] eut un gros sanglot'.[147]

A second aspect of the environmental impact of the banana industry is the issue of toxic products. The products Beretti ships from Europe and which eventually find their way into the various locations of the RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN include significant quantities of 'insecticide, vitriol, raticide, soude caustique et lemon-rubb'[148]: an ungainly combination of pesticides and cleansing agents which eat into the physical, mental and spiritual fabric of the Africa. The plantations are routinely sprayed from the air, and the pesticide when inhaled saps the energy of the unprotected coolies, leaving them in a perpetual state of torpor and helplessness, their condition being comparable to that of the insects targeted by the pesticide.[149] The sociological implications of this state of affairs are unmistakable in the text. The active and able-bodied men are now reduced to zombies hardly deserving the respect of their women and children. Indeed it is the women who faced with the spectacle of their emasculated partners pour water on their heads to rouse them and give them a semblance of dignity.

The novel's title is itself derived from the brand name of a cleansing agent, a powdery substance that peels off the skin of those who handle it with naked hands, and may be read at one level as a symbol of Europe's destructive presence. That presence culminates of course in the Emmanuel-led collective suicide: the self-appointed African evangelist and his followers eat of the dangerous substance at the close of their ill-fated quest for freedom from the 'banane anarchique' and the

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibi., pp. 17-18.
[149] Ibid., p. 73.

dehumanising system it represents.

In *Les flamboyants*, the focus is on the moral and spiritual shortcomings of a materially affluent society. Tokor's hatred of his city's Western visage is even more explicit when he gives vent to his anguish in these terms: 'Mandouka est une catin en train de crever, pourrie par leur fric, leurs trusts, leurs conflits, leurs complots, leurs salamalecs et paperasses, leurs courbettes d'ambassades, leurs cocktails et leurs surprises-parties!'.[150] The emphasis on the possessive adjective 'leur' leaves readers in no doubt that Tokor now considers himself to be a stranger in his own backyard, outdone and alienated by the corrupting influence of external forces. Tokor's uneasiness about Mandouka may be explained in terms of that city's opposite number, its negative underside or ungainly outgrowth, namely, Le Mourmako, a sprawling shanty town beside Mandouka. Le Mourmako's squalor and deprivation seem to be the steep price paid for Mandouka's glittering wealth. Little wonder that as events unfold in the novel Le Mourmako becomes a theatre of sedition and revolution against Tokor's reign: a battlefront for Lalaka's socialist ideal designed in principle as a necessary corrective to the corruption and decay with which the affluent Mandouka oozes.

c. The underside of 'Rational Europe'

Bound up with the questioning of Europe's technological/material achievements as the model of human progress is the negation of a related aspect of European cultural self-image: its supposedly rational and scientific view of the world. The cultural anthropologist Marimba Ani identifies 'rational man' among other cultural traits as a

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[150] *Les flamboyant*s, p. 36.

key expression of European value and self-image in relation to non-European peoples and cultures. She writes:

> The 'rational man' in European terms is above all the person who is in control of his passions. He makes decisions - based on reason - the proper and incontrovertible guide. Being in control of himself puts him in a better position to manipulate and control others - those who are irrational or at least less rational. Through the institutionalization and abstraction of this 'rational' decision-making process - of which science is constituted - he believes that he can even control his destiny. He plans, predicts, and creates his future; activities usually associated with a 'god'.[151]

To Ani, the primacy accorded to reason in shaping human action and experience has been a dominant feature of European cultural thought and behaviour. What *Onitsha*, *White Spirit* and *Les flamboyants* reveal when read through the prism of Ani's notion of European cultural thought and behaviour, is a re-examination of the supremacist cultural assumptions predicated on the primacy of reason, showing either its inadequacies in its account of human experience or its negative, indeed destructive implications.

This leads us back to Fintan: to his rejection of his boots and socks in his interaction with the African environment. His behaviour brings into focus a more fundamental issue: the questioning of the philosophical attitude that underpins such technological sophistication, namely the 'rational'/ 'scientific' mind's interaction with and transformation of the physical and human environment in utilitarian terms. In an important essay entitled *L'extase matérielle*, which first appeared in 1967, nearly twenty-five years before *Onitsha* was published, Le Clézio provided a kind of literary and philosophical manifesto. It shows in essence the thought processes of a young European intellectual, who, distrustful of all systems and categories, looks for an alternative mode of relating to the world as a complex indivisible whole. It calls into question the

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[151] M. Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*, (Trenton-Asmara, Africa World Press, 1994), p. 239.

Cartesian duality of mind and matter, of privileged thinking man and soulless physical reality. To transcend this rational dichotomy, the essay envisages an approach akin to a romantic or fantastic view of reality.

> N'existe-t-il pas d'autres possibilités d'entrer directement en rapport avec le monde, sans l'exprimer, sans le morceler? Une espèce d'intelligence immédiate, venue des sens liée aux obsessions et aux délires anciens, qui se nourrisse de réalité? Esprit proche de la mystique, fascination, émotion profonde et vitale dont l'aboutissement est dans le tout ineffable, grandiose, un tout si vaste et si vibrant qu'il en devient voisin du rien?[152]

The operations of 'rational' Europe may have led to the technological sophistication and control of reality: but its understanding of it, and thus its actual hold on it, is only partial, calling for an approach capable of rendering its immediacy, its totality, its unfathomable depths. To enter into a meaningful relationship with his non-European environment, Fintan must begin by shedding his cultural trappings: his boots and socks, to lay his body open to the fullness of reality hitherto held in check by a cultural tradition that proceeds by separations, divisions and isolations of aspects of reality, watering down its inherent complexity and heterogeneity.

The damaging operations of the 'rational' mind are shown at work in *White spirit* as well. Young Victor is bewildered by the pointlessness and illogicality of the expired products he is made to sell.[153] But as the narrator puts, it is Victor, not the products, that is the problem. He fails to realise that he is no more than a cog in the wheel of a bi-continental economic set-up where the production, distribution and consumption of products have a logic all their own. The narrator's verdict on the operations of that economic set up and on the mind set that underpins such operations is unequivocal.

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[152] J.-M. G. Le Clézio, *L'extase matérielle*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1967), p. 80-81.
[153] See above, p. 125.

> Il [Victor] ne savait pas que ces denrées étaient le résultat d'une pensée rationnelle, d'une efficacité calculée, le gâchis n'était que dans son esprit. Ces produits n'étaient pas bons, mais ils n'étaient pas mauvais pour tout le monde [...] Ils avaient été fabriqués pour LA RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN, où Victor devait les faire disparaître. Il était au bout de la chaîne le maillon indispensable qui bouclait la boucle, il était au bout du monde la bouche de l'égout au fond de la mer.[154]

A supposedly rationally minded and technologically sophisticated culture is shown here to be through its intensions, objectives and procedures a danger to itself and to others.

But perhaps it is the personality of the young Scotsman William Irrigal in Grainville's *Les flamboyants* that foregrounds most crucially this questioning of the assumptions, biases and prejudices that equate Europe with rationality, strength and progress, at the expense of other cultures deemed irrational and in consequence amenable to Europe's will to dominate. At one level, William cuts the figure of 'rational man' to perfection: he is a serene, elegant young aristocrat in total control of his emotions even in the most trying circumstances. For instance, on approaching Yali, the vessel in which he is travelling is caught in a violent tropical storm. All around him is chaos. He is unshaken nonetheless, being the only passenger to endure the upheaval 'sans manifester l'émoi le plus infime'.[155] William's exceptional qualities at the beginning of his African adventure remind the reader of Sartre's description of the white coloniser's privilege: his power of knowing and naming other people and cultures.

> Le blanc a jouis trois mille ans du privilège de voir sans qu'on le voie; il était regard pur, la lumière de ses yeux tirait toute chose de l'ombre natale, la blancheur de sa peau c'était un regard encore, de la lumière condensée. L'homme blanc, blanc parce qu'il était homme, blanc comme le jour, blanc comme la vérité, blanc comme la vertu, éclairait la création comme une torche, dévoilait l'essence secrète

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[154] *White spirit*, pp. 108-109.
[155] *Les flamboyants*, p. 19.

et blanche des êtres.[156]

But William's very qualities of serenity, calmness and self-control make him a one-sided personality, lacking the vivacity, the complexity and contradictions that seem to be the very stuff of existence. He is presented as 'William Néant blanc':[157] a nickname that emphasises his essential vacuity; a sort of tabula rasa meant to be filled in by the life forces that he Tokor and his continent embody to perfection. William's whiteness, his serenity and self-mastery place him as it were beyond the pale of what is judged natural, human, life-giving and life-affirming; they bring to mind what as we saw Sartre calls in his castigation of white racism and cultural arrogance a shabby white undergarment, urging its wearer to strip off in order to become human.

The issue of whiteness as elaborated in *Les flamboyants* and 'Orphée noir' brings this chapter full circle: it ties up the chapter's underlying argument, namely the presence of a shared pattern of cross-cultural responses in the essays and novels that I have examined. The novels take up and modulate within the framework of their fictionality the indignation felt and the accusations made in the more straightforward, non-fictional prose compositions in relation to colonial excesses and their continuing post-colonial manifestations. The main site of this anti-colonial and cultural self-critical stance in the novels is the interplay of character and narrative viewpoint. The views, attitudes and actions of the child heroes in *Onitsha* and *Ouregano* contrast with the actions and attitudes of the adult protagonists, but converge with the positions taken by the main, heterodiegetic narrators. In *L'état sauvage*, *White spirit* and *Les flamboyants*, which feature mainly adult protagonists, the location of the anti-colonial and cultural self-

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[156] *Situations III*, p. 229.
[157] *Les flamboyants*, pp. 19-25.

critical narrative is the actions, attitudes, views, attributes (physical and moral) of the European adult protagonists as they interact with the non-European world. Its other location is the responses of the critical heterodiegetic narrators to the African situations depicted in the books. There is a clear sense of a shared and sustained pattern of unflattering assessments and hostility to colonial and neo-colonial control.

Chapter III

Celebrating Cultural Difference

Section A

Non-Fiction

If one key positive aspect of the essays and novels examined in the preceding chapter is their largely explicit questioning of the imperialist project and its after-effects and of the supremacist cultural assumptions and ideological motivations inherent in that project, another is their equally explicit recognition and celebration of black Africa perceived as a paradigm of difference. The recognition and celebration constitute what I call a narrative of cross-cultural empathy.

This narrative involves the various authors' responses to and conceptions of African writing/aesthetics, their laudatory evocation of the continent's physical attributes, their appraisal of its racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity, their celebration of its philosophy and cosmogony, and their salute to aspects of its long and prestigious history. Such categorisation may sound schematic but perhaps it is a price worth paying for the clarity and economy of exposition it permits. Moreover, it gives an insight into the point at which the works and their authors intersect and intertwine, acquiring in the process referential power among themselves (in Said's apt phrase). But in contradistinction to Said's position this referential power shapes into the works' subversion at a second level

of the supremacist colonial cultural mindset: they further undermine it by showing how the various authors attempt to enter empathetically into black African situations.

This empathetic cross-cultural response is evident particularly in those articles published in *Présence africaine* from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, and also in other articles and books published elsewhere in France during the period in question. This leads us back to the works of Gide, Sartre and Balandier, but I will consider also a host of other figures including the ethnographer Griaule and the natural scientist Monod. I will also discuss where relevant essays published from the 1960s onwards, in particular those of Sartre and Dumont.

Central to this corpus are the essays contained in the eighth and ninth issues of *Présence africaine* published in March 1950 as they mark in my view a high point in the recognition and celebration of black Africa's cultural originality. These essays resulted from a collaborative effort by a team of commentators comprising school and university teachers, pastors, priests, literary critics, buisnessmen, colonial administrators, military officers, doctors, zoologists and ethnologists from France, Great Britain, the USA and black Africa itself. They are concerned with a wide range of issues covering black Africa's ethnic, racial and linguistic diversity, the life-styles of its peoples and their means of livelihood, its traditionally oral literature, its music, dance, humour, games and rituals, its great personalities, and its relations with the wider world.

The multi-cultural and multi-national character of the team leads back to a key aspect of *Présence africaine*'s three-part mission, spelt out by its founder Alioune Diop. As indicated earlier, the first of the three sections of the journal was to publish studies on African cultures and civilisations by specialists of whatever colour, creed or nationality.

The team with whose essays I am concerned here was led by the French natural scientist Théodore Monod, founder of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, based in Dakar, Senegal, which was devoted to research into African cultures. In his introduction, Monod specified his team's aim in these words: 'On voudrait [...] faire apparaître sans nier les valeurs de notre forme de culture [...] ce qui dans celle du voisin n'est pas moins digne d'estime et de conservation'.[1] This point is crucial: the aim of defining those black African values judged deserving of respect and of preservation that Monod and his team set themselves may well stand for the general objective of the authors of the essays discussed in this chapter.

1. Writing /Aesthetics

Just as Gide's 'Avant-propos' sets the tone of the anti-colonial and the cultural self-critical narrative examined in the preceding chapter, so does it mark the beginning as it were of the narrative of cross-cultural celebration and empathy. Gide says that cultural exchange is a necessary condition for cultural renewal and enrichment. He argues further that black Africa's cultural originality constituted new and different aesthetic norms capable of revitalising what he saw as the worn-out aesthetic norms and practices of Europe. He locates that originality in the sculptural masterpieces produced in the continent and in jazz music - the latter being a creation of the black diaspora in the Americas. He celebrates the deep and revitalising impact of jazz in Paris:

> La musique nègre fit irruption dans notre savante culture et bouscule soudain nos clefs de sol, nos modes, nos subtils et délicats moyens d'expression de l'âme par le

[1] Monod, 'En manière d'introduction', *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950), 7-22 (p. 8).

> son. Triomphante sensualité; jouvence. Le jazz ne s'adressait plus tant, ou plus du tout, à la seule intelligence, mais à notre machine entière, que les battements de son rythme exaltait.[2]

The same celebratory tone underlies his comments on African statues and masks. These products, he notes, were so appreciated in Europe that they became objects of great commercial value and found their way into museums across the continent. A people capable of producing such prized objects necessarily had something to teach other cultures. To him, the masks and statues were a source of unique emotions and sensations, which he qualifies as direct, strong, elemental and spontaneous. The terms he uses are 'angoisse panique', 'stupeur', 'férocité' and 'terreur'.[3] The value of these emotions lay it would seem in their being a desirable alternative to an aesthetic experience governed all too often in Europe by Greco-Roman artistic traditions tending towards the expression of what he defines as harmony, peace and quietude.

Regarding the issue of black writing in French, Gide cautions against the temptation for European readers to dismiss as inferior a literature written by a people who had long been despised and who by the force of circumstances have had to adopt as a literary medium the very language of their subjection. Gide's greater concern seems to be that the black writer might seek to attain European standards of literary excellence in order to impress and gain the approval of European readers. Gide argues instead that the less self-conscious the black writer was, the more he would be appreciated by his European readers, suggesting his desire to find in black writing those qualities of spontaneity and directness he associates with Afican statues and masks and jazz music.

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[2] Gide, 'Avant-propos', *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947), 3-6 (p. 5).
[3] Ibid.

At the close of 'Présence noire', Sartre makes a similar point about the revitalising influence of black Africa's cultural specificity. If Sartre viewed Caribbean and black African poetry as a new literary phenomenon that was for French people a source of remorse for their culpable colonial action, he also saw it as a source of new energy for the French language and the culture it carries. Sartre writes: 'chaque noir qui cherche à se peindre au moyen de nos mots et de nos mythes, c'est un peu de sang frais qui circule en ce vieux corps'.[4] He then details in 'Orphée noir' the nature and function of black poetry, calling it, in the immediate aftermath of the war, 'la seule grande poésie révolutionnaire'[5] of the time. He argues that by their corrosive indictment of Europe through their poetry, African and Caribbean writers reduced that continent to the margins of human concerns. Europe now became in the very eyes of European readers of Caribbean and black African poets a thing of the past, a malaise, a hazy thought within warm, sunny souls. Black Africa now became the essence of being, forcing readers to re-examine themselves, to re-assess the relevance of their assumptions, their values, their way of life, their achievements, their physical attributes and indeed their natural environment, all of which they had hitherto taken for granted.

> [C']est le soleil qui est essentiel, le soleil des tropiques et la mer... L'Etre est noir, l'Etre est le feu, nous sommes accidentels et lointains, nous avons à nous justifier de nos moeurs, de nos techniques de notre pâleur de mal-cuits et de notre végétation vert-de-gris.[6]

The power of black poetry was to be found in its appropriation of the coloniser's language, which it infused with new meanings, giving the word Negro a resonance that crystallised the black writer's defiance of his oppressor and his pride in his identity:

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[4] Sartre, 'Présence noire' *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947), 28-29, p. 29.
[5] Sartre, *Situations III*, p. 233.
[6] Ibid., pp. 231-232.

'insulté, asservi, il ramasse le mot de "nègre" qu'on lui a jeté comme une pierre, il se revendique comme noir, en face du blanc, dans la fierté'.[7] In a particularly striking passage, Sartre regards black poetry as an expression of the black writer's descent into the innermost recesses of his soul - an act of self-discovery and self-affirmation, analogous, as reflected in the very title of Sartre's essay, to Orpheus's descent into the underworld in search of his beloved Eurydice. And just as Orpheus's journey into the kingdom of Pluto was strewn with obstacles and dangers, so the black poet's journey of self-exploration was beset with difficulties and risks. The poet's very guide to the recesses of his soul was paradoxically the language of his oppressor. Wrestling with his soul, doing violence to himself as he battled between 'la "civilisation" et le vieux fond noir'[8], he emerged triumphant none the less. For to Sartre it was when the black writer felt stifled by what he calls 'les serpents de notre culture'[9] that he was most heroic, most revolutionary in his quest for freedom and in affirming his identity.

Georges Balandier echoes this revolutionary power of black writing in his 'Littérature noire de langue française' discussed earlier in the thesis.[10] While Balandier saw Bakary Diallo's apparent uncritical assessment of the colonial project in terms of the hidden hand of some government official at work, he considered the works of succeeding generations of black writers as a welcome alternative. The writings of Senghor and Césaire testified, it would seem, to a change in relations between the coloniser and his subject, being as he put it 'une revendication où s'entendent le poète chrétien (Senghor) et le poète athée

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[7] Ibid., p. 237.
[8] Ibid., p. 242.
[9] Ibid., p. 243.
[10] See above, p. 49.

(Césaire) en dilatant la vieille notion d'homme civilisé, en faisant craquer les frontières traditionnelles accordées jusqu'à présent à l'homme'.[11]

2. Philosophy and Cosmogony

While Gide, Sartre and Balandier consider black writers' creative output in terms of a differing and much need aesthetic alternative that subverts the language of the coloniser for purposes of self-definition and self-affirmation, the ethnographer Marcel Griaule offers in his 'Inconnue noire' a much wider cross-cultural perspective by celebrating what he regards as the richness and sophistication of Africa's cultural heritage as seen in its languages, its philosophy and world view.[12] This essay is in essence a summary of the arguments of an impressive body of works based on ethnographical researches the author and other French scholars had conducted mainly in what was until the 1960s French Sudan (now Mali). Griaule had been the brain behind the famous Paris-Djibouti Mission that lasted two years (1931-1933), taking him and his team from Senegal in West Africa right across to Ethiopia in East Africa. He planned and carried out subsequent expeditions to the continent between 1935 and 1938. In this way he gave a decidely Africanist slant to French ethnology. Researchers like Germaine Dieterlen and Jean-Paul Lebeuf who accompanied him in those missions to sub-Saharan Africa, became distinguished Africanists in their own right, influencing in turn succeeding generations of scholars in the field. Griaule's best-known work is *Dieu d'eau*, first published in 1938. It grew out of Griaule's encounter with an old Dogon hunter Ogotemmêli from whom he

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[11] G. Balandier, 'la littérature noire de langue fançaise', *Présence africaine* 8-9 (1950), 393-402, (p. 402).
[12] M. Griaule, 'L'inconnue noire', *Présence africaine*, 1 (1947), 21-27.

discovered a complex body of ancient lore regarding the cosmos, which to him testified to the possession by the Dogon of a coherent and self-contained explanation of the universe and man's place in it.[13]

The key point Griaule makes in his 1947 essay is that views in Europe about black Africa being a backward and savage place stemmed simply from affairs: Europe's ignorance of the continent. To counter such misguided views, which, according to him, were prevalent even among intellectuals, Griaule draws attention to his findings regarding two important ethnic groups in Mali: the Bambara and the Dogon, whose origins reach back out to the dawn of time. Their belief systems, languages, initiation ceremonies, creation myths and notions of person are seen by Griaule to be incontrovertible proof of the existence, long before Europe's contact with and conquest of Africa, of elaborate cultures and civilisations in that region of the world. He argues that the principles underlying both Bambara and Dogon cultures included the primacy and divine nature of human language, itself placed in relation to water and light, viewed as the regulating forces of the universe. Speaking of the Bambara, Griaule states that their worldview was as complex as any, encompassing the largest structures of the universe and the very smallest ones. The subtlety of their behaviour and the minutiae of their rites were comparable to those of the most elaborate and refined cultures of the Far East. The Dogon for their part had no less sophisticated a worldview and behaviour. They possessed an impressive body of astronomical knowledge that could be drawn upon to place modern astrology on a solid footing. Additionally their elaborate customs and

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[13] M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: conversations avec Ogotemmêli* [1938] (Paris, *Les éditions du Chêne*, 1948).

traditions could serve as new approaches to the age-old questions regarding totems. circumcision and sacrifice.

3. Racial, Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity

Some of the articles contained in the same volume of *Présence africaine* highlight black Africa's fundamentally complex ethnic and racial dimension. One such article is 'Comment il est fait' (the pronoun 'il' refers here to the African) by L. Pales. Pales argues that skin colour alone does not determine a people's racial character. Other common and hereditary traits pertaining to hair, skull, face, trunk, pelvis and calves are according to him equally important. He notes that when all these factors are taken together and applied to Africa, it becomes clear that far from being the racial monolith the continent is often taken to be by the outsider, it is, like other places on earth, a melting pot of racial types, reflecting the constant interaction and fusion of its peoples right through history:

> Ce monde aussi fermé géographiquement [...] que paraît l'être l'Afrique noire, est en réalité un creuset. La matière plastique qu'est l'humain y a déjà subi au cours des âges de profondes transformations. Nos modestes classifications de l'heure présente n'ont jamais fixé qu'une phase, transitoire, de son humanité en perpétuel devenir.[14]

The companion article by C. Justevin, 'Comment il parle', stresses the originality, complexity and diversity of African languages. These are said to be melodious, simple, logical and an effective means of communication.[15]

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[14] L. Pales, 'Comment il est fait', *Présence africaine*, no 8-9 (1950), 39-48 (p. 47).
[15] C. Justevin, 'Comment il parle, *Présence africaine*, no 8-9 (1950) 61-70.

4. Physical/Geographical Space

Balandier shows in *Afrique ambiguë* a continent torn between its traditions and European modernity. If his findings no longer corresponded with his childhood romantic visions of an Africa of primeval forces, the fact remains that his book does convey a certain sense and quality of life which the continent could have offered him had it not been for Europe's spoiling, modernising presence; a sense and quality of life he refers to as 'une existence plus fruste, plus authentique' and as 'les aspects les plus universels et les moins décevants de la nature humaine sous les vêtements les plus primitivement nègres'.[16] Balandier seeks to convey the point that appearances do deceive, that Africa's visible material backwardness - symbolised by its primitive clothes - spared it the horrors of World War II that Europe's supposedly more advanced civilisation had brought on its own head. The same perspective is evident in Justevin's image of an Africa of simple, rural people, a phenomenon that must in his view not be allowed to disappear in the face of European technological civilisation. J. G. Duchemin's article, 'Comment il vit', draws attention to the quintessentially rural life of Afrcans. He hopes the Western-educated African ruling minority would recognise the limits of their adopted life-style and consider what they would lose by turning their backs on what he calls 'l'Afrique vraie, d'hier, d'aujourd'hui et peut-être de toujours, celle du berger, du pêcheur et du paysan'.[17]

This valorisation of black Africa's physical attributes is not the prerogative of pre-1960 essays alone; it can be located also in the writings René Dumont, for instance. As an agronomist and third-world specialist and activist, it is no surprise that he makes African

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[16] *Afrique ambiguë*, p. 10.
[17] J. G. Duchemin, 'Comment il vit' in *Présence africaine*, no 8-9 (1950), 49-60.

peasants the central focus of his analysis, and calls them 'les vrais prolétariats', echoing in this what Sartre perceives as the struggle of colonised people against western capitalist oppression. The immediate candidate for the role of oppressor in Dumont's case was of course the new African ruling elite, who had inherited the privileges of the white colonial administrator without showing much for that. To Dumont, the peasants constituted the bedrock of African life, the way forward for the continent. Significantly, *Pour l'Afrique, j'accuse* is in part dedicated to the peasants of Africa, above all those of the sahel regions of Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Niger, threatened by the spread of desert land. In championing their cause Dumont echoes Duchemin to whom proximity to nature is the essence of African life.

5. African Personalities

It is in their consideration of the qualities and achievements of notable African figures that the authors of the essays most clearly convey their empathetic disposition towards things African. It is in Part II of the volume, in the section entitled 'personnalités noires,' that Monod pays homage to the glorious achievements of the Moussa I, the ruler of the fourteenth-century kingdom of Mali.[18] Monod's account is a commentary, not a sustained biographical piece, in which he provides an overview of the personality in question and of his significance in African political and cultural history.

Monod's eulogistic portrayal of Moussa I is unmistakable from his opening statements to the closing ones. Just as Europe had its own great personalities at that moment in history, so did Africa. Moussa I is most remembered for his epoch-making journey to

[18] See Théodore Monod, 'Un empereur: Moussa I', *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950) 109-114.

Mecca, the seat of the Islamic faith. Upon his death in 1337 Moussa left his son Maghan 'un immense empire, probablement le plus vaste qu'ait connu l'Afrique Noire'. Monod then notes that such was Maghan's own reputation that it went far and wide, reaching Europe itself. He mentions Ibn Batuta, the great Moroccan scholar, traveller and explorer, who visited Mali in 1352, and commented on the horror in which Africans held injustice, the safety they enjoyed and the hospitality they extended to foreigners, as well as their observance of the Islamic faith. Monod's concluding words constrast Moussa I's Mali with late Medieval France and leave the reader in no doubt as to where his admiration lies.

> Bilan: trop évident pour qu'il faille la formuler. Et je ne puis m'empêcher de penser à la tête de Jean le Bon, si on était venu décrire au roi d'une France ravagée par la guerre, la peste noire, la Jacquerie et les Grandes compagnies, l'état des routes et de la justice dans un royaume nègre et par conséquent 'barbare' du fin fond de l'Afrique.[19]

And just as the magnificence of the fourteenth-century kingdom of Mali elicits in Monod feelings of respect and admiration, so do the life, teachings and personality of the West African Islamic scholar Tierno Bokar (1884-1940).[20] From Monod's pen he emerges, Christ-like, as the embodiment of simplicity, humility, charitableness and wisdom, misunderstood and ostracised at the close of his life even by his own. Devoted to the higher issues of spirituality, he was none the less well attuned to the lives of ordinary men. And possessed of an acute sense of the real, he taught in an informal and non-dogmatic way, using again in the manner of Christ 'quelque incident matériel, un petit fait, un objet, un rayon de soleil, la route, le ruisseau, la pluie,

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[19] Ibid. 114.
[20] Théodore Monod, 'Un homme de Dieu: Tierno Bokar', *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950), 149-157.

l'écurie et les vaches'[21] (all being aspects of his geo-cultural milieu) as symbols to illustrate a moral truth. A man of peace, Tieno Bokar disapproved of violence, declaring when asked about the necessity of a holy war: 'personnellement, je n'admire qu'une seule guerre, celle qui a pour but de vaincre en nous nos défauts'.[22] All in all, his message was one of tolerance, of openness to difference, grounded in a universalist religious ideal, in which 'la religion, celle que veut Jésus et que Mahomet ne déteste pas, c'est celle qui, comme un air pur et libre est en contact permanent avec le soleil de Vérité et de Justice dans l'Amour du Bien et de la Charité pour tous'.[23]

Balandier goes to Southern Africa to demonstrate in the figure of the 18th-century Zulu King Chaka and in that of his Basotho biographer Thomas Mofolo how Africa possessed great leaders and great writers.[24] Balandier's source for his commentary is a French translation by Victor Ellenberger of *Chaka*, Mofolo's third and most important work, which he wrote in his native Sesotho language in 1910 but which was not published until 1925.[25] Balandier calls Mofolo 'un grand écrivain'. He echoes aspects of Mofolo's work that relate to the circumstances of Chaka's birth, his upbringing, training, prowess and destiny, all of which he deems exceptional enough

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[21] Ibid., p. 151-52. For a systematic account of Tierno Bokar's teachings in the context of West African Islamic belief and practice, see L. Brenner, 'The Sufi Teaching of Tierno Bokar Salif Tall', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 8, 3 (1976), 208-26. As regards an authoritative biography of Tirno Bokar, see A. Haampâté Bâ, M. Cardaire, *Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1957).
[22] Ibid., p. 153.
[23] Ibid., p. 156.
[24] See G. Balandier, 'Un chef: Chaka', *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950), 159-166.
[25] *Chaka, une épopee bantoue* [*Chaka*, 1925] traduit du seSotho par V. Ellenberger (Paris: Gallimard, 1940). Notable English translations of Mofolo's book include *Chaka: An Historical Romance*, Translated from the original Sesuto by F.H. Dutton (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), and *Chaka*, New English Translation by Daniel P. Kunene (London Heinemann, 1981. For an insight into the historico-cultural context of Mofolo's writings and those of other African language writers of his generation and beyond, see Nhlanhla P. Maake's 'A Survey of Trends in the Development of African Language Literatures in South Africa: With Specific reference to Written Southern Sotho Literature 1900-1970s', *African Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1992), 157-188. For an analysis of the transpositions of the myth of Chaka by a number of Francophone African poets and playwrights including Léopold Sédar Senghor, Seydou Badian Kouyaté, Djibril Tamsir Niane and Tchicaya U Tamsi, see Bykahiudi C. Mabana, *Des transpositions francophoness du mythe de Chaka* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002).

to be the stuff of myth and legend that they have become. A military strategist and an empire builder par excellence, he reorganized and consolidated his hold on the territories he had gained before launching further wars of conquest. He constructed an imposing capital city, befitting his might and authority. To Balandier, Chaka had great capacity for organizing a military state, a point he felt would surprise those in Europe who as he puts it, 'faisant confiance aux idées communes, ne voient dans le monde noir qu'anarchie irréductible.[26] In other words, Chaka's military prowess and organizational ability proved Africa's detractors wrong. Of course Balandier notes that Chaka sacrificed human considerations in his overriding thirst for greatness and ultimate power. His reign thus became an inhuman one and his fall inevitable. He died without greatness, killed by his jealous brothers who capitalized on his reign of terror to eliminate him. Yet even in death Chaka seems to have triumphed over his rivals as he prophesied the coming of the white colonizer who would deny his rivals the very power for which they murdered him.

As for the post-1960 African situation, Sartre compares the stature and place in history of Lumumba to other revolutionary figures like Frantz Fanon and the hero of Cuban independence José Marti. Placing Lumumba in the context of the political events that immediately preceded and followed Congo's independence, Sartre calls him the person '[qui] *fut* le Congo au moment historique de la passation des pouvoirs'[27] and who became 'le premier martyr'[28] of that historic moment. Pushing his respect and admiration further, Sartre makes a parallel between Lumumba and one of the heroes and martyrs of the French Revolution itself: Robespierre. What struck Sartre was the purity of Lumumba's

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[26] Ibid., p. 165.
[27] *Situations V*, p. 245. The emphasis is Sartre's.
[28] Ibid., p. 253.

motives and his incorruptibility, virtues that ironically led to his demise just as Robespierre became a victim of the very revolution whose ideals and principles he had sought to promote with unflinching commitment.

Gide's hymn to African aesthetic products may be at a remove from Dumont's sensitivity to the plight of rural people in a newly independent Africa, or from Sartre's delineation of the chaos and violence that dogged the early stages of the said independent Africa. The fact remains that these diverse responses to no less diverse African historical and cultural situations constitute in my judgment an enabling vision of difference. It is a vision grounded in an ethic of a common and shared humanity, emphasizing and embracing in a gesture of cultural openness Africa's historical realities and cultural attributes as perceived by the authors concerned.

Section B

Fiction

The celebratory perspective on difference in the essays discussed above also characterises the novels examined in the thesis, with the exception of Conchon's *L'état sauvage*, which seems to move from one extreme to another: from an anti-colonialism and cultural self-criticism to a cultural self-reassertion. This section thus focuses on Le Clézio, Constant and Grainville, showing how their books reflect by way yet again of narrative viewpoint and system of characters their attempt to empathise with black African situations.

In a survey of post-War metropolitan French novels, Francine Dugaste-Portes makes a case for an increasingly positive image of black people. She argues that unlike what obtains in novels belonging to earlier periods, the essential humanity of black people is no longer called into question by the authors of her corpus, evidenced by the role of major protagonists those authors assign to their black characters.[29] I will adopt Dugastes-Portes's point to claim that the positive response to difference that she underlines applies (where Le Clézio, Constant and Grainville are concerned) not just to African characters but to a wider African world (historical, cultural or geographical) they imagine and in which the characters and situations they invent take on their significance. For clarity of exposition, I will discuss that positive response to difference in terms of three key points: the novelists' attitude to a certain idea of black Africa's remote past, their response to aspects of African cultural traditions, and their sense of the continent's physical environment.

6 Linking Black Africa and Ancient Egypt

If Monod, Balandier and Sartre focus on notable African figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Le Clézio moves much further back in time in his novel to reconnect with black Africa's remote past, echoing in his narrative the debate surrounding the origins of black African cultures and civilisations. In *Onitsha*, Geoffroy's quest for links between Africa's remote past and its immediate present brings to mind a scholarly

[29] Dugast-Portes, Francine, 'Héros noirs, romans blancs dans la littérature française métrpolitaine'. *Notre librairie*, no. 91 (1988), 19-35.

tradition which dates back to the *Voyages en Égypte et en Syrie*[30] of the eighteenth-century French scholar and traveller Volney. The tradition finds a particular resonance in the writings of the twentieth-century Senegalese historian and philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop drew upon anthropological, archaeological and linguistic evidence to argue for a black African origin and essence of ancient Egyptian civilisation. He articulated his views in a wide range of books and articles including *Nations nègres et cultures*,[31] *Antériorité des civilisations nègres, mythe ou vérité historique?*[32] and *Parenté génétique de l'égyptien pharaonique et des langues négro-africaines*.[33] In the politically charged context of the 1940s and 1950s marked by the struggle for political and cultural emancipation, Diop's scholarly endeavour called for and indeed embodied a non-Western-centred approach to history.

Such radical re-evaluations of Western assumptions about human development and progress find one of their most recent formulations in the works of the British scholar Martin Bernal. In his *Black Athena, The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*,[34] Bernal follows a line of argument akin in broad terms to Diop's. He stresses how Western racist misconceptions about history have led to the almost complete loss from

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[30] François-Constantin de Volney, *Voyages en Égypte et en Syrie* (Paris, Mouton, 1959).
[31] Cheikh Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1959).
[32] Cheikh anta Diop, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres, mythe ou vérité historique* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1967).
[33] Cheikh Anta Diop, *Parenté génétique de l'égyptien pharaonique et des langues négro-africaines* (Dakar, IFAN-NEA, 1977). A one-volume English translation of key sections of *Nations nègres et culture* and *Antériorité des civilisations nègres, mythe ou vérité historique?* is offered in Mercer Cook's *The African origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Chicago, Chicago Review Press Inc., 1974.
[34] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena, The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* , vol. I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985 (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1987). The book is in fact the first of four volumes Bernal planned to write to communicate the results of his revisionist historiographical and historical research project. The second is entitled: *Black Athena, The Afro-asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1991). It offers as the title explicitly shows, the archaeological and documentary evidence for the initial claims Bernal makes in the first volume. The third and fourth volumes are yet to be published. In them Bernal intends to examine respectively the linguistic and mythological evidence for his claims.

the early nineteenth century onwards of a model dating back to the ancient Greeks themselves, who located the root of their civilisation in the influence of Phoenician and Ancient Egyptian cultures. In place of that model has arisen a new paradigm, an Aryan one, which denies such Afroasiatic influence in order to affirm the Indo-European origins of Classical Greece.

The works of both Diop and Bernal have been the subject of much controversy. If their sympathisers view the books as much-needed exercises in historiographical and historical re-orientation and as validations of their own positions, their detractors protest against what they see as the ideological motivation behind their writings, accusing them of manipulating historical evidence and of sacrificing scholarly rigour to score political points. To take the case of Bernal, if Afrocentrists see his ideas as an authoritative endorsement of their own convictions by a respected white scholar[35], eminent classicists like Mary Lefkowitz strongly object to his motives and approach. To the classicists, Bernal's emphasis on the civilising influence on Greece of Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern cultures is an unjustified distortion of the historical evidence available.[36]

Perhaps more balanced assessments of Bernal's project are offered by the Congolese novelist and critic Mudimbe and the Dutch anthropologist Wim Van Binsbergen, both of whom question aspects of Bernal's methods and arguments and yet recognise the liberating thrust of his project. Mudimbe takes Bernal to task for failing to take due

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[35] For details of Bernal's own comments on the enthusiastic reception accorded his books by Afrocentrists, see Walter Cohen's 'An Interview with Martin Bernal', *Social Text*, 35 (1993), 1-24 (pp. 7-9). Of course Bernal made clear in the interview that while he agreed with Afrocentrists on a number of points, he was himself not an Afrocentrist as he did not believe that any one continent could lay exclusive claim to excellence and progress.

[36] See for instance M. Lefkowitz and G.M. Rogers (ed.), *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1996). See also M. Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse To Teach Myth As History* (New York, Basic Books, 1996). A sustained and wholesale onslaught on Afrocentrism is offered in Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (London/New York, Verso, 1998).

account of his predecessors' (in particular Diop's) contributions to a revisionist historiographical and historical endeavour that he argues they all share. Nevertheless, Mudimbe makes no secret of his conviction of the high value of Bernal's insights and of their far-reaching intercultural implications. He notes that Bernal's project 'will profoundly mark the next century's perception of the origins of Greek civilisation and the role of ancient Egypt'.[37] He argues that the project 'witnesses to a reversal of what made possible and founded the slave trade since the fifteenth century: imperialism and colonialism, with their triumph in the nineteenth century, and in this century so well exemplified in the 1930s and 1940s by Nazism, their natural product'.[38]

Van Binsbergen for his part considers the second volume of Bernal's book as a flagrant case of methodological sloppiness and questions the way a certain brand of Afrocentrism - a militant one - seems to have appropriated the work. That situation in his view leaves the author open to accusations of politicising and eroding scholarship. Additionally, Van Binsbergen refers to Bernal's project - its ambition and scope - as a Herculean task. He describes the scope as 'far too comprehensive for one person', and refers to 'its political, ideological and moral implications' as being 'far too complex' for one person to be trusted 'to thrash them all out'.[39] Yet Van Binsbergen accepts that for all the errors that have crept into Bernal's work, his 'scope of vision' cannot be questioned, as it derives from Bernal's realisation that 'inside as well as outside

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[37] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, (Bloomington, Indiana Press; London, J. Currey, 1994), p. 104.
[38] Ibid.
[39] *With Black Athena into the Third Millennium CE?* 1-17 (p.17), accessed 20 June 2004 at: http://www.geocities.com/warriorvase/with.htm

scholarship, creating a viable and acceptable alternative to Eurocentrism is the most important intellectual challenge of our time'.[40]

I am not suggesting that Le Clézio is versed in the works of Diop or Bernal, or that the publication of the second volume of *Black Athena* and of *Onitsha* in the same year was more than a coincidence. My point is that in the context of a scholarly tradition motivated by the need to counterbalance a dominant Eurocentric knowledge base in the interests of healthier cross-cultural relations, Le Clézio's treatment of links between black Africa and Ancient Egypt may provide an insight into his quest for an alternative, non-Eurocentric world view. That quest of his as we saw dates back to such early works as *Haï*, where he assumes a Panamanian Amerindian identity.[41]

Grafting onto his main narrative, set in colonial Africa, a second narrative that draws upon events reaching as far back as the fourth century AD, Le Clézio takes up and elaborates further this sense of a wider, multifaceted, transcultural self. This widening of the cultural self leads the author to place black Africa in a historical and cultural continuum which, while taking into account the episode of colonial servitude, both predates and postdates that episode. I noted that *Onitsha*'s anti-colonial and cultural self-critical thrust crystallises around the novel's symbolic enactment of the demise of imperial power (the disappearance of the battleship George Shotton into the muddy waters of the Niger), opening up by implication the possibility of the continent's future mastery of its own destiny.[42] What I will now examine is how the novel's treatment, through its double-structured narrative, of events relating to the sacking of the Cushite city of Meroe creates and reinforces a cross-cultural vision in

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[40] Ibid.
[41] See above, p. 111.
[42] See above, pp. 142-143.

which the colonial period counts for no more than an episode in the life of a continent judged in the final analysis to offer a rich, complex and alternative human reality.

This is not to say that *Onitsha* offers, like Diop's *Nations nègres et culture*, a detailed, painstaking reconstruction of aspects of black Africa's past. The book is first and foremost a work of fiction, and the nature and quality of the cross-cultural vision it elaborates lie in and are shaped by the workings of features peculiar to the book, in this case the fictional viewpoint and the system of fictional characters. This leads me back to Fintan's father's quest for traces of contact between black Africa and Ancient Egypt, in particular the queen of Meroe's trajectory and final destination upon fleeing her city. It is a quest that foregrounds an image of the continent that is at one level a corrective to the arrogance and cynicism of the likes of Simpson and Rodes. For all his mastery of many African languages, his owning a well equipped library on African cultures and his claim to Maou that it is he who has drawn her husband's attention to the possible connections between Aro Chuku and Meroe, Rodes does not believe in the reality of those connections, dismissing them as mere fantasy. It seems that Rodes's dismissal of the idea of a pre-colonial African civilisation as fanciful is in keeping with his role as an advocate of empire. What matter to him are the glories of the battleship George Shotton and the preservation of a socio-political status quo that allows him the illusion of power - lording it over his black servants Oya and Okawho and owning a library that provides the intellectual basis of that power. The point of Geoffroy's vision of black Africa is in one sense its reversal of Rodes's colonial, egocentric perspective on difference, in so far as it elaborates a picture of the continent

located both temporally and spatially outside the confines and constraints of the colonial closure embodied by Rodes and the Simpsons.

Significantly (and this raises the issue of the author's visible hand at work), the physical shape of the passages relating to Geoffroy's vision of Africa seems to reinforce that temporal and spatial distance. The passages stand out from the rest of the novel by the wider-than-usual left-hand margins that characterise the pages on which they are written. They in fact occupy about half of the space available on each of the pages concerned. They thus strike readers as narrow, vertical strips of texts situated on the right hand side of the pages. The effect created is one of textual distancing: a parenthesis that disrupts the normal flow of passages on the pages of the novel, enabling Le Clézio to accentuate those aspects of African history or culture that he considers distinctive.

The ancient city of Meroe, situated on the banks of the river Nile and between present-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan, flourished for several centuries. However, it remains to this day an archaeological mystery: the lives and achievements of its inhabitants are yet to be fully understood.[43] This is because their language and writing though bearing resemblances to the Egyptian hieroglyphics and thus suggesting Egyptian influence and control, is still a mystery.[44] What is known, gleaned from the observations of ancient Greek and Roman travellers like Herodotus, Pliny and Strabo and from archaeological explorations undertaken in more recent times, points to a civilisation that was the envy of its neighbours and where women

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[43] See Chris Shaughnessy's brief comments on the ancient city and its civilisation in 'Meroe', accessed 10 July 2004, at: <http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/africa/meroe.html>.

[44] Ibid. Further reference to problems relating to decoding the Meroitic language and writing system is found in J. Leclant's 'The empire of Kush: Napata and Meroe', in G. Mokhtar (ed.), *A General History of Africa*, Vol. II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa (Paris, UNESCO, 1981), 278-97(pp. 288-89).

played a prominent role in government.[45] The reasons for Meroe's decline are so far speculative in nature, but a theory generally held is that in the second half of the fourth century AD, it was invaded by the neighbouring kingdom of Axum.[46] What Le Clézio does is to rework, through his protagonist Geoffroy's obsession with Africa, a possible consequence of that invasion, namely the flight of the city's inhabitants under the guidance of their queen. Le Clézio seems to draw here on the theory that at the fall of Meroe, the Cushite royal family fled westwards carrying with them the essence of a civilisation that later impacted on inner Africa.[47]

The queen who fascinates Geoffroy appears as Amanirenas. This was in fact the personal name of one of the many Meroitic female rulers known as Candaces and whose resistance to the Roman army has earned a place in history.[48] One source for Le Clézio is the figure of a Candace described by the Ancient Roman historian and geographer Strabo, born in 64 BC. In his description of the world as it was known in his time, Strabo mentions such places as Cush situated in a region then known as Ethiopia. Relating the clashes between the Romans and the Ethiopians, Strabo spoke of a certain 'Queen Candacê, who was ruler of the Aethiopians in my time - a

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[45] For detailed analyses of various aspects of the Meroitic civilization, see again G. Mokhtar (ed.), *A General History of Africa*, Vol. II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa (Paris UNESCO, 1981), 245-325. See also P. L. Shinnie's extensive researches on Nubian history and culture. His writings include *Meroe, A civilization of the Sudan* (New York and Washington, Frederick A. Praeger, inc., 1967) and *Ancient Nubia*, (London, Kegan Paul International, 1996).

[46] See again Shaughnessy's comments, accessed 10 July 2004, at: http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/africa/meroe.html [accessed 10 July 2004]

[47] For comments relating to possible Meroitic influences on inner Africa, see J. Leclant's 'The empire of Kush: Napata and Meroe', in *A General History of Africa*, Vol. II, 278-97(p. 293).

[48] For an insight into the status and role of the Candaces of Meroe, see A. A. Hakem's 'The civilization of Napata and Meroe', in *A General History of Africa, II, Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, ed. by G. Mokhtar (Paris, Unesco; London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd; Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981), 298-325 (pp. 302-303).

masculine sort of woman, and blind in one eye'.[49] Le Clézio maintains these attributes in his novel where the queen features as: 'la reine noire de Meroë, borgne et forte comme un homme, qui commandait aux troupes contre César et qui conquérait l'île Eléphantine. Strabo l'appelait ainsi [Candace, that is], mais son vrai nom était Amanirenas'.[50] As can be seen, Le Clézio makes no secret of his source. But he goes further than Strabo: by making Amanirenas the object of Geoffroy's passionate quest, he celebrates a figure that he calls elsewhere in his text 'la reine noire, la dernière représentante d'Osiris, la dernière descendante des Pharaons'.[51] The words 'reine noire' denote no doubt the Queen's racial attributes, echoing in this Cheikh Anta Diop's contention that anthropologically (as indeed archaeologically and linguistically) the civilization of ancient Egypt was essentially Negroid in origin. The terms 'dernière représentante d'Osiris' and 'dernière descendante des Pharaons' refer for their part to the Queen's powers in both the secular and spiritual realms, stressing the political, cultural and spiritual ties between Ancient Egypt and the rest of Africa.

At the heart of this celebratory cross-cultural perspective is the image of a ruler whose extraordinary qualities of leadership bring to mind the stature and achievements of Biblical figures like Moses. Indeed Amanirenas as imagined by Geoffroy is a mythical figure, used here in the sense of what Fredrik Westerlund regards as a fundamental attribute of Le Clézio's writings, namely his interest in and use of 'la mythologie ancienne dont les thèmes surgissent partout dans ses textes'.[52] Westerlund mentions the novel *Le déluge* which he describes as having 'emprunté son titre à *la*

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[49] Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, vol. 8, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1930), p. 139.
[50] *Onitsha*, p. 143.
[51] Ibid., p. 134.
[52] See F. Westerlund, 'Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio' 1-14 (p.7), accessed 5 October 2004, at: <http://www.multi.fi/~fredw/>

Bible dans un scénario apocalyptique, où le protagoniste suit la démarche d'un Oedipe moderne'.[53] He also mentions such biblical and Classical mythological figures as David, Narcissus, Ariadne, Icarius or Jason, all of whom Le Clézio has according to him reworked for his own needs. Westerlund is here echoing Jennifer Waelti-Walters, who was the first to establish the mythopoetic trope as a key element in Le Clézio's writing. Waelti-Walters focuses on the Greek myth of Icarus, showing this to be a structuring motif in as she puts it, 'les écrits hétéroclites de l'auteur au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années'.[54] I would suggest that with Amanirenas Le Clézio broadens the base of the ancient myths and legends he reworks in his writings. Like Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land, Amanirenas acts under divine guidance and inspiration. A visionary, she alone knows her destiny and that of her people whom she leads by the force of events into what the narrator admiringly calls 'la plus grande aventure qu'il y ait eu sur terre'.[55] She sets about her purpose with unshakable commitment, attaining through the epic scale of her venture the stature of a superhuman being: a truly mythical figure embodying the founding moments of a people. Of course like Moses, Amanirenas dies before reaching the Promised Land, inner Africa in this case. Yet her exceptional personality and visionary powers live on in the person of her daughter Arsinoe who presides over her people's long, risk-laden migratory march across a continent and brings it to a successful close.

The mythical and indeed universal thrust of the journey from Meroe to inner Africa is reinforced by the novel's poetic qualities. In her perceptive reading of *Onitsha*,

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[53] Ibid..
[54] J. Waelti-Walters, *Icare ou l'évasion impossible: étude psycho-mythique de l'oeuvre de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Sherbrooke, Editions Naaman, 1981), pp. 9-10.
[55] *Onitsha*., p. 143.

Judith Ohlmann calls the work 'une mosaïque de genres littéraires où se croisent poésie, mythologie et parabole',[56] and specifies the mythical and universal dimension of the passages dealing with the migration from Meroe in these terms: 'Les temps de la narration sont ici différents du reste du roman. Le présent domine, comme si cette mythologie restait actuelle, éternelle'.[57] Additionally, she calls the novel 'un texte qui offre un style soigneusement travaillé, parsemé de métaphores qui lui donnent un ton poétique'.[58] The point here is that the passages centred on the journey from Meroe, told in the voice of the anonymous narrator and largely reflecting Geoffroy's passion for Africa, foreground a cross-cultural vision that is characterised by a fusion of temporal and spatial horizons, and lead to the transmutation of an episode from Africa's past into a timeless, universal reality. Perhaps nowhere is that fusion of time and space more evident than in the passages that detail the final moments of the long journey across the continent. The Nile is transfigured into the Niger, seen as 'un fleuve immense',[59] and likened to 'un dragon de métal'[60] in the Savannah. Its discovery by the descendants of Amanirenas marks the end of their ordeal and a new beginning for the community. In scenes cast in a decidedly epic mode, they sail the ever-widening Niger. And guided by their queen Arsinoe and her attendant and priest Geberatu, they found their capital, the new Meroe, on one of the many islands that dot the river. The island features as 'l'île au milieu du fleuve, couverte de roseaux, pareille à un grand radeau'.[61] It is the birthplace of Arsinoe's daughter who will be

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[56] J. Ohlmann, 'Discours de Le Clézio dans *Onitsha*: aspects d'une écriture hétéroclite', *Tropos*, 26 (2002), 48-64 (p. 48).
[57] Ibid., p. 49.
[58] Ibid., p. 48.
[59] *Onitsha*, p. 185.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., p. 191.

called after her grandmother Amanirenas. She is the fruit of the union between queen and priest and a symbol of their Egyptian past and of their new 'West African' home. But if the past is a vital aspect of their lives, it is nevertheless toned down by the demands of the present. Heiress to a Nilotic civilisation, young Amanirenas is none the less very much a daughter of the Niger. She is the first queen of the new-found river, having been born, as the narrator puts it,

> pour que l'île [her birthplace] devienne la métropole d'un nouveau monde, pour que tous les peuples de la forêt et du désert s'unissent sous la loi du ciel. Mais déjà son nom n'est plus dans cette langue lointaine, brûlée et déchirée par la traversée du désert. Son nom est dans la langue du fleuve, elle s'appelle Oya, elle est le corps même du fleuve, l'épouse de Shango. Elle est Yemoja, la force de l'eau, la fille d'Obatala Sibu et d'Odudua Osiris. Les peuples noirs d'Osimiris se sont alliés aux gens de Meroë. Ils ont apporté les graines, les fruits, les poissons, les bois précieux, le miel sauvage, les peaux de léopard et les dents d'éléphant. Les gens de Méroë ont donné leur magie, leur science. Le secret des métaux, la fabrication des pots, la médecine, la connaissance des astres. Ils ont donné les secrets du monde des morts. Et le signe sacré du soleil et de la lune et des ailes et de la queue du faucon sont gravés sur les visages des enfants premiers-nés.[62]

This is clearly a celebration of what is imagined as material, intellectual and spiritual interaction among various African peoples. It is a picture of fruitful, pre-colonial, inter-African encounters and interpenetrations. Here, various histories, geographies, peoples, languages and mythologies converge and commingle in a spirit of reciprocity and interdependence, in contradistinction to the politically oppressive order instituted by European rule. Geoffroy's 'West African Meroe' is indeed a cultural melting pot characterised above all by a panoply of gods and goddesses and a whole range of religious symbols and practices drawn from Ancient Egypt and from the spiritual worlds of the Yoruba and the Igbo of contemporary Nigeria. Oya, Shango, Yemoja, Obatala and Odudua are the names of important deities in the Yoruba religious or

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[62] Ibid., pp. 192-193.

spiritual system, while Osiris refers to the ancient Egyptian god of the dead. The name Odudua Osiris seems to mark, from Geoffroy's perspective, the integration of the two spiritual systems.

This integration of spiritual systems is further reflected - visually - in the front cover design of Gallimard's 1991 edition of *Onitsha*. The cover carries an illustration by the renowned cartoonist and illustrator Edmond Baudoin ,[63] featuring a human face that bears scars akin to tribal marks - a cultural practice still found in many societies in contemporary Africa. But the scars are not just tribal marks: they are the visual rendition of spiritual/religious symbols and practices dating back presumably to Ancient Egypt and which are described in the passage cited above as the 'signe sacré du soleil et de la lune et des ailes et de la queue du faucon [...] gravés sur les visages des enfants premiers-nés'. The scars in fact lead us to a specific cultural and religious practice among the Umundri group of Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, which the renowned South African-born British scholar Jeffreys researched and wrote on for several decades. Significantly, Le Clézio's knowledge of Jeffrey's work is underscored in his dedicatory statement, which reads: 'à la mémoire de M. D. W. Jeffreys'.[64] Jeffreys served as a colonial administrative officer in Nigeria and the British Cameroons, rising to the position of judge. At some point, he was assigned by the colonial government to investigate aspects of Igbo traditional religious beliefs, and his writings on these became the substance of his doctoral thesis.[65] Given the

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[63] In 1989 Baudoin had provided an illustration for Futuropolis-Gallimard for Le Clézio's very first novel *Le procès-verbal* published in 1963. Two years younger than Le Clézio, Baudoin is like the novelist a native of Nice, where he was born in 1942. For an insight into Baudoin's creative practice, see Philippe Sohet, *Entretiens avec Edmond Baudoin* (St Egrève, éd. Mosquito, 2001).

[64] *Onitsha*, p. 9.

[65] See M. D. W. Jeffreys, 'The divine Umundri kings of Igboland', unpublished Thesis (Ph.D.) -- University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1934.

similarity in their names, it is obvious that Le Clézio's protagonist Geoffroy represents an acknowledgement in fictional terms of his intellectual indebtedness to the British scholar. Indeed the practice of facial scarification is the subject of an article by Jeffreys in which he describes the social and cultural context of the practice, the actual process of scarification itself, and its spiritual significance. The scars are a mark of rank, of distinction and privilege. They make up the *itsi* sign, the prerogative of the sons of title holders, marking them out as spiritual beings, not to be molested or assigned to any menial task. These men of distinction are the divine Umundri, meaning the children of Ndri, a 'Sky-Being' who partakes of the nature of Chuku, the Sky-God and Supreme Being of the Igbo spiritual Pantheon and who seems to have affinities with the Ancient Egyptian Sun-God Shu. The *itsi* sign dates back to ancient times, in particular to the winged solar disc which the Hittites of the Ancient Near East had apparently adopted from Ancient Egypt and which by implication had found its way over time to West Africa.[66]

Le Clézio's intermingling of various spiritual systems across time and space may be at some remove from the realities that characterize the various African peoples whose lives and histories he draws upon in *Onitsha*. But perhaps as a work of fiction, the book need not be assessed in terms of the extent to which it reproduces in literal terms the African situations it describes. Its true force lies in the liberty it takes with the material it works with. Its account of black Africa is a muti-faceted one. In it, fact, fiction, myth, legend, history and geography intertwine and interpenetrate, culminating

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[66] For similarities between Le Clézio's text and Jeffrey's discussion of facial scarification and other possible Ancient Egyptian spiritual influences, see *Onitsha*, pp. 99-103; pp. 137-141, and 'The Winged Solar Disk or Ibo ItSi Facial Scarification', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 21, 2 (1951), 93-111.

in a sustained attempt at embracing a hitherto misunderstood difference. It is in any case certainly a welcome change from the arrogant, egocentric and ultimately inhuman attitude of people like Rodes and Simpson to the black African world they inhabit.

7. African Cultural Forms and Practices

In the essays of Gide, Griaule and Sartre, we saw that each writer stresses the revitalising influence of African cultural forms, expressions and practices on European aesthetic sensibilities. Gide hailed the enthusiastic reception of African cultural products and jazz music in Paris. Sartre saw in African and Caribbean poetry the source of a much needed input into an otherwise worn out French language and culture. Griaule for his part saw the traditions and customs of the Dogon of Mali as offering new approaches to astrology. Although produced nearly a half century after the essays of Gide and Sartre, Le Clézio's *Onitsha* equally conveys this sense of African cultural formal specificity and influence; a sense it shares with Constant's *Ouregano*.

A key instance of this is the two authors' handling of the issue of African oral literature. For the Nigerian critic Isidore Okpewho, oral literature is basically 'literature delivered by word of mouth'.[67] Other appellations Okpewho identifies for the same literary phenomenon include 'orature', 'traditional literature' and' folk literature'. The term orature as he points out, emphasises the oral character of the literature in question. 'Traditional literature' for its part stresses that the literature

[67] I. Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 3.

originates from the past and is transmitted from one generation to another. 'Folk literature' on the other hand tends to identify the creators of the literature as folk, meaning ordinary, uneducated people found in villages or rural communities. Of course Okpewho hastens to add that in recent times the collection of oral literature has occurred in important African urban communities as well, involving people who have benefited at the very least from primary school education. But whichever of these appellations one finally adopts, the point to remember is that oral literary forms are often seen to be integral to the continent's cultural identity. They are considered in criticisms of modern African literary texts as markers of the enduring impact of the continent's cultural heritage and as proof that in the words of Okpewho, 'Africa has had, since time immemorial, traditions that should be respected and a culture to be proud of'.[68]

Okpewho's words recall those of Hampâté Bâ that in Africa 'quand un vieillard meurt c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle'.[69] Hampâté Bâ was speaking in reaction to a certain Western conception of culture, which tended to equate culture with writing, suggesting that the absence of writing meant the absence of culture. Hampâté Bâ's point was that oral traditions were worthy historical sources, as valuable and dependable as written documents, in any case essential in understanding Africa's past. He moreover felt that oral traditions offered a certain human dimension that Western technical and technological know-how and ascendancy threatened to erase.

This centrality accorded to orality in African cultural expression was again thrown into relief recently by the critic Madeleine Borgomano in a tribute to the late Ivorian

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[68] Ibid., p. 293.
[69] A. H. Bâ, *Aspects de la civilisation africaine: personne, culture, religion* (Paris, Présence africaine, 1972), p. 21.

novelist Ahmadou Kourouma, known for his linguistic inventiveness. Borgomano sees Kourouma's writing as being '[l']élaboration d'un langage métis fictif et par là même significatif, enfant heureux du mariage entre la langue française et le malinké'.[70] She then goes on to quote Kourouma himself on his aesthetic practice:

> Je n'avais pas le respect du français qu'ont ceux qui ont une formation classique [...] Ce qui m'a conduit à rechercher la structure du malinké, à reproduire sa dimension orale, à tenter d'épouser la démarche de la pensée malinké dans sa manière d'appréhender le vécu.[71]

Now I am not suggesting by any means that Le Clézio and Constant should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which their texts relate to and project aspects of African oral culture. The two authors are not Africans and their knowledge of African languages, if any, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be compared to Kourouma's mastery of his mother tongue. And when Kourouma spoke of those who unlike him were trained in the humanities (he was an actuary by profession), he was referring to other Francophone African writers, not to white, Metropolitan French authors. Yet there is no denying that both Constant and Le Clézio display an awareness of African oral culture, aspects of which impinge on their narratives. I read this as yet another instance of their attempt to enter empathetically into black African situations.

As we saw, Le Clézio uses the geographer Strabo as a point of departure for his Meroitic queen Amanirenas, whom he then raises to the stature of myth. Elsewhere in

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[70] M. Borgomano, 'Ecrire, c'est répondre à un défi', *Notre Librairie*, 155-156 (juillet-décembre 2004), 120-127, (p. 125).

[71] Ibid. For an overview of Kourouma's life and writings, see P. Corcoran, 'Ahmadou Kourouma, 1927-2003', *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 2.1 (2004), 87-96. For close analyses of his creative, indeed subversive use of French, see M. Gassama, *La langue d'Ahmadou Kourouma* (Paris, Karthala, 1995) and S. A. Konaté, 'Le "lèse-français" d'Ahmadou Kourouma', *Africultures*, 4 Janvier 2006, accessed 5 February 2006, at: http://www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=articles_lecteurs.

the text, he moves beyond mythologizing African historical figures to enter into the realm of African creation myths proper. One consequence of his interest in the connections between the Ancient Egyptian and Igbo spiritual worlds is felt at the level of the narrative procedures he uses. In portraying Geoffroy's fascination with the Umundri, the high-ranking, privileged bearers of the *itsi* sign, he weaves into his narrative passages relating to Igbo oral tales of creation and beginnings. Like the passages featuring Amanirenas's and her descendants' epic venture into inner Africa, the passages inspired by Igbo creation myths stand out in the novel as vertical strips of text with copious margins to the left.

At the time of writing *Onitsha* Le Clézio may or may not have known Hampâté Bâ's position on the importance of oral traditions in Africa. His book at any rate conveys a clear sense of oral traditions being a store of knowledge and wisdom in traditional African societies. Geoffroy's knowledge of the spiritual world of the Umundri results from an encounter with an elderly African called Moïses. Moïses is said to have a command of many local languages. He introduces Geoffroy to the Umundri myth of creation. According to that myth as he tells it, the earth was a pristine swamp. The sun-God Chuku's first messengers on earth were a couple: Eri and his wife Namaku, both fed directly by the Supreme Being himself. Eri's brother Ndri remained on an anti-hill waiting for the water to recede. Chuku ordered a blacksmith from Awka to dry up the land. Eri then died and Chuku stopped sending down food. Famine raged and people had only earth and grass to eat. Ndri pleaded with Chuku for help. Chuku asked him to obey him without thinking, commanding him to kill his son and daughter as an offering. Terrified, Ndri at first refused. Chuku had the faces of the children

marked with the *itsi* sign and again ordered Ndri to kill them. Ndri now obeyed and buried the children in two separates graves. Afterwards, young tendrils burst forth from the graves, the son's ultimately yielding a yam and the daughter's a koko. These are tubers that are a principal staple in many places in West Africa. In the context of the myth, they are the first staple food on earth and their value lies in the supreme sacrifice paid by the children of Ndri. As Moises puts it, the *itsi* sign which the children of Ndri were the first to bear, became mandatory for future generations of first-born children. It kept alive the memory of two children who died in order that others might live.

The point of the myth is clear: it registers a vision of humanity shaped by the will of an all-powerful Creator God who tests the faith of its creatures in the severest of ways, rewarding those who obey him. In this sense, one is reminded of the story of Abraham/Ibrahim and Isaac/Ishmael in the Bible or the Koran, suggesting a common mythological thread among varying spiritual systems. What is worth stressing is the way the myth features within the structure of the text. This brings me to consider the contrasting positions of Moïses and Geoffroy. Moïses is the well-informed, versatile local linguist and teacher while Geoffroy is the foreign student and listener. In the telling of the myth, the pervasive voice of the anonymous narrator gives way if momentarily to Moïses's, a strategy that bestows on the text the character of an oral tale. Geoffroy takes in the information Moïses provides and tries to make sense of it. Moïses's intervention is in direct speech while Geoffroy's reaction is conveyed in reported speech, befitting their respective positions as giver and receiver of African knowledge and wisdom. It is not the case that both teller and listener are equal

participants in the reworking of a myth drawn from the traditions of a shared cultural community.

This hierarchization of the positions of teller and listener or of teacher and learner is extended to the rendition of another myth of origins, concerning this time Ginuwa, a legendary prince of the ancient kingdom of Benin. Benin was an extensive empire that flourished from the 14th century to the dawn of European conquest and rule in the 19th century. It was a case of a home-grown pre-colonial African success story: its vast territory, great wealth, impressive political, social and military organisation, and sophisticated cultural life and artistic products forced the admiration of all those including early European explorers who came into contact with it. In speaking about Benin and its legendary prince, the knowledgeable Moïses shifts from the Igbo spiritual world of Chuku, Eri, Namaku and Ndri to a wider cultural and spiritual environment that includes ethnic communities of the Niger delta, a region that was at the heart of ancient kingdom of Benin. The rulers of Benin were called Oba, and Moïses's tale revolves in legendary terms round a strategy put in place by one such ruler to protect his son and successor Ginuwa from the jealousies and machinations of his rivals, the tribal chiefs of Benin. Knowing that upon his death the chiefs will assassinate his son to usurp the throne, he has a casket built, and locks up in it seventy-two children chosen from the families of his rivals. He then puts his son on board, providing him with food and a magic wand. He places the casket at the mouth of a river for it to drift into the sea. The casket stays adrift for many days before reaching land. When it finally does so, Ginuwa walks out triumphantly, accompanied by the seventy-two children.

The point here is that capitalising on the magic wand and the provisions given him by his wise father, Ginuwa makes the best of a dangerous situation and lays the foundation of his authority over his peers and potential rivals for power. The theme of rivalry and struggle for political power testifies to the story's universal relevance and applicability, but what I will again stress is Moïses' role as an informed channel of local lore and history, a living archive and a voice of wisdom that is very much in keeping with Hampâta Bâ's equation of old age with wisdom in the traditional African context.

Constant's handling of aspects of African cultural forms and practices in *Ouregano* shapes into the same positive apprehension of difference that I have identified in Le Clézio's *Onitsha*. Echoing Le Clézio, the protagonist through whom such celebratory apprehension of difference is mediated in Constant is called Moïse, in this case her heroine Tiffany's African playmate. But if Le Clézio's Moïses is presented as a wise, knowledgeable old man, Constant's Moïse is like his white playmate, a child. Yet, possessed of a quick, active and inventive mind, he is quite knowledgeable about his surroundings and in fact initiates Tiffany into their secrets. It is through him that Tiffany apprehends elements of African cultural traditions. But Tiffany's initiation into African cultural traditions is preceded by Moïse's own initiation into aspects of western literary traditions. Like Tiffany, Moïse is a pupil of the colonial school run by Madame Refons. In their secret meetings, Tiffany figures as an extension of those literary traditions. She gives Moïse dictation exercises of her own devising and more importantly, she shares with him the pleasures of reading abridged and simplified versions of classics of French literature: the plays of Corneille, Racine and Molière.

Like Tiffany Moïse enjoys the stories and scenes featured in the texts and identifies with the heroes or heroines (including gods and goddesses drawn from Greek and Roman antiquity and from the Bible). Nevertheless, he raises issues that seem to emphasise the quintessential remoteness of the heroes and heroines in question. He asks: 'Pourquoi étaient-ils habillés comme ça? Où habitaient-ils vraiment? Où étaient-ils maintenant?'[72] Tiffany is at a loss here. Her only comment is that it was all a long time ago. In no mood to accept that for an answer, Moïse wants to know in particular what role Jesus played in it all: 'Quelle place tenait le Fils de Dieu parmi ces dieux, tous fils et pères de dieux?'[73] He feels that Tiffany ought to have answers to these questions as the gods and goddesses were, like her, white. It would seem that Moïse expects to find in the legends and plays he reads the stuff of history, of a lived experience, related somehow to the concrete realities of life as lived in the culture from which the legend and plays emanate.

While Tiffany considers the worlds depicted by Corneille, Racine and Molière to belong to a bygone era, Moïse as interpreter of African culture introduces her to a world by way of tales in which foundational myths and lived, historical experience overlap and intertwine. Thus, his village, as the narrator informs us, is also that of his ancestors: 'pas seulement celui du père de son père, mais plus loin encore celui du père du père de son père et du père de ce père-là, presque jusqu'au temps de l'araignée et de la hyène quand les animaux parlaient.'[74] The reference to animals with human attributes, in particular the spider and the hyena, echoes the world of African folk tales; but it is a world that dates back to time immemorial and possesses features that

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[72] *Ouregano*, p. 169.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., p. 170.

speak to the present. The mud huts and their thatched roofs in the tales are the same as those he sees around her. She finds this point fascinating as it makes her wonder whether the huts were in fact much more solid and durable than the fortified castles depicted in history books.

Placing himself at the centre of events relating to his village from its origins to its present, Moïse provides a narrative of trials and tribulations, of displacements and uncertainties, as generations after generations of his forebears sought to circumvent the ravages of epidemics and other natural disasters by relocating their communities from one point to another and then back to the initial location. There is a grim circularity to the process of displacement and relocation, pointing to what might be called the fundamental tragedy that is at the heart of human affairs. The narrator puts this point across in these terms: 'l'abandon successif de tout ce qui faisait leur histoire n'avait servi à rien, sinon à démontrer la permanence du malheur et la faiblesse des efforts humains'.[75]

It would seem that what is required in the face of the permanence of evil is a hero: a man of superior intellect or magical powers capable of containing the evil within bounds and freeing his community from its emasculating hold. Moïse readily identifies himself as such a hero and informs Tiffany of the extraordinary events that attended his birth. His account of his birth is one in which

> entraient tour à tour les predictions, la conjonction d'une lune à cinq branches et d'un baobab qui s's'était ouvert par le milieu, d'un cri remarquable. Toute la nuit de sa naissance, pendant que sa mère était soutenue par les matrones, les signes prodigieux n'avaient cessé de tomber sur le village dans un enchevêtrement inouï . comme une pluie d'étoiles sous l'orage.[76]

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[75] Ibid., p. 171.
[76] Ibid.

The reader is of course aware of the underlying irony of Moïse's view of himself as a redeemer, for he not only ends up betraying Tiffany by divulging to her parents and the other European adults her hiding place (she absconds from home for several days) but becomes at the close of the novel a willing agent of the colonial authorities. Yet, Moïse's self-styled extraordinary birth has this function: its inscription of the supernatural in human affairs shows Constant's grasp of aspects of oral epics from Africa. As Stephen Belcher put it, the 'epic is an extended historical narrative, delivered in public performance, most often with musical accompaniment by a specialized performer.'[77] In the African context an epic has as it subject matter a lived, historical experience. That experience is however mediated through an accomplished storyteller or griot, whose musical or poetic gifts lend his narrative the qualities of a work of art. There are of course no griots in *Ouregano* and Moïse is no epic hero, being a child growing up in a stratified colonial society where people of his colour are disadvantaged. Yet his description of his birth in heroic and supernatural terms has as its subtext a narrative tradition exemplified by works like Niane's *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue*.[78] This book deals with Soundjata, a key African figure and founder of the ancient kingdom of Mali; its appeal lies, in part at least, in the griot's gripping account of the extraordinary circumstances attending the hero's birth, upbringing and rise to power.

In addition to African oral culture, Constant draws on aspects of traditional African life that suggest that the essence of Africa as she conceives it, lies in that continent's potential to overturn its condition of servitude. This point is dealt with symbolically in the novel

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[77] Stephen Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xiv. See also John William Johnson, Thomas A. Hale, and Stephen Belcher (ed.), *Oral Epics fom Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997).
[78] D. T. Niane, *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue* (Paris, Présence africaine, 1960).

and leads us to the great fire episode where the natives of Ouregano in performing their annual hunting rites, set alight large stretches of forested land. The episode is presented mainly from the narrator's perspective, and its force lies in African and European differing reactions to the event. The fire has a liberating effect on the Africans, allowing them to hunt down in the space of a single night all the game that had eluded them in the course of the year and to hold in check the encroaching vegetation. More importantly, their skill in handling the fire, in forcing it to follow a pre-determined trajectory, carries a message tinged with political overtones. Their supremacy over the fire transforms their situation of victims into that of victors. The fire is theirs and symbolises their power: they know it, control it, and feel no fear. Indeed, as the narrator has it, 'le feu qui était passé cette nuit était le feu des hommes de l'Afrique. Seuls ceux qui n'avaient jamais dominé le feu avaient eu peur'.[79]

The narrator's celebratory view of the ceremony is heightened by Tiffany's response to the event. Like the Africans, she relishes the fire, seeing it as a force of good, a source of excitement. She feels the exhilarating effects of 'le miracle de ce feu qui avait jailli sans que rien l'annonçât, comme un Noël que personne n'aurait attendu, le premier Noël, une fête qui ne serait pas commémoration, un événement et non une célébration'.[80] The reaction of Tiffany's parents and the other European adults to the fire is by contrast one of deep anxiety and fear. For a moment they feel that all is over and that it is time to leave. The narrator sums up this reversal of roles between the rulers and those they rule in these terms:

> Alors que les hommes qui dirigeaient les hommes s'inquiétaient, se troublaient, ramassaient leurs biens, prêts à capituler, les hommes qui commandaient au feu les

[79] *Ouregano*, pp. 177-78.
[80] Ibid., p. 178.

épargnaient tous selon une tactique qui n'était plus celle du chasseur mais celle du guerrier en sa clémence.[81]

The magnanimity of those who command the fire, seen in their steering it away from the homes of their frightened white masters, is indeed proof of their moral superiority and profound humanity.

8. Geopoetical Celebration of Difference

Black Africa's pre-colonial past and its cultural traditions and practices thus form the basis of Le Clézio's and Constant's attempt to enter empathetically into African situations. In the case of Grainville, in particular his *Les flamboyants*, such a cross-cultural endeavour becomes a celebratory response to the continent's physical attributes. This is not to say that Le Clézio and Constant do not pay attention to these attributes, but it is in Grainville's *Les flamboyants* that the evocation of the natural world and of its salutary possibilities for man is most striking.

When asked about the various literary influences that have shaped his writing, Grainville mentions in particular *Madame Bovary*, but also Latin American literature and Francophone African literature, citing Kourouma and his *Les Soleils des independances*. Another influence he mentions and which is pertinent to this discussion is what he refers to as 'l'importance de la terre, de la nature, du cosmos'.[82] Here he emphasises the centrality in his writings of nature, or rather, the natural world.

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[81] Ibid.
[82] G. Cherel, 'Patrick Grainville "Le roman baroque, c'est aller à l'excès, le mélange des genres, l'horreu du vide"', accessed 5 June 2003, at: <http://www.regards.fr/archives/1998/199807/199807invo1.html>.

This is a world possessed of a revitalizing, pristine, rural quality, in contradistinction to a spiritually alienating, materially obsessed, urbanised environment.

Thus at the core of *Les flamboyants*, to borrow a very useful phrase from Peter Urpeth,'beats an ecological spirit'.[83] Urpeth is speaking of the works of the distinguished Scottish poet, critic and academic Kenneth White, whose writings display according to him, a spirit that 'operates in stark contrast to the harshly urban thought of his one-time contemporaries in the Paris universities'.[84] Urpeth points out however that while opposing White in these terms to his Parisian contemporaries is a tempting thing to do, it might distract attention from what he considers to be the Scottish critic's central subject, namely 'the "self", and kind of self-awareness, or awareness of "Self" in relation to the world'.[85] He then draws attention to White's own understanding of the self as subject. To White, the self as subject does not derive from subjectivity, that romantic self-idealization through which a writer reflects himself in nature. It is rather 'work[ing] on myself at the

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[83] See Peter Urpeth's report of an interview he had with Kenneth White in December 2003 at: http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/dec03_interview1c.htm [accesses 10 June 2006].

[84] Ibid. It should be noted that White held the Chair of Twentieth Century Poetics at the Sorbonne from 1983 to 1996 and is the founder-president of the International Institute of Geopoetics. He founded the institute in 1989. For details relating to the aims, scope, activities and membership of the institute, see http://www.geopoetique.net/archipel_fr/index.html [accessed 15 May 2006]. The institute has over the years grown from strength to strength leading to the creation of regional centres in his native Scotland and in Canada, Switzerland, New Caledonia and Reunion. Significantly, White was awarded in Paris in the summer of 2004 the Edouard Glissant Prize, in recognition of what was described as his openness to the cultures of the world. He was the first recipient of a fellowship set up by Hi~Arts, the arts development agency of the Highland and Islands of Scotland.The fellowship enabled him to deliver at the end of October 2005 three lectures on the geopoetical theme. Recordings of the lectures can be downloaded via http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/geopoetics_project.html [accessed 10 June 2006]. Books by White where issues of cultural openness and diversity and of man's relationahip with the natural world include *Les Finisterres de l'esprit: Rimbaud, Segalen et moi-même: essais*, Éd. du Scorff, 1998; *Opem Worlds: Collected Poems*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 2003; *The Wanderer and His Charts*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 2004; and *Across the Territories*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 2004. For an overview of the general field of ecocriticism and environmental ethics to which White's geopoetics project ultimately belongs, see for instance Greg Garrard *Ecocriticism,* London, (Routledge, 2004) and Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism", *PMLA*, 21.2 (2006), 503-516.

[85] Ibid.

same time as I am trying to look outside. That is why I went into Zen Buddhism. That is why I went into all kinds of different ways of working on "me". In biology these days they speak of the human being as being an "open system". So let us say I am trying to live "open being"'.[86] White then notes in greater detail:

> This 'open being' feels itself in concordance with and in consonance with, and in deep contact with, the wind blowing in the trees, the waves breaking on the shore, the plankton swimming in the sea. For me, when you are open you're living a complete world, and that is a desperate need of all of us. A desperate need for many of us that is so deep, a need that sometimes we don't or can't think about it. When we do experience it, we forget it, and get the hell back into the 'real world'. But what we call the real world is in fact a small, narrow caricature of a world.[87]

White's claim that the notion of living open being revolves round a joyous identification with and celebration of difference and diversity, resulting in the conjoining of the human and natural realms, reminds readers of the views of the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels as elaborated in his influential study *Bantu Philosophy*.[88] The book stands out as one of the earliest attempts by Europeans at a systematic account of African belief systems and world view. In it, Tempels identifies and defines in opposition to what he projects as a fundamentally static Western notion of being, a dynamic, vitalist African conception of existence. Basing his arguments on an understanding of African linguistic categories and thought processes, Tempels writes:

> Certain words are constantly being used by Africans. They are those which express their supreme values; and they recur like variations on a *leitmotif* present in their language, their thought, and in all their acts and deeds.

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Trans. Colin King (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959). The book was first published in Flemish in 1945 and was translated that same year into French by A. Rubbens. King's English translation of the work is based on Rubbens's French version.

This supreme value is *life, force, to live strongly*, or *vital force*.[89]

Such insight into African modes of thought and expression was hailed in its time by no less a figure than Alioune Diop. In a preface to a 1949 edition of Rubbens' French version of the book, Diop equates Tempels' work with Sartre's 'Orphée noir', describing the two as 'deux études capitales pour le monde noir'.[90] His point is that while Sartre's piece articulates the sense and significance of the works of black writers in the context of their problematic relationship with Europe, Tempels 'contribue à révéler l'âme du nègre authentique inséré dans son vivifiant milieu naturel'.[91]

Les flamboyants exemplifies that well, even though appearing some thirty years later. In it, the natural world becomes the very symbol of diversity and difference, signifying the African world, Europe's cultural alter ego, to which the protagonist William Irrigal opens himself up. Such cross-cultural openness is facilitated of course by the presence of Tokor Yali Yulmata, Grainville's African hero, with whom his European protagonist interacts, and whose physical attributes, habits, feelings, thoughts and actions stand out for their earthiness, their elemental, indeed cosmic force. As I have noted, a key reason for William's visit to Africa is his ex-diplomat father's desire for him to undergo 'une cure à l'équateur'.[92] That desire is born of a fundamental geographical dichotomy between a frigid, inhibiting, life-denying, marginal European environment and a warm, life-giving, central, African one. The words 'une cure à l'équateur' echo of course Sartre's exaltation of the African world, whose elementality he evokes, we saw, in these terms: 'C'est le soleil qui est essentiel, le soleil des

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[89] Ibid., p. 44. Tempels's italics.
[90] *La Philosophie bantoue* (Paris, Editions africaines, 1949), p. 5.
[91] Ibid.
[92] *Les flamboyants*, p. 21.

tropiques et la mer [...] L'Etre est noir, l'Etre est le feu, nous sommes accidentels et lointains, nous avons à nous justifier de nos moeurs, de nos techniques, de notre pâleur de mal-cuits et de notre végétation vert-de-gris.'[93] Here again the physical environment becomes the very site through which the human is given meaning.

The central importance of the natural world is announced from the very first pages of *Les flamboyants*. In an editorial note, the initial encounter between Tokor and William is described as: 'le début d'une épopée à travers l'Afrique moderne et légendaire: palais, bidonville, savanes, fleuves, lacs, volcans, forêts s'entrelacent dans une tapisserie qui s'adresse à tous les sens'.[94] This statement is quite revealing. It not only points to Grainville's juxtaposition in his text of the urban and the rural, that is, the man-made and the natural, but also explains the way the twin aspects of the African world he depicts are mediated in the text. Grainville builds up in his book an intricate picture of a world where the senses (those of his protagonists as indeed those of his anonymous narrator and ultimately those of his readers) are constantly called into play. More precisely, it a picture in which aspects of the natural world, denoted by the words 'savanes' 'fleuves', 'lacs', 'volcans' and 'forêts', are mediated through the interplay of the senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. What thus emerges in the text is a world of multiple sensations which converge and intersect, culminating in what might be called a hymn to life and vitality, to elemental force and energy.

Thus on a page just opposite the one on which the first chapter of the novel proper begins, these very striking words occur: 'Noir/ Or et Sang/Vert massif'.[95] By their location outside the first chapter, which opens with the voice of an anonymous narrator,

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[93] Sartre, *Situations III*, p. 232.
[94] *Les flamboyants*, p. 3.
[95] Ibid., p. 10.

the words belong inevitably to the author himself. Through them, he sets the tone of his hymn to the natural world his reader is about to enter. The words convey an image of a world of multiple colours. They can be read as a very condensed image (a poetic fusion) of aspects of the African world: its racial and cultural attributes, its vast tropical forests, its soils, minerals and other geophysical properties as Grainville imagines these to be. Entitled, like the novel itself, 'Les flamboyants', the first chapter takes up and elaborates this world of colours, energy and tropical luxuriance. In the very opening lines, the unnamed narrator draws the reader's eye to flamboyant trees, whose giant, bright-red flowers dominate the entire arc of a bay, standing out against the blue of the sky and the sea: 'Les flamboyants dressés déploient leurs armoiries de feu: floraisons immobiles, écarlates sur le bleu irréel de l'azur et de la mer. Géants panaches de fleurs rouges dans l'absence absolue de feuillages sur tout le cercle de la baie'.[96]

The flamboyant trees and their bright-red flowers are not simply the first item in an inventory of Africa's flora. In a novel set against the backdrop of 'un foisonnement de vie végétale et animale',[97] they are part and parcel of that multitudinous life. Put another way, the term 'les flamboyants' constitutes the organizing principle, the structuring motif through which the personalities and actions of Grainville's protagonists are evoked and explained, alongside the environment in which those personalities and actions occur. This emphasis on an environment that exudes power and energy prepares the reader for William Irrigal's entry into the African scene. Although initially portrayed as being a serene, self-composed young Scottish aristocrat, these qualities seem to desert him once in Africa. To the narrator, he is quite simply the tall, white puppet around whom

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[96] Ibid., p. 11.
[97] Ibid. See back cover of the text.

'excédentaire la vie déferlait, s'épatait, ondulait, se gonflait de boubous, pagnes, coiffes de soie jaune'.[98] William himself is quite aware of his new environment. He thinks of it as a 'pays de volupté, d'ocre et d'agonie', by which he already feels exhilarated, and which causes in him ('grande statue blanche et séraphique' that he is) 'un début d'allégresse panique'.[99] A key point in William's transformation in this contact with life forces is obviously his relationship with Tokor, to whom he feels automatically drawn. He who is usually little inclined to make friends realises he likes 'ce bahut!'[100] He finds in him qualities that contrast with and at the same time complement his own personality. Characterised as 'un viscéral, une masse de chair impulsive, une toupie baraquée, ventrue et volcanique', Tokor embodies these excesses to the point of sublimity and presides over his country in its 'grandeur tellurique' and 'gigantisme solaire'[101]. Thus even though their ways part in the end, and for reasons I will discuss in the next chapter, William's impression of Africa is of the effervescence he finds in Tokor and in the world over which he reigns. A key point of that impression is his contact with the mysterious world of the Diorle, who live in the pristine depths of the jungle la Hourla and who for years have been the object of Tokor's sacred quest. Ironically it is his European protégé who attains the ultimate knowledge he seeks, in particular the nature and function of two animals, the Sacred Peacock and the Ludies, in the context of Diorle divinity and spirituality. The chapter 'Le paon sacré' reveals the character and role of these sacred animals as seen by William. In the section dealing with the Ludies in particular, the relation of events gives way to the enumeration of the animals' characteristics: their

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[98] Ibid., p. 24.
[99] Ibid., p. 25.
[100] Ibid., p. 34.
[101] Ibid., p. 35.

physical shapes, their movements, their temperament and their sexuality. The enumeration is designed no doubt to reaffirm, summarise and systematise the fundamentals of African life as seen and lived by William the European. The narrator's and indeed William's and perhaps Grainville's own understanding of the African world seem to converge at that point in the novel, culminating in a cross-cultural perspective that recalls the direct, elemental and spontaneous emotions and sensations that Gide associates with black cultural products. Indeed the Ludies are in one instance and in a general and theoretical sense called 'des émotions pures', 'des secousses de félicité sensuelle, de grandes audaces colorées, des surprises'.[102] The theory of African effervescence and sensuality is then given a practical demonstration in the form of William's own direct observation of what emerges as the Ludies's active and playful nature:

> William passa tout le clair de son temps à regarder courir les Ludies libres. Elle sifflaient, elle chantaient...Elle jappaient, elles bondissaient, mêlaient leurs crinières noires et brunes ou s'étiraient sur leurs longues jambes, leurs cuisses minces et charnues ; alors les mamelles se gonflaient aux torses semés d'un duvet limpide: invisible soie capillaire veloutant la chair blonde, dorée.[103]

But any investigation of the intersection of the human and natural worlds in *Les flamboyants* must in the final analysis shed light on how the key African figure in the novel himself understands and indeed relates to his 'Africanness', in this case his continent's 'grandeur tellurique' and 'gigantisme solaire'. Tokor cuts the figure of a loner and distinguishes himself from his rivals whom he accuses of not having any 'sens du tellurique'.[104] And by 'sens du tellurique' he means 'le goût, la passion de la terre yali

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[102] Ibid., p. 331.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., p. 39.

[...], la grande terre yali de brousses et de savanes, de lacs et de forêts, de Hourla, de Kondi, de Toura de Dolé, de Diorles'.[105] He displays here his intimate knowledge of the various regions of his country and of its multiple languages and ethnic groups. An outgrowth of that intimate knowledge is Tokor's sense of his being the very heartbeat of his country, the living symbol of its attributes and its ways. Hence his attempt to replicate in the urban setting of his palatial headquarters, the Tindjili, the pristine environment of La Hourla, home to the Diorles. He calls the replica forest, which measures ten square kilometres, 'la Hourla de poche'. The forest teems with animals of unimaginable variety. In it also trees and flowers of every shape and shade pullulate. He shows his guests around as a mark of his honour and respect. But more importantly the forest holds secrets that he imagines reconnect the living with a mythical past, that is, the dawn of time. Indeed he invites William to listen from deep within the forest to the lemurs whose chorus he considers to be the most unsettling sound on earth. He adds: 'Fais silence en toi William, ouvre l'oreille...Les grands lémuriens des premiers temps de la terre, peut-être nos plus lointains ancêtres se sont mis à chanter'.[106]

Tokor is so fascinated by the natural world and its secrets that politics, or rather, la 'patrie politique' as he puts it, is merely an abstraction, of no concrete value. Hence his impatience to abandon the stifling environment that is his capital and palace in order to open himself up in one instance to the animal world and live to the full the complex network of emotions and sensation that world generates in him. Indeed away from Tindjili and Mandouka and their constricting ways, Tokor is at his telluric best when '[il]

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[105] Ibid. p. 38.
[106] Ibid., p. 52.

s'abîmait au fond de l'énorme bestialité sereine'.[107] At that point his senses are involved in a play of associations reminiscent of Baudelaire. He now 'respirait avec ses yeux, voyait avec sa peau, sentait avec les compliquées, les liantes capillarités de ses poils, il entendait de ses narines dilatées, et ses oreilles brouillaient comme des regards.'[108]

Finally, nature incarnate, Tokor rejoins the natural world after he dies. Although his forays into the Hourla do not yield him the revelation he craves but instead pave the way for his rivals to strip him of his power, the fact remains that in death he does enter the sacred world of the Diorle. At William's suggestion he is honoured with the funeral rite of sacred dissemination which the Diorle reserve for their princes. His funeral marks the very end of the novel and is certainly an occasion for celebration rather than mourning. In the presence of William and a prince of the Diorle, Tokors's body is dismembered into five parts in accordance with the funeral rites. The parts are in turn buried at five keys points, thus facilitating his reinsertion into the natural world. He dies only to live again for his soul is immortal: he is everywhere, in the mountains, in the trees, in the rivers, in the animals. As the closing words of the narrator (and the novel) most eulogistically put it,

> 'la terre pulsionne, palpite et bat sous les secousses de son sang. Tokor est là, partout, il s'éploie dans la vaste giron de la Hourla [...]. Il court, il roule, il vole, il bat, se précipite sur la terre, rejaillit, s'exalte. L'univers est sa fresque, sa harangue, son emphase et sa déraison. La panmétamorphose du Yulmata est maintenant absolue, sacrée, immémoriale. Tokor principe et fin, source, chair et fructification, rythme et puissance, matière, souffle et génie de la Hourla des Diorles.[109]

Here, the emphatic, repetitive style throws into relief the cosmic dimension of Tokor's personality. The terms 'rythme', 'puissance', 'matière', 'souffle' point to the very

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[107] Ibid., p. 243.
[108] Ibid., p. 43.
[109] Ibid., p. 382.

sources of existence itself; sources which Tokor's sacredly disseminated body parts go back to replenish.

The distinctive fictional worlds of *Onitsha*, *Ouregano* and *Les flamboyants* shed light on aspects of the African world their authors consider significant. In *Onitsha*, Le Clézio moves beyond the constricting context of British rule in Nigeria to foreground a historical experience dating back to Egypt, one of the earliest civilizations known to man. At the same time, he and Constant register in their varying ways a clear sense of black African cultural forms and practices, in particular African oral culture exemplified by their incorporation into the narrative fabrics of *Onitsha* and *Ouregano* of African tales of origins or creation myths. Grainville for his part stresses in *Les flamboyants* aspects of the African physical world, showing these to hold possibilities for cultural and spiritual enrichment and renewal.

Chapter IV

Cultural Self-Reassertion

Section A

Non-Fiction

How far do the anti-colonial and cultural self-critical attitude, and its attendant celebratory response to difference, in fact go? In particular, how far are the contested and often derided 'European' self and its presumed opposite - the eulogised 'black African' other - independent of the various writers' own moods, needs, interests, tastes, persuasions, convictions and illusions? And do these not constitute, however involuntarily, a certain collective cultural consciousness that relates to difference in a given way, appropriating it for its own purposes? In other words, is the 'European' self invariably contested, derided and rejected? Is its 'black African' other unproblematically eulogised and accepted?

This chapter identifies aspects of the works studied that negate the anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and cross-cultural empathy they initially enable, showing how their explicit subversion, or rather, disruption of colonial modes of relating to difference has its blind spots, contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes. This section of the chapter takes yet another look at the essays discussed already. It also, however, examines a number of other essays introduced for the first time in the thesis. Like the more familiar works, the new essays belong to the post-War period and are drawn from *Présence africaine* or from

other sources. The aim is to show how the disruption of colonial modes of relating to difference highlighted earlier in the thesis is held in check by a certain cultural self-assertiveness that echoes from one essay to another. In this way, the one can observe the ways in which texts written in the closing decade and afterwards of France's black African imperial endeavour, if at times overtly hostile to the latter, reproduce paradoxically the colonial and neo-colonial mentality they set out explicitly and of course laudably to undo.

1. Celebrating Black African Art/Aesthetics According to European Modes of Thought

A closer look at Gide's 'Avant-Propos' shows that if the author does assign value and meaning to black cultural products, he nevertheless ends up doing violence to them. Indeed they are forced into a neat category of aesthetic experience, in this case the desired or desirable opposite of what emerges as a far too refined, a far too contrived and inhibiting artistic taste, rule and practice. How does Gide know that the African cultural products he praises constitute an expression of 'angoisse panique', 'stupeur', 'férocité' and 'terreur'? Do African art products alone give rise to these emotions and sensations? One might perhaps argue that Senghor himself identified emotion as opposed to thought as being a distinctively Negro-African characteristic, to be seen in the black artist's view of the world and his expression of it. Senghor's well-known phrase, 'l'émotion est nègre comme la pensée est hellène' contrasts the Negro's supposedly intuitive capacity and the European's rational mind.[1] But Senghor's claim has of course been contested in black

[1] L. S. Senghor, 'Ce que l'homme noir apporte', *Liberté I*, (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1964), p. 24.

Africa itself for the dichotomous and rather reductive conception of human attributes and capabilities it suggests.[2]

A second point of contention is that if at one level Gide readily considers black African art as a desirable counterpoint to what appears to be the far too refined and contrived aspects of his own culture, at another level he makes those very aspects of his culture the basis of Europe's superiority. Such a conflicting attitude gives rise in his essay to perceptions of difference that smack unmistakably of prejudice. A closer look at his position on black writing is very revealing in this case. To be fair to Gide, there is no doubt that his cautioning the black writer against imitating European literary models in a servile fashion was meant to indicate the dangers and pitfalls of writing in a borrowed language, especially when the language in question had been a weapon of cultural and political subjugation. The problem however is that if Gide explains the dangers of literary imitation in terms of the colonised writer's desire to impress and gain the approval of those who had despised him, he does so also in terms of the black writer's or indeed black people's extraordinary capacity for imitation! Gide writes: 'Ses extraordinaires facultés d'imitation, ou plus exactement de mimétisme, jointes à son désir de nous plaire, le feront, lorsqu'il s'adressera à nous, s'observer, se retenir'.[3] While the term 'extraordinaires facultés d'imitation' might sound complimentary in other situations, it refers here surely to a childlike, unimaginative disposition. The question then is this: is the capacity for imitation particularly pronounced in black people? If so, where would their originality as a people then lie? Would it lie in the act of imitation itself?

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[2] Wole Soyinka argues that by promoting a dichotomous view of racial and cultural attributes, Negritude remained captive of 'a pre-set system of Eurocentric intellectual analysis of both man and his society and tried to redefine the African and his society in those externalised terms'. For more details, see *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 136.

[3] Gide, 'Avant-propos', *Présence africaine*, 1, (1947), 3-6 (p. 6).

A related point about the issue of black writing in French is concerned with Gide's own conception of language, or rather, of writing itself. Gide clearly enthuses in the essay about African masks and statues and jazz music, as these epitomised in his view black cultural independence, having come into being with little or no foreign input. Yet when it came to literary language or writing, it would seem that to Gide, the black writer was faced with an entirely uncharted territory: 'Les moyens plastiques, la musique triomphaient; la littérature restait en retard, inexistante, ou tout au moins insoupçonnable, insoupçonnée'.[4] The point here is that Gide thought of literature in terms of being exclusively a written phenomenon. He certainly knew that Africans had their own languages for communicating with each other. Nevertheless, Africans were yet to develop a language through which to communicate their thoughts and feelings to the outside world. French was now to fill that vacuum, and who were better placed than the French to help the African writer to achieve self-expression and self-awareness in the new language by being receptive to his works?

> Il importe [...] de l'aider à prendre conscience de soi et cette confiance en soi qui lui manquent; cette assurance dans l'affirmation de ses vertus les plus spécifiques, sans souci de notre approbation. Et je gage que c'est alors qu'il sera le mieux écouté.[5]

Such fine, altruistic sentiments hardly mask the paternalistic tone of the utterance. The tone reminds the reader of Gide's attitude to his black servant Adoum, whom as recounted in his travel narrative *Voyage au Congo* he helped with reading and writing, which to him were the basics of civilised standards of life. It certainly did not occur to Gide as he wrote his 'Avant-propos' that African masks and statues aside, there was a

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[4] Ibid., p. 5.
[5] Ibid., p. 6.

whole tradition of oral literature in the places he once visited in Africa and of which he could have had some inkling had he taken the trouble to learn the language of his servant Adoum!

Like Gide's, Sartre's explicit celebration of black art, or more precisely, black writing is not without its problems. Indeed if he celebrates black poetry for a French intelligentsia with a view to promoting cross-cultural understanding, he enlists black poets at the same time as allies in his Marxist crusade on behalf of the European proletariat against the ruling bourgeoisie. He argues that Negritude was in the final analysis the minor term of a dialectical progression whose main thesis was the theoretical and practical assertion of White supremacy. By this he means that the real value of Negritude was transitory rather than intrinsic: as a counterpoint to White cultural supremacy, it was a means rather than an end; it was destined to destroy itself in the very act of undermining White cultural arrogance, thus paving the way for a higher human order that he calls 'une société sans races'[6] and, by implication, one without class. It could be argued that some of the poets Sartre discusses - Aimé Césaire and Jacques Roumain for instance - were in fact adherents of Marxist and Communist doctrines and that their points of view simply coincided with Sartre's own political orientations and motivations. But I wonder if Césaire or Roumain ever sought in the interest of a future classless society to relativise the very cultural identity they affirmed in their writings. It is not difficult to understand Fanon's disappointment:

> On avait fait appel à un ami des peuples de couleur, et cet ami n'avait rien trouvé de mieux que montrer la relativité de leur action [...]. Jean-Paul Sartre a oublié que le nègre souffre dans son corps autrement que le blanc.[7]

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[6] Sartre, *Situations III*, p. 280.

[7] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, Seuil, 1952), pp. 108; 112. Of course Lilyan Kesteloot accuses Fanon of offering too subtle a reading of Sartre's qualification of Negritude as the moment of

Césaire's resignation from the French Communist Party in 1956 was in fact an act of cultural self-affirmation.[8] Indeed if he claimed elsewhere that the proletariat was 'la seule classe qui ait encore la mission universelle, car dans sa chair elle souffre de tous les maux de l'histoire, de tous les maux universels'[9], he made no secret in his letter to Thorez of the fact that as a Negro he was less an actor in world history and more a tool in the construction of the proletarian ideal; an ideal whose concretisation moreover left in places like Stalinist Russia much to be desired. [10]

I will now raise the implications of Sartre's literary critical voice for power relations. In underlining the continuing relevance of the theoretical issues associated with Sartre's 'Orphée noir', Belinda Jack observes that the essay foregrounds crucially the paradox inherent in a literature (African) that is characterised on the one hand by a 'non-French identity, culture and civilisation' but which has 'the French language' as its mode of expression. The implication being that to the extent that African literatures use European languages as their mode of expression there will always be a 'colonial legacy present in the very language of the literature'. She adds that it is only where African literatures

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negativity. To her, Sartre uses the term negativity in a technical, or rather, philosophical (Hegelian dialectical) sense. This involves a mode of reasoning in which the conflict generated between opposing sides of an argument (the thesis and antithesis) is resolved by way of a synthesis. The latter incorporates in equal measure positive aspects of both the thesis and antithesis while doing away with their respective imperfections. Kesteloot however admits that Sartre did not emphasise enough in his otherwise rich analysis of Negritude the parity of value Hegel ascribes to a thesis and its antithesis. Additionally, she argues that by subsuming Negritude under a universal proletarian struggle, Sartre forgot that cultural differences between a Chinese and a Russian, and by implication a Negro, would still remain even in the hypothetical context of a united world governed by equal rights for all peoples and cultures. For more details, see *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature* (Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1977), pp. 120-123.

[8] Césaire's reasons for resigning from the Party are contained in his *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris, Présence africaine, 1956). Maurice Thorez was the Party's Secretary General at the time.

[9] A. Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Présence africaine, 1955, p.72.

[10] See *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*.

adopt African languages as their mode of expression that the contradictions highlighted by Sartre become irrevelant to critical debate.[11]

Much of the literature from former French black Africa continues to be written in French. Sartre's analysis in 'Orphée noir' thus remains an important reference point in discussions of that literature. One could of course argue that such European critical influence is not necessarily a liability, being an instance of a positive take on difference. But perhaps when one considers that France's erstwhile black African possessions remain an important source of that country's self-image as a former colonial power and an important post-War world player, a troubling question arises relating to Sartre's cross-cultural endeavour. Do his pronouncements on black African situations not amount by virtue of the very prestige and influence he commanded, to a case of the colonial centre maintaining in intellectual and cultural terms its hold on its periphery, even as that centre calls into question through one of its most enlightened, cultural self-critical voices (Sartre's in this case), the assumptions that tended to legitimise its hegemony? If in discrediting imperial Europe Sartre's essays enable a fruitful encounter with Europe's presumed black African opposite, does the encounter not still bear in certain respects the marks of the unequal power relations in which it occurs? In other words, is his critical voice not itself then a 'colonial legacy'?

2. Cultural Self-Criticism but Shedding One Myth in Favour of Another

The binarism inherent in Gide's enthusiasm for African art brings into focus the problems of a cross-cultural perspective that equates black Africa with nature and its

[11] *Negritude and Literary Criticism*, p. 166.

forces. Gide is of course not alone in this. Balandier, Justevin, Duchemin and Dumont have all celebrated what they see as Africa's quintessential pristine surroundings and the implications of the lack of such surroundings in their own culture. In this way they attempt to undo assumptions of white arrogance and to enter empathetically into African situations, but remain attracted like Gide by the 'primitive' side of the 'primitive versus sophisticated' dichotomy. One could argue that Griaule's vision of an Africa that was and still is home to elaborate and sophisticated cultures and civilisations avoids this binarism. Yet his celebration of Bambara and Dogon philosophy and cosmogony is itself problematic; it belongs ultimately to the binary value system of 'primitive versus sophisticated'. Of course Griaule opts for the 'sophisticated' side of the cultural dichotomy, a mythoclastic gesture aimed as he puts it elsewhere at 'bouleverser de fond en comble les idées reçues concernant la mentalité noire comme la mentalité primitive en général'.[12] There thus emerges from the authors taken together a tussle between a desire to identify with the other because its perceived primitiveness offers what is lacking in the civilised self, and a need to place the other on an equal, sophisticated footing with the self: despite appearances, the other is no less civilised than the self. What I am saying is that the primacy of the self remains uncontested in all these authors: it names and defines its other as primitive or sophisticated by standards that it sets.

3. The Imperative of Progress and the Problem of Didacticism

But perhaps it is around a certain conception of modernity and progress that the conflict and contradictions within post-War French intellectual cross-cultural responses to black

[12] M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* (Paris, Les Editions du Chêne, 1948), p. 9.

Africa are most striking. Black Africa's natural environment - its tropical sun hitherto hailed by Sartre as the essence of being, or its people's way of life hailed as simple and natural by Justevin, Balandier and Dumont - becomes in a number of other post-War essays a formidable natural obstacle, pointing to the continent's marginality and retardation in relation to the rest of the world, and to Europe particularly. The approach adopted by Monod and his fellow contributors to *Présence africaine* culminated in essays like 'L'Afrique Continent marginal', written by Monod himself, where black Africa is portrayed as a mere appendage to the larger, more important, neighbouring Eurasian landmass.[13] The key words in the essay are 'péninsule', 'île', 'appendice', 'excroissance' and 'point d'interrogation', which evoke both literally and metaphorically a place of isolation and mystery and a sense of its superfluity. Here, black Africa figures as the unknown quantity: an enclosed, almost impregnable space, which had remained untouched and unconcerned for ages by the progress registered in the shape of brilliant and impressive cultures and civilisations by its neighbour. To Monod, it was only relatively recently that Europe broke through the formidable barriers of the continent and took possession of it. A brutal act of possession, Monod readily admits, but one which he nonetheless couches romantically: Europe, the 'prince charmant', finally woke up and embraced Africa, 'la belle endormie'. One is left to conclude that that embrace - violent though it was - finally ushered black Africa into human history, as construed of course by Monod the Frenchman. The 'prince charmant/belle endormie' image of Europe and Africa has particularly obnoxious connotations of male penetration and female passivity, replaying as it does the power relations between a supposedly strong-willed, energetic and enterprising Europe and a docile and acquiescent Africa.

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[13] Théodore Monod, 'L'Afrique Continent marginal' in *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950), 25-30.

The isolation, mystery, impenetrability and retardation Monod associates with black Africa reach a crescendo in the writings of the geographer Richard-Molard and the philosopher/journalist Emmanuel Mounier, aspects of which stress an environmentally hostile and intimidating Africa. In a short but striking piece called 'Terres de démesure', published in the same volume as Monod's 'Continent marginal', Richard-Molard replays quite unmistakably the myth of the Dark Continent.[14] He weaves a deeply pessimistic and fatalistic picture of Africa where, in contrast to Europe, nature, not man, was the measure of all things; nature in its most untamed and hostile state, impeding human progress and achievement. He begins with what he calls 'la sylve tropicale', that is Africa's equatorial forest, whose debilitating impact on man he equates with that of the tundra or the desert, and which he describes as dark, rainy, frightening, infested with mosquitoes and flies. Man was a prisoner there, victim of nature's excesses. The grasslands, which he calls 'la brousse' were no less debilitating in their impact on human life. If the sun did shine there, the heat it radiated made it a star of death and inertia, not of life and vitality as it was known elsewhere. It vitiated all that it touched, drying up streams and esmaculating the African who spent his day stretched on a mat in the shade of trees or lying in a hammock hung in the veranda of his hut. The continent's waterways, like its forest and sun, served apparently no beneficial purpose, losing their contents into what the author calls 'le désert de l'Atlantique', in contrast to the waterways of Eurasia, which in his view had facilitated the development of civilised life there: 'Où sont en vérité les mers Méditerranée, Egée, Ionienne, les Manche et mer du Nord, les Seine et Rhin, les bas Nil, les Gange, les Yang-Tsei de l'Afrique Noire? Où sont 'ces

[14] Jacques Richard-Molard, 'Terres de démesure', *Présence africaine*, 8-9 (1950), 31-38.

peuples de la mer' par lesquels s'est fait l'Occident?'.[15] By its very geography, black Africa in Richard-Molard's scale of human progress and development weighed practically nothing, especially those regions of the continent he calls 'les plus typiquement nègres';[16] these include the Congo Basin, and the Atlantic coast. To him, such regions were inward looking, far removed from Europe, which epitomised his idea of civilisation.

Similarly Mounier speaks in his *L'éveil de l'Afrique noire* of 'le gigantisme africain', stressing what he saw as black Africa's oversized but pointless physical features. Published like Sartre's 'Orphée noir' in 1948, the book details the author's brief sojourn in West Africa. There, he visited in the space of six weeks (11 March - 23 April 1947) various territories under French, British and American control, drawing comparisons which of course favoured France's brand of hegemonic control. What I want to emphasise is that brief as Mounier's visit was, he nonetheless reached conclusions worthy of a connoisseur of African affairs. Significantly, a key person he mentions in his book to underwrite as it were his claims about Africa, is Richard-Molard, who like Monod was then based at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar, Senegal. Richard-Molard had apparently given Mounier a book by a Belgian geographer. That book must have coincided with Richard-Molard's own misgivings about Africa and in consequence shaped Mounier's own responses to the continent. Indeed when Mounier waxed lyrical as in the following passage about Africa's physical attributes, it was almost with the voice of the author of 'Terre de démesure'.

> L'Afrique est le pays des choses énormes, d'une énormité préhistorique, et qui ne servait à rien. Sur deux ou trois cents kilomètres, dans une vaste plaine que la forêt,

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[15] Ibid. p. 35.
[16] Ibid.

> ou une sorte de maquis plus ras que la forêt, ne lâche pas d'une pouce, les bras du fleuve succèdent aux bras. Entre eux, des serpents végétaux roulent leurs anneaux: ce sont des bras secondaires, assez étroits pour que le feuillage fasse voûte au-dessus du cours. C'est le rêve baroque et démesuré plus que la création de Dieu.[17]

Of course Mounier implicitly distinguished himself from Richard-Molard: 'le géographe qu'il est ne croit pas à l'avenir de l'Afrique'.[18] His point seems to be that while aware of the problems Africa's intimidating physical environment offered, he nonetheless had hope in the future progress of the continent. That progress, as he understood it, was to be measured in terms of the degree and rapidity with which Africa was made to attain standards Europe had achieved. This led him as he criss-crossed the continent to use such hasty and puerile expressions as 'un morceau de Limousin ou de Hautes Alpes', 'Fontainebleau en Afrique', 'Sénégal, porte de l'Europe', 'Le Dahomey, Quartier Latin de l'A.O.F': all meant to register his surprise and delight at what seemed to him oases of progress and needful transformation brought on by Europe's colonizing and by extension modernising/civilising presence in an otherwise barren and barbarous place.

There is obviously a fundamental distinction between Richard-Molard's self-evident pessimism and its resultant blackening and inferiorisation of black Africa's natural and human environment in 'Terres de démesure', and Sartre's call to arms against white oppression in 'Orphée noir'. Obviously, unlike Richard-Molard, Sartre does not condemn but hails the tropical sun. Moreover, his black Orpheus is not a fixed, unchanging reality in contrast to Richard-Molard's essentialised indolent or rather inactive African: Sartre's Negro is a product of history, capable of changing the circumstances of colonial oppression to his advantage. Yet interestingly, Sartre's

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[17] *L'éveil de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, Seuil, 1948), p. 63.
[18] Ibid., p. 19.

analysis conveys in its own way a certain idea of progress and perhaps civilisation predicated on Europe's scientific and technical know-how, which his black Orpheus having achieved the historical and psychological necessity of racial and cultural self-affirmation, might now acquire in view of his economic liberation and prosperity. The white working class in the metropolis - his spiritual comrade in the struggle against capitalist exploitation - was apparently way ahead in the class struggle: his country's technical and industrial capacity already guaranteed the viability and applicability of socialist reforms. For the Negroes of Senegal or of Congo, socialism was as yet a dream; they needed first to determine and formulate what their claims for social justice were.[19] They might also need to assimilate of course 'les techniques blanches' to progress towards the socialist ideal.[20] A 'primitive versus civilised' cultural dichotomy is certainly at work here.

Sartre's delineation of Lumumba's personality and political trajectory also reproduces this primitive versus civilised cultural dichotomy. He qualifies Lumumba's intelligence as 'vaste' and ranks him in purity of purpose with Robespierre and in revolutionary conviction with José Marti. Yet Lumumba's itinerary from rural Congo to such Europeanised cities as Léopoldville (Kinshasa at independence), from his traditional cultural background to the writings of Rousseau and Victor Hugo, from a home headed by a father who was a peasant to a position within the Belgian administrative hierarchy and then to the statesmanship both national and continental, conveys a certain conception of socio-cultural transformation or progress where Europe stands out as the model.

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[19] *Situations III*, pp. 237-238.
[20] Ibid., pp. 237-238; p. 285.

Lumumba's transformation was however incomplete. Taking up again his argument that the Negroes of Senegal or Congo were behind times on matters of class consciousness and social reforms, Sartre called Lumumba 'un révolutionnaire sans révolution'.[21] For if he attributed the Congolese leader's tragic fate primarily to the machinations of the imperial capitalist West, he also saw in the situation over which he presided the logical outcome of a socio-political change that lacked the vital ingredient of a popular uprising. What the situation in Congo ideally required was not so much an African elite (the latter was a by-product of the colonial system and owed its prominence to it), but a mass movement capable of unleashing a change of such moment as to sweep all before it, thus making possible a fresh start. To Sartre, such a movement had been the force behind the socialist revolution that had occurred in places like Cuba, the USSR, Vietnam and China.[22] Indeed he saw in Castro's Cuba the culmination of José Marti's pioneering struggle for that country's independence and felt that Congo still awaited its own Castro who would bring to fruition the struggle Lumumba had set in motion and in which he made the ultimate sacrifice.

Sartre's good faith and commitment to humanistic principles of justice and equality are not in question here. Also, as a Frenchman with left-wing sympathies, his choice of European historical, intellectual and cultural reference points to explain black African historical and cultural situations to his European audience is perfectly natural and legitimate. Yet the underdeveloped human space - in socialist and technological terms - that emerges in his texts leaves an unmistakable impression of a continent that was yet to catch up not only with Europe but also with the rest of world.

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[21] *Situations V*, p. 232.
[22] Ibid.

It could be argued that if the essays by Sartre, Monod, Richard-Molard and Mounier are somehow not free from cultural bias, this is only to be expected: at the time they were written, the French black African empire was still alive and the intellectuals in question were part and parcel of that particular historical situation. But the conflicting respones to difference they contain are not unique to essays of the early post-War years. A close look at French intellectuals writing this time in the wake of black Africa's independence reveals a similar ambivalent perspective. It is a measure of Dumont's good faith that he mentions in the opening portions of his L'*Afrique noire est mal partie* the risks involved in writing about a continent in relation to which he stands in a position of relative strength, being an intellectual from a country which has had a history of dominance in black Africa.[23] That said, his conception of African life as being quintessentially rural and so closer to nature replays perhaps unwittingly the primitive versus sophisticated dichotomy we highlighted in Gide, Balandier and Justevin. Secondly, his reference to African peasants as 'les vrais prolétariats' amounts as we said in Sartre's case to an ideological appropriation, not to say confiscation, of the reality he describes; a reality whose complexity he obliterates by imposing on it a Marxist viewpoint.

But a far more important argument is that by grounding his culture's achievement as the yardstick by which to measure the strength and viability of Africa's cultural heritage and future economic prosperity, Dumont falls into the trap of both condemning and justifying colonialism, of empathising with the African while paternalistically urging him on to progress, to develop, to catch up with the rest of the world. What thus emerges, and this in contrast to his cultural self-critical stance, is a cultural self-congratulatory acceptance of a certain idea of human progress that categorises the black African as the

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[23] See epigraph above, p. 4.

poor, underdeveloped other. A theory of economic superiority seems to replace here that of racial and cultural superiority. In this new situation, black Africa still weighs pretty little, having in Dumont's view, made no progress ever since its civilisations reached their apogee in the 14th and 15th centuries.[24] Stuck in a state of technological backwardness, black African peasants, hailed at one point in the text as 'les vrai proletariats,' become at another point 'l'homme noir [...] enfermé dans le cercle infernal d'une agriculture sous-productive, réalisée par des hommes sous-alimentés, sur une terre peu fertilisée'.[25] This technological vacuum and its attendant human misery could have been avoided, Dumont argues, if black Africa's early contact with the more technologically advanced civilisations had not taken a predatory turn. In this scheme of things, Europe's subsequent colonial control of the continent must in the final analysis be seen as salutory: it saved black Africa from the greater evil of total technological vacuum and economic stagnation: 'Cette oeuvre humaine [colonisation], fort imparfaite [...] a déformé, détourné le développement de sa ligne de plus grande pente; mais elle y a contribué'.[26]

In certain instances Dumont sounds quite an impatient giver of lessons on development to his black African friends, who must hurry forward or revert to the horrors of the pre-colonial age: 'Si vous refusez la colonisation, le contrôle des naissances et l'effort supplémentaire nécessaires au développement, une seule solution: renvoyez les médecins, pour rétablir le taux de mortalité'.[27] Regarding the African ruling elite, the lessons given are of a moral kind, emphasising the need for honesty and commitment to public

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[24] *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*, p. 21.
[25] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[26] Ibid., p. 66.
[27] Ibid., pp. 88-89.

interest: 'Le développement de l'Europe occidentale s'est accentué quand un certain dégré d'honnêteté a été atteint par son administration. Il faut trouver, parmi les dirigeants et les jeunes cadres de l'administration africaine, le noyau dur et pur, assez fort pour éliminer les corrompus, suffisamment dévoué à l'intérêt général du futur continent pour s'y consacrer corps et âme, donner l'exemple d'une certaine austérité'.[28] This is all very well. The problem however is this: in a post-War world defined as it is by Dumont in terms of the haves and the have nots, the developed and the underdeveloped, the honest and the not so honest, is there anything left for Europe to receive from black Africa in the interest of a healthier relationship? The point is that the one who receives lessons in economics and morality is perhaps never the equal of the one who gives them, especially if it remains a wholly one-way affair.

4. Eternal Victims of Evil Outsiders

In admitting their continent's culpability for Africa's problems, Negroni, Sartre and Dumont run the risk of creating and perpetuating a cross-cultural vision that categorises Africa and other formerly colonized spaces as zones of socio-economic disaster. The African reality - multi-faceted though it might be - is thus reduced to a question of economics. The continent emerges as the hapless victim of Western capitalist exploitation, its well-being and prosperity predicated on the demise of the exploitative economic order. The possibility that Africans might have, or do have, their own take on the economic realities of their continent, if envisaged, remains nonetheless unarticulated.

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[28] Ibid., p. 88.

The reader is left with the impression that well-meaning and friendly voices from the imperial or formerly imperial centre have said all that needs to be said.

Verschave's castigation of his country's neo-colonial policies and activities is itself a consequence of a conception of national selfhood guided by the principles of equality and justice; principles which make him prefer, as he puts it in the closing pages of *Noir Silence*, Condorcet's idea of France to those of Richelieu and Foccart. As Verschave informs us, while Condorcet insisted that the pursuit of France's political and economic interests should in no way lead to the abuse of the rights of even a single individual, Richelieu claimed that no moral law could be higher than the defence of what he called 'les intérêts nationaux'. As for Foccart, all was apparently permissible including doing business with the devil himself where his country's interests were concerned.[29] Verschave's preference for a France that is respectful of the rights and interests of other nations does however leave us with an Africa cast as the aggrieved and helpless victim of political manipulation, making it a continent where nothing apparently goes well, even though this time it is largely the fault of others, in contrast to Richard-Molard's vision of a continent of doom and gloom beginning with its very geography.

5. Cartier's Brand of Anti-Colonialism

The last point I raise concerns a case of clear cultural self-reassertion. In two series of reports published in the popular Parisian weekly magazine *Paris-Match* in 1956 and 1964, the journalist Raymond Cartier offered a diagnosis of his country's colonial and post-colonial involvement with black Africa, making declarations that have crystallised

[29] For Verschave's comments on Condorcet's, Cardinal de Richelieu's and Foccart's conceptions of national selfhood, see *Noir silence*, pp. 557-558.

into what is known today as 'le cartiérisme' – that doctrine of French African policy grounded in hard-nosed national economic self-interest.[30] In the first series of reports, Cartier sought to establish that African colonies were not vital to France's economic prosperity and its political standing in the world. Rather, the colonies which to him made up the most infertile regions of the continent were an unnecessary economic burden, with France putting in it more than it received. Moreover, he derided the folly of trying to improve conditions on a continent that was to him so large and backward that France's best efforts would amount to no more than a drop in the ocean. Hence the need for level-headedness particularly in a post-War world context where France's power and prestige had irrevocably waned and where the colonies, buoyed by independence movements world wide (the spirit of Bandoeng), were poised to break free from colonial control. It was no longer a time for sentiments and illusions but one for rational choices and decisions, aimed at a rapid transfer of sovereignty. It was Africa that needed France, not the reverse: 'L'Afrique Noire, privée de son pilier français s'écroulerait instantanément dans la misère et le chaos'.[31]

Eight years later, in his 1964 series of reports,[32] Cartier picked up from where he left off. This time he was sounding a new alarm: his country's ill-advised financial involvement with its erstwhile African colonies and with the wider world of newly independent developing nations. To him, it was as if nothing had changed. France had

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[30]The first series appeared in 1956. It comprised three interrelated reports, all of which carried the generic title of 'En France noire avec Raymond Cartier'. The reports featured in *Paris-Match*, 383, le 11 août, 1956, pp. 38-41; *Paris-Match*, 384, le 18 août, 1956, pp. 35-37; and *Paris-Match*, 386, le 1er Septembre, 1956, pp. 39-41.

[31] *Paris-Match*, 384, p. 36.

[32] This second series also comprised three interconnected reports, which went under the generic and clearly alarmist title, 'Attention! La France dilapide son argent'. For more details, see *Paris-Match*, 777, le 29 février, 1964, pp.102-105; *Paris-Match*, 778, le 7 mars, 1964, pp. 3-11; and *Paris-Match*, 779, le 14 mars 1964, pp. 3-9.

simply replaced one form of reckless spending with another. Her aid to developing nations was a wholesale depletion of its resources: an absurd humanitarian venture which risked transforming the country into a 'pays sous-développé'.[33] The resources spent abroad were needed at home and would serve a more useful purpose there like upgrading the country's infrastructure on all fronts, and Cartier claimed: 'nous avons bâti partout sauf chez nous'.[34] He lamented the situation of France's poor and referred to the overcrowded homes in which some of them lived as 'un tableau asiatique'. France's efforts, he felt, should be directed at building a strong and viable Europe, whose nations were becoming increasingly interdependent. As regards her aid policy, this should be integrated with that of the rest of Europe. That would enable her to tailor her aid to her resources.

There is nothing wrong in Cartier, the patriot, calling for sanity in France's utilisation of its resources and saying that its first priority should be tackling its own socio-economic problems. But must he do so by dismissing other nations and cultures as being congenitally backward? Must he do so by being insensitive to the injustices of colonial rule? To him, his country had no reason to atone for its imperial past: '[S']il lui est arrivé de détruire, il a construit au centuple, et après la fin prématurée de la colonisation, il n'a pas à prendre l'attitude morale d'un coupable'.[35]

There is obviously a distinction between Cartier's unabashed advocacy in the 1950s and1960s of a policy of national self-interest and Verschave's virulence in the late 1990s and the early 2000s against what he describes as France's criminal exploitation of Africa. Yet curiously both of them speak in my judgment from a position of strength in relation

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[33] *Paris-Match*, 778, p. 3.
[34] Ibid., p. 4.
[35] *Paris-Match*, 779, p. 5.

to Africa, which emerge in their texts either as a bad and unsolvable case of backwardness or a helpless victim of external manipulation.

Section B

Fiction

The categories of flawed cross-cultural discourse that I have identified above are not restricted to the essays alone. The novels also display a range of problematic cross-cultural positions, which can be summarized as a replay, or rather, a reassertion (in the distinctive context of each text), of the cultural assumptions underpinning the colonial enterprise and from which their authors have sought to distance themselves. These assumptions seem to crystallise round the problem of African agency in the novels. By African agency I mean the function assigned to African characters and the African world: the extent to which these emerge as embodiments of positive action, or generate and regulate meaningful and valued, self-sufficient existence.

I will begin again with Le Clézio's *Onitsha*. Here I will discuss among other things the cross-cultural implications in the novel of the cultural assumptions and biases of some of the sources the author uses, showing how these impact on the quality of the African world depicted and of the African characters that inhabit it. In Constant's *Ouregano* and *White Spirit*, the problem appears to be the overall picture of the African world she

imagines, in particular the quality of her African characters. Does her extremely unflattering image of European operators on the colonial African scene ultimately result in the restoration of agency to her African actors? With Grainville's *Les flamboyants*, the hymn to the elements and Tokor's tropical luxuriance seem to be a double-edged sword: the life-giving forces associated with the African continent are indeed shown to be at the same time forces of destruction, requiring the calming effects of 'reason'. Finally, Conchon's *L'état sauvage* stands out as a site of two mutually opposed perspectives: anti-colonialism and cultural self-criticism on the one hand, and cultural self-reassertion on the other, with no intermediate point of a celebratory approach to difference.

6. *Onitsha*: Sources and the Problem of African Agency

Le Clézio's wholesale indictment of colonial rule and his unmistakable openness to cultural difference cannot deflect attention from a fundamental issue: the nature and quality of the African world he envisions. Is the author's situation as a westerner and a citizen of a country of considerable authority and influence in Africa to be discounted altogether on the basis of his disavowal of colonial rule? In the strict context of the novel, should the relationship of Geoffroy, Maou and Fintan with Africa be assessed solely on the basis of their hatred of European colonial administrators and their empathetic disposition towards Africans and the African world?

There is first the problem of Geoffroy's single-minded obsession with Meroe and of Maou's exoticist view of Africa prior to her arrival in the continent. One might argue that the only alternative to that single-mindedness and exoticism is the harsh world of the

Rodes and the Simpsons. But if Geoffroy and his family are the best that is on offer where intercultural relations are concerned, does *Onitsha* not posit albeit unwittingly the ultimate impenetrability of cultural difference? In a recent well-argued study of the novel, Robert A. Miller, mindful of Geoffroy's position within the imperial power structure, raises this question about him: 'Faut-il l'assimiler dans sa poursuite obsessionnelle de ce rêve [Meroe], à l'Africain Cheikh Anta Diop qui voulait trouver des antécédents africains de la civilisation humaine ou plutôt à l'Africaniste Frobénius qui cherchait à interpréter la culture et le passé de l'Afrique en fonction de ses croyances européennes?'[36] Implicit in this clear-cut distinction that Miller makes between Diop the African and Frobenius the European Africanist is a warning about the limited scope of Geoffroy's cross-cultural perspective. The perspective is judged here by Miller to be more in tune with the exoticist desires and expectations of the Western traveller that he is than with what Africa might be from the perspectives of the indigenous peoples of the continent. It would seem that such a warning is still relevant in today's postcolonial world. I am thinking of Théophile Obenga who speaks of an ever-widening ideological rift between African academics and their European counterparts in their study of African history, languages, civilizations and politics.[37] In point of fact, Miller himself does not just take issue with the cross-cultural perspective of Geoffroy and of the colonial generation to which he belongs, but asks if Fintan, a descendant of that generation, can produce a postcolonial narrative. The thrust of his analysis provides an answer, namely that Fintan's own perspective on Africa is caught between 'some postcolonial

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[36] Robert Miller, '*Onitsha*, ou le rêve de mon père: Le Clézio et le postcolonial', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 6, 1 (2003), 31-41 (p. 34).
[37] Théophile Obenga, *Le sens de la lutte contre l'africanisme eurocentriste* (Gif-sur-Yvette, France, Khepera; Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001).

cosmopolitanism (positing individual freedom, roaming through cultural differences)' and 'a new globalized colonialism (positing stereotypes of the Other and global reproduction of the self as dominant culture)'.[38]

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Le Clézio takes no critical distance from Geoffroy, Maou or Fintan. Geoffroy's quest is at times seen as an obsession, a feverish, almost fanatical, indeed illusory search for origins. Certain remarks by the narrator are quite revealing in this respect. For instance: 'L'Afrique brûle comme un secret, comme une fièvre. Geoffroy ne peut pas détacher son regard, un seul instant, il ne peut pas rêver d'autre rêve'.[39] In this sense, the technique of textual distancing can be seen an act of authorial distancing, enabling Le Clézio to step away from Geoffroy's fixation on a past that is imagined, not real: a dream world, a fantasy, an escapist's paradise, at variance with the realities of life in a colony.

Geoffroy's obsession with Meroe is further questioned in terms of its negative impact on his family life. He first meets Maou in the summer of 1935 in Nice following his undergraduate studies in Engineering in London. Their encounter and subsequent marriage result in Maou's pregnancy. But Geoffroy soon leaves her to embark on his search, which nothing seems to outweigh in importance. As Maou later recalls, 'Il [Geoffroy] ne parlait que de cela [...], de la reine noire qui avait traversé le désert jusqu'au coeur de l'Afrique. Il parlait de cela comme si rien du monde présent n'avait d'importance, comme si la lumière de la légende brillait plus que le soleil visible'.[40] She thus gives birth to their son Fintan in his absence and the outbreak of war in Europe delays further the family's reunion, leaving Maou desperate and

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[38] '*Onitsha*, ou le rêve de mon père', 31-41 (p. 31).
[39] *Onitsha*, p. 99.
[40] Ibid., p. 97.

insecure. When in the end they all meet, Fintan is eight: father and son are total strangers to each other.

Maou's own expectations relating to Geoffroy's project and her subsequent re-evaluation of it seem to show an exoticist mind at work. Before the war, she looks forward to joining Geoffroy in the Africa of his dreams and reads with relish the letters she receives from him. She can hardly wait to join him and share the secret about the queen of Meroe. Yet feeling helpless and abandoned in a Europe that is at war, she readily questions Geoffroy's motive and action, held down to earth as she is from her exoticist flight of fancy by the quotidian realities of privation and insecurity. The narrator leads us into her thoughts in these terms: 'Il n'y avait plus d'avenir. Il n'y avait que le silence quotidien, qui consumait l'histoire. Maou pensait à la reine noire de Meroë, à l'impossible voyage à travers le désert. Pourquoi Geoffroy n'était pas là?'[41] Her expectations are particularly dampened upon her arrival in Onitsha. There, faced with the humdrum realities of the commercial operations in which her husband is involved, and with the morally repugnant day-to-day incidents of colonial oppression, her disenchantment about the Africa she had dreamt about while in Europe is unmistakable. As the narrator notes, 'Maintenant, Maou avait rejoint le fleuve, elle était venue enfin, dans ce pays dont elle avait rêvé si longtemps. Et tout était si banal. Ollivant, Chanrai, United Africa [names of foreign-owned trading companies] est-ce pour ces noms-là qu'on avait vécu?'[42]

A key question that arises is this: is Geoffroy's desire to unravel the mystery that is Africa made even more intense in the face of the humdrum realities of colonial

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[41] Ibid., p. 98.
[42] Ibid.

commercial operations that his wife complains about? Is Meroe ultimately a means then for him to escape from the uninspiring and indeed inhuman world of exactions over which Simpson and Rodes preside? But if this alternative to the African world of Simpson and Rodes is itself subject to doubt, then why make it so central a component of the novel, both thematically and structurally? These questions are particularly relevant when one assesses Fintan's own attitude to his father's dream. While he is attracted to the vision of Meroe, Fintan does raise doubt about its veracity. Indeed Geoffroy's mythical fusion of past and present, the Nile and the Niger, the gods and goddesses of Egypt and those of the Yoruba and Igbo spiritual pantheons seems to lose its poetic edge when juxtaposed with passages conveying Fintan's doubt: he feels that his father's quest is a futile gesture. One can almost touch the pity he feels for him in what emerges as the physically repulsive and indeed intimidating surroundings of the dream.

> Il faisait chaud. Les fourmis ailées tournoyaient autour des lampes, les margouillats étaient accrochés aux taches de lumière, leur têtes aux yeux fixes au centre d'une auréole de moustiques.
>
> Fintan etait sur le seuil. Il regardait cet homme fébrile, qui marchait de long en large devant sa carte, il écoutait sa voix. Il essayait d'imaginer cette ville, au centre du fleuve, cette ville mystérieuse [the new Meroe] où le temps s'était arrêté. Mais ce qu'il voyait, c'était Onitsha, immobile au bord du fleuve, avec ses rues possiéreuses et ses maisons aux toits de tôle rouillée, ses embarcadères, les bâtiments de la United Africa, le palais de Sabine Rodes et le trou béant de Gerald Simpson. Peut-être qu'il était trop tard déjà.[43]

The reader is certainly miles away here from the beauty of the passages detailing the westward journey of Amanirenas and her descendants in search of a new home. Geoffroy seen through his son's eyes is just a lonely intellectual who has lost touch with the uninspiring, concrete, every day colonial African reality.

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[43] Ibid., p. 135.

But even if one allows that the poetic quality of the passages relating to Meroe constitutes in itself both Le Clézio's and his protagonist's empathetic response to African situations, there are yet other problems, relating this time to the cross-cultural perspective that underpins the very sources he uses. As we have shown, the description of the Meroitic queen as 'la reine noire' and 'la dernière des pharaons' echoes Cheikh Anta Diop's thesis of a black Ancient Egypt, while the reference to the Igbo practice of facial scarification points to the researches and writings of M. D. W. Jeffreys. A close look at the two sources reveals a contradiction of which Le Clézio seems to be unaware. Of course both Diop and Jeffreys suggest in their writings a North-South or East-West cultural flow from Egypt to West Africa. Yet to Diop Egypt itself was black, implying a cultural flow among groups of black people located at different positions on the African continent. By contrast, in his assessment of the religious/spiritual affinities between the Igbo and the Ancient Egyptians, Jeffreys opts for a scenario in which a culturally barren, black West Africa is seen to be at the receiving end of developments from more enlightened, non-black societies. To him, there was nothing to suggest that both the Igbo and the Egyptians had independently developed their religious/spiritual systems, or that the cultural flow had been from West Africa to Egypt. Speaking more generally about the various forms of historical and cultural contact between West Africa and the wider world, he writes:

> Whether the signs of the zodiac came to the Gold Coast via Bornu and the Niger, or via the Moors and Timbuctu, or via the Mediterranean and Lisbon, does not alter the fact that the design came from the ancient Near East and did not evolve in West Africa. Now the winged solar disk also arose in the ancient Near East and, I suggest, like the signs of the zodiac, iron-making, and the loom, spread westwards to the Niger.[44]

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[44] M. D. W. Jeffreys, 'The Winged Solar Disk or Ibo ItSi Facial Scarification', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 21, 2 (1951) 93-111 (p. 106).

This contrast between spheres of cultural backwardness and spheres of cultural development and sophistication seems to resurface, perhaps unwittingly, in the very passage of *Onitsha* that I presented earlier as a signal case of cross-cultural celebration, showcasing harmonious intercultural collaboration between Meroe and the peoples of the Niger. A second look at the same passage shows two unequal levels of cultural development and sophistication at work. Indeed the so-called alliance between 'les peuples noirs d'Osimiris' and 'les gens de Meroe' is one in which the former operate solely as providers of material things, namely, 'les graines, les fruits, les poissons, les bois précieux, le miel sauvage, les peaux de léopard et les dents d'éléphant'. As for the people of Meroe, presumably the descendants of or first recipients of Near Eastern cultures, they bring to the intercultural market an even more precious commodity: their brain power, described as 'leur magie, leur science. Le secret des métaux, la fabrication des pots, la médecine, la connaissance des astres. Ils ont donné les secrets du monde des morts'. It is not difficult to imagine which of the two supposedly equal groups is more equal than the other.

This unequal flow of cultural exchange between the ancient cultures of West Africa and their Near Eastern counterparts leads us to a second level of unequal cultural exchange: Geoffroy's own position in relation to the oral cultures of Africa. I have shown the hierarchical nature of his relationship with Moïses, the expert in local lore from whom he learns about legends and creation myths. But Moïses's superiority is momentary: he is superseded by Geoffroy in that he places the stories Moïses tells in a wider cultural context, tracing their roots back to Egypt and thus proving more

knowledgeable than his African master, whose vision is confined to his African locale and lacks ultimately the synthesizing power of his European pupil.

I have discussed the figure of Amanirenas as a high point in Le Clézio's attempt to enter empathetically into African situations. Yet even here Geoffroy's position of superiority as initiator of the cross-cultural contact, as the committed European prepared at all costs to unravel the mystery surrounding Africa's pre-colonial past, is self-evident.

Finally, I will raise the issue of Fintan's own relationship with the African world. I mentioned earlier his quick adaptation, under the influence of his African playmate Bony, to the African physical and indeed cultural environment. That adaptation is epitomised by his shedding of his western clothes and shoes, by roaming about freely with Bony and by travelling occasionally with Rodes in a boat on the Niger. But this direct, physical contact with the continent is toned down by the fact it is ultimately a transient one. Through no fault of his own he leaves Onitsha (as a twelve-year-old his destiny is obviously tied to that of his parents) to return to Europe where he culturally belongs. Yet memories of Africa persist and towards the end of the novel and following his father's death, these memories replace in the text the narrative of his father's dream of the queen of Meroe. In the long missive Fintan addresses to his sister Marima, a young student in France (significantly his mother got pregnant with Marima just before the family's departure from Onitsha), he speaks of Onitsha to Marima very fondly, stating that though far away in both time and space, he still smells

> l'odeur du poisson frit au bord du fleuve, l'odeur de l'igname et du foufou. Je ferme les yeux et j'ai dans la bouche le goût très doux de la soupe d'arachide. Je

> sens l'odeur lente des fumées qui montent le soir au-dessus de la plaine d'herbes. j'entends les cris des enfants.[45]

To such a vivid recollection of the delights of the African world one must add the sensitivity and pathos with which he speaks of the danger hanging over that world. For the impetus behind his missive is the Biafran war of secession (in 1968 the war was in its second year). He laments over the devastation visited on the places he had known and feels guilty that he is in a position to do nothing to stop the horror. The letter seems to be a desperate gesture on his part to convey to his sister his sense of a people on whose soil she was conceived and to whose customs she ultimately belongs.

Yet how reliable is that knowledge, given that Fintan's recollections occur some twenty years after the event and indeed so far away, as he himself admits, from Africa? As though aware of this problem, Le Clézio places Fintan's missive in the third and final portion of his novel whose heading is significantly 'Loin d'Onitsha', emphasizing a temporal disconnection between Fintan and the Africa he had known.[46] But if one needs to make a distinction between Fintan and the author, the note of doom and gloom on which the novel ends is perhaps not Fintan's alone. Fintan's comments on the Nigerian civil war are of course based on Western media reports of that tragedy, again suggesting a disconnection between Fintan the commentator and his subject matter. But there seems to be nothing to suggest that the war itself ended in 1970 and that by 1991, the year *Onitsha* first appeared, Nigeria and specifically its Igbo-speaking regions had moved on.

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[45] *Onitsha*, p. 279.

[46] The first part of the novel carries as heading 'Un long voyage', which details the sea journey from Europe to Africa while the second has as its heading 'Onitsha'. This part constitutes the core of the novel and deals with Fintan and his parents' experience of the colonial African scene.

7. *Ouregano* and *White Spirit*: the Burden of Racial and Cultural Stereotypes

The problem of African agency is perhaps even more pronounced in Constant's *Ouregano* and *White Spirit* than in Le Clézio's *Onitsha*. True, as I have shown, Constant like Le Clézio does not limit her portrayal of conditions in colonial black Africa to condemning the excesses of European rule. Her vision of colonial society does invest Africans and the African world with positive qualities, as seen in her foregrounding of the power, skill and magnanimity of the hunters during the fire episode. But while Le Clézio devotes a substantial portion of his work to Meroe and its legendary queen, the fire episode in *Ouregano* seems to be an exception to the rule, that is an aberration within a wider canvas of 'l'enfer d'un huis-clos équatorial' that Clavreuil speaks of: a canvas in which the African world - its human and physical environment - comes in for severe battering. Little wonder that in his assessment of the novel, Clavreuil deplores what he sees as its author's perpetuation of racial and cultural stereotypes. He first commends Constant for the literary qualities of her book, calling it 'une réussite littéraire',[47] but then castigates her for failing as he puts it, 'd'évoquer une Afrique plus positive. Cela finit par devenir pour le moins lassant de lire qu'en Afrique les Noirs sont immanquablement paresseux, voleurs et menteurs'.[48]

One could of course argue that to accuse Constant of cultural stereotyping as Clavreuil does is to suggest that she indulges in her novel in cultural self-congratulation and a resulting denigration of difference. In fact, her image of Europe through the mainly

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[47] *Notre librairie*, 91(janvier-février 1988), 138-40 (p. 139).
[48] *Notre librairie*, p. 139.

negative European characters she creates (Tiffany being the only exception) does not in any way amount to cultural self-congratulation. One could also say that the reductive image of Africans that Clavreuil identifies is not necessarily a function of Constant's own attitude to racial and cultural difference and that the image should be seen as resulting from an explicitly negative view of the impact of colonial rule. That view is facilitated by the distance, both temporal and spatial, that separates Constant from the colonial African world she depicts.

Yet even though Constant wrote about colonial black Africa with the benefit of hindsight, the positive image of Africans and of the African world she offers in her book is not without its problems. True, she portrays traditional hunters as being skilled in handling fire and as being magnanimous in their attitude to their frightene oppressors. Yet lacking in individuality, they are thus no more than a fleeting moment of brightness in an African world in which the key actors and individuals are the white colonial overlords. This is particularly so when one considers her only attempt at individuating Africans in her text ends in the creation of characters whose distinguishing qualities are complete submissiveness and utter loss. The most important African character in the text - the medical assistant N'Diop - is indeed no figure of strength and power. Caught between an elite colonial training and his African heritage, he is at ease neither with the white colonial overlords that he serves nor with the natives of Ouregano, from whom he in fact recoils, seeing in them an inferior caste of humans whose mode of life and disease-laden environment are at variance with life as lived in his native Senegal. Alienated as he is from his surroundings and seeking refuge in poetry that glorifies an original Africa now adulterated by European corrupting presence, N'Diop is ill-equipped

to face up to and survive the brutalities of colonial oppression. He offers no resistance in his confrontation with Beretti and goes meekly, even willingly to his death in as it were a final, suicidal gesture of submission to white supremacy.

One could object that if N'Diop cuts the figure of a helpless African anti-hero at the mercy of the circumstances of foreign domination, there are individuated African characters in *White spirit* who rise up to the challenge of colonial subjugation and take their destiny into their own hands. A case in point is the fiery African evangelist Emmanuel and his lover Reine Mab. The two do emerge as a match for their white oppressors. Emmanuel's insurrectional activities culminate in disrupting the operations of the plantation economy, portending not only the imminent ruin of the white oppressors's neo-colonial economic interests but indeed that of the political, social and cultural order upon which those interests thrive. Reine Mab for her part stands out by her business acumen; her dream is to become one day 'la grande commerçante de l'Afrique'.[49] That dream of personal gain makes her and Emmanuel to go their separate ways, but she does realize it in the end. Using proceeds from sales of the cleaning agent to their followers, she buys the local branch of the white-owned 'RESSOURCE DE L'AFRICAIN and sets out on what one suspects will be a successful career in business.

But for all its revolutionary dimension, Emmanuel's action in freeing the coolies is quintessentially self-defeating. Ironically the chapter in which the action occurs is entitled 'Les bienheureux'.[50] He leads the coolies not to a collective salvation but to a collective tragedy. He and his followers commit suicide using the very substance Reine Mab sells to set up her business. Emmanuel's use of his new faith as an instrument of

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[49] *White spirit*, p. 171.
[50] Ibid., pp. 188-194.

dissent and insurrection seems in the end to replay on a collective level N'Diop's helplessness and final act of submission to the murderous Beretti. Significantly, in the very last chapter of the novel captioned (again ironically) 'Happy End',[51] the representatives of white neo-colonial interests respond to Emmanuel's action quite characteristically: frightened but none the less insensitive, they go ahead with a beauty contest planned earlier and which they now see as a much needed life-affirming response to the black evangelist's destructiveness. Clearly, Emmanuel's misguided attack on a system of privilege and exploitation drowns out the effects of such personal black success stories as Reine Mab's.

A more fundamental problem with both *Ouregano* and *White Spirit* has to do with Constant's portrayal in them of a pervasively intimidating physical and cultural space whose contours seem to recall both Monod's and Mounier's vision of a continent of extreme physical attributes. I have noted already Constant's qualification of tropical Africa as 'féroce et pauvre' and her description of her contact with the continent as a 'confrontation violente'. I have also noted her reference to her fictional worlds in general as 'univers concentrationnaires'. I have explained these words in terms of their political and social significance, showing how Constant distances herself from her continent's involvement with black Africa. Yet such cultural self-distancing does not entirely neutralise, much less eliminate in her texts, the cultural biases and presuppositions inherent in her words. If the words point to her denunciatory stance in relation to the inhuman action of the holders of colonial and neo-colonial power, they also convey a sense of a frustratingly difficult environment where man is at the mercy of the hostile forces of nature.

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[51] Ibid., pp. 204-211.

If Constant's frequent switching of narrative viewpoints enables the reader to contrast Tiffany's and the anonymous narrator's positive reaction to the fire with the fear and uncertainty felt by the European adults, that narrative strategy sometimes leads to a complete reversal of the qualities associated with Africans and the African world. Within the passages that extol the skill and magnanimity of the traditional hunters are comments that are clearly unflattering, suggesting a laid-back attitude on the part of those who command the fire. Apparently they only act out of necessity, taking from nature what they need and instinctively returning to inaction and sleep until the need for action arises again. The narrator sums up the scene in these terms: 'Une nuit de chasse dans l'année, la nuit où tout brûlait. Après il n'y avait plus rien, ils [the natives of Ouregano] retournaient au sommeil jusqu'à ce que tout repoussât et tout renaquît.'[52]

And paradoxically, these same natives who seem to find all they need in nature and live by its rhythms are portrayed elsewhere in the text almost exclusively as a mass of suffering humanity. Here, Constant's phrases 'féroces et pauvres', 'confrontation violente' and 'univers concentrationnaires' take centre stage in the text, echoing perhaps unwittingly the jaundiced view of Africa and Africans of her creations Bonenfant, Dubois and Murano, and of course the ill-fated N'Diop himself, from whom she consistently distances herself. Indeed the overwhelming sense of despair, death and disease that pervades the text is certainly not that of the death-obsessed Dubois alone. Dubois's presence and views are part and parcel of a fictional world inhabited also by hordes of hungry lepers, by communities laid waste by sleeping sickness. Indeed the narrator's attempt to relativise things by claiming that 'on ne mourait pas plus à OUREGANO

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[52] *Ouregano*, p. 178.

qu'ailleurs, on ne mourait pas moins non plus'[53] simply pales into insignificance beside the same narrator's observation that

> OUREGANO n'avait pas besoin d'un Administrateur. On n'administre pas le néant, ni la mort, ni la faim. Cela s'organise tout seul selon un cycle infernal où les hommes n'ont rien à faire. Car la faim entraîne la maladie, la maladie, la faim, donc la mort. Soigner la maladie, nourrir la faim, écarter la mort , ne sont point les besognes d'administrateur. Aussi Monsieur Dubois administrait-il toute une region, et OUREGANO ne servait de siège qu'aux bureaux, c'était rassurant quand on voyait OUREGANO, c'était rassurant quand on voyait les autres villages, les uns après les autres, les pouvoirs de Monsieur Dubois s'exerçaient toujours ailleurs. Il était l'homme des 'plus loin', des 'plus tard'.[54]

The passage is intended as a sarcastic dig at Dubois, at his fatalism, his incompetence and inertia. Yet the underlying impression of a continent of horrors and misery articulated in the passage belongs to a much wider conception of the continent. There is an inescapable feeling that Dubois is being blamed not for causing the horrors and misery (apparently endemic to Africa) but for doing nothing about them.

This difficult and dangerous human space acquires in *White Spirit* a specific dimension: a playground of reactionary forces which though conceived at one level as black Africa's logical response to foreign domination, give the impression of a place of anomy: a gaping hole of darkness and isolation in which occult forces unleash violence and death and where the unwary white colonizer, or more accurately, neo-colonizer, gets much more than he bargains for. The overwhelming sense of abject isolation and loss is conveyed in terms of the way Victor, the young fortune-hunter, feels himself catapulted from one place to another, from his little French village to the port city of Bordeaux, and from Bordeaux right into the belly of the beast: the ironically named Africa-bound steamer LA

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[53] Ibid., p. 135.
[54] Ibid., pp. 50-51.

VOLONTE DE DIEU, and from that hell-hole of a ship to that rotten heap of a town PORT-BANANE. From there he moves to

> ce village sans nom, dans ce trou ultime et obscure qu'était le salon de Guastavin. dans quelque chose qui approchait le désespoir. C'était loin, trop profond, il faudrait trop d'effort, trop de temps pour remonter la pente; déjà, on ne devinait plus le jour. Il comprit ce qu'on disait à l'église quand on parlait d'éternité.[55]

There is an echo here of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the European protagonist Marlow journeys by sea to Africa, moving from one point to another up the Congo river until he reaches the 'inner station', the culmination of his adventure into a dangerous continent. It is worth noting here Achebe's assessment of Conrad's image of Africa. He calls Conrad a racist for what he reads as his unforgivably defamatory picture of his continent.[56] I am not by any means suggesting that Constant is a racist and I will hasten to add that Conrad himself made no bones about the injustices of colonial exploitation. In a widely quoted phrase, he decribes European imperial adventure in the Congo as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'.[57] In *White Spirit*, one may argue that Guastavin is a prisoner of his own making: the cruel and exploitative commercial concern he oversees makes him an obvious target of the plantation workers. As a strategy of survival, he barricades himself in his house and thus becomes the creator of the very darkness that surrounds him. He is destroyed by the very forces his reprehensible dealings with Africa unleash. But ultimately the forces of resistance and change dissolve themselves in acts of gratuitous self-annihilation, leaving their survivors within the expatriate European

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[55] Ibid., p. 60.
[56] For details of Achebe's critique of Conrad's portrayal of the indigenous people of Belgian Congo, see 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *The Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), 782-94.
[57] See 'Geography and some explorers', in *Last Essays* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1926), 1-32, (p. 25).

community to gather the pieces together in what can only be a new round of exploitative control of Africa. In the world of Beretti and N'Diop and of Guastavin and Emmanuel, there seems to be no hope of bridging the cultural chasm and changing the system of political and economic imbalances it thrives on.

8. *Les flamboyants* and the Issue of Tropical Excesses

I adopted Tempels' notion of 'vital force' to discuss Grainville's portrayal of Africa as a site of nature's physical and spiritual regenerative powers. But while both Tempels and Grainville in their respective ways posit the specificity of Africa and attempt in so doing to engage positively with the continent, an unavoidable matter still arises. The elemental force and dynamism they locate at the heart of the Africa they describe bring us back to the cultural binarism I associated earlier with Gide's conception of black African cultural and artistic products. I read the elemental force and dynamism Tempels and Grainville ascribe to Africa as variations, like Gide's view of African art and culture, on a western thematic of a natural and untamed Africa. I have already dealt in my discussion of Gide with the self-evident problem of cultural reductionism posed by this. It is worth recalling also that critics of Tempels, while recognising his pioneering role in positing an identifiable, self-sufficient African ontology, have in the same breath taken him to task for homogenising for purposes of Christian conversion, what was obviously a culturally complex and diverse continent. Hence Mudimbe's contention that the precepts and aims of Tempels' book 'are those of his church, his culture and his period'.[58] I aim to show

[58] V. Y. Mudimbe, 'An African Practice of Philosophy: A Personal Testimony', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/ Revue africaine de philosophie*, XIX (2005), 21-36, p. 27). For further assessment of the

here that even if one allows that the thematic of a natural and untamed Africa constitutes in *Les flamboyants* a clear case of a positive and empathetic engagement with difference, the western self emerges in the novel (as it does ultimately in both Gide and Tempels) as the ultimate cultural arbitrator: it celebrates and merges with its presumed African opposite but only within the limits and boundaries that it sets for such cross-cultural celebration and merger, thus retaining in the final analysis the privilege of agency.

This leads me to a key issue. To what extent does Grainville's African hero, Tokor, the embodiment of African tropicality or vitality, assume and retain the privilege of agency in the text? Does that privilege cease with his physical demise or does it live on with his subsequent panmetamorphosis? One should not overlook the fact that despite his being cast in the role of guest and indeed pupil of the African sovereign, William the European visitor is the final judge of Tokor's actions and of the African world and values he embodies. Thus if the novel celebrates right from the outset an Africa of colours, sensations, life and vitality, the fact remains that Tokor, the human dimension of these positive qualities, is a mad dictator. He is as it were nature run riot, negating in the process those very qualities he embodies. The natural world hitherto hailed becomes a hostile and dangerous place. The enormous bright red flowers of the flamboyant trees, once a symbol of the life forces associated with Africa and its ruler, now become the early signs of a network of images and symbols of a continent that is judged to be a place of extremes and excesses.

These extremes and excesses are thrown into relief at the outset, signalled in one instance by the evocation of tropical storms so fierce they cause the sun to disappear,

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limits and biases of Tempel's theory of a Bantu vitalist world view, see Paulin Hountondji, 'Histoire d'un mythe', *Présence africaine*, 91 (1974), and more importantly, his *Sur la philosophie africaine* (Paris, Maspero, 1976).

transforming the sky into a 'cumulus si monstrueux qu'une angoisse étreint toute la ville et la brousse dans un paroxysme de chaleur magnétique'.[59] Later as the action of the novel progresses and William gets to know his African host better (he accompanies Tokor on his war campaigns against rival ethnic groups and observes him from close quarters), the extremes and excesses of the African world - the natural and the human - seem to meet and merge. At work then is a principle of cosmic vastness and power best epitomized at the level of the natural world by a cataclysmic volcanic eruption whose destructive force sets everything within its reach ablaze, nearly costing Tokor himself his life. In human terms, the African extremes and excesses revolve round Tokor's quest for absolute power and knowledge: a demented, irrational quest that often manifests itself in murderous outbursts of violence against those who resist his will. It reaches a crescendo in the heart of the African jungle itself, the Hourla, where Tokor and his forces discover quite unexpectedly a group of youths from the ever elusive Diorle. The youths are bathing playfully in a river. Then ensues an act of unspeakable violence as the forces of the deluded sovereign rain bullets on the Diorle, cutting them down in their prime and destroying the peace, quietude and sanctity of their pristine home. To crown it all, Tokor plunges into the river which is now reddened by the spillage of blood and takes a macabre bath.

This is a crucial moment in the novel. The act of gratuitous violence sanctions for good the parting of ways of the African sovereign and his European guest and the opposing values they represent. The contrast between William's peaceful discovery of the Diorle and of his enjoyment of their play and Tokor's mad and murderous encounter with them proceeds from two competing temperamental dispositions: the calm, rational, self-conrolled, serene 'statue d'Apollon' finally wins the day and gains entry into the mysterious and sacred world

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[59] *Les flamboyants*, p. 10.

of the Diorle in opposition to the profoundly irrational and maniacal 'Tokor le tellurique', who is denied while alive the privilege of spiritual illumination that his guest and pupil from across the oceans attains. It is as if the African vitality or tropicality Tokor embodies is much safer dead: it is better to have it as a cultural reference point and a matter for intellectual speculation than a lived, visceral experience.

The theme of political dictatorship in Africa is of course not unique to the works of European writers like Grainville. The disillusionment that followed the first decade or so of African independence led to a thematic and stylistic reorientation in Francophone African letters, resulting in a spate of fictional works that foreground their authors' acute sensitivity to the broken promises of a better future that the prospect of self-rule had held. The theme of colonial oppression that had dominated the novels of Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono and other first-generation African writers, had given way by the end of the first decade of independence to works by Ahmadou Kourouma, Alioune Fantouré and Sony Labou Tansi, which focus on what Lilyan Kesteloot calls 'L'Afrique déchirée', meaning among other things, 'les dictatures et les boursouflures des pouvoirs arbitraries, les Bokassa, les Idi Amin, les Ojukwu, les Macias Nguema'.[60] The works of Labou Tansi, in particular *La vie et demie*[61] and *L'état honteux* ,[62] are particularly virulent in their castigation of the shameful state of African affairs. In portraying the traumas of misrule in his continent, Labou Tansi, unlike Grainville, is not burdened with the problem of having to relate to Africa from a position of exteriority in so far as his works draw inspiration from the lived experience of

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[60] Lilyan Kesteloot, *Anthologie négro-africaine: panorama critique des prosateurs, poètes, et dramaturges noirs du Xxe siècle* (Verviers: Marabout, 1981), p. 408. For a sustained analyses analyses of the thematic and formal reorientationas in African letters from the late 1960s onwards, see S. Dabla, *Nouvelles écritures africaines: romanciers de la seconde génération* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986).
[61] Sony Labou Tansi, *La vie et demie* (Paris, Seuil, 1979).
[62] Sony Labou Tansi, *L'état honteux* (Paris,Seuil, 1981).

his native continent. His African heroes, or more appropriately anti-heroes, do not require a cultural (European) counterfoil in the shape of someone like Grainville's William Irrigal. Thus in contrast to Granville, he does not run the risk of making judgments, qualifications, distinctions relating to Africa that convey, however unwittingly, biases of a cultural or racial order. Indeed Grainville's William does find in Africa an alternative cultural order which he readily embraces but only in so far as his African mentor's tropicality is kept within the bounds of reason.

9. *L'état sauvage*, or the Complete Erosion of African Agency

Within their respective problematic perspectives on black Africa, *Onitsha*, *Ouregano*, *White Spirit* and *Les flamboyant*s do contain readily identifiable attempts to engage with or indeed open up to difference. Such glimpses of positive crossings of boundaries are non-existent in Conchon's *L'état sauvage*. True, like the other novels, the book portrays the coloniser, or more accurately, the ex-coloniser in particularly virulent terms. Yet such anti-colonialism remains no less debatable in so far as it fails to grow into a sympathetic portrayal of Africans and the African world. One can argue that it is no business of the artist to relate in a predetermined way to a given cultural situation in which he happens to set his work. One can even claim that a lack of cross-cultural empathy on the part of a writer does not in any way invalidate the aesthetic riches of a work like *L'état sauvage*, whose winning of the premier French literary prize ought to be seen as proof of its intrinsic qualities. Emphasising the book's artistic merits, Anne Kraft claims:

> [...] Même si la vision de Georges Conchon nous paraît trop partiale, on aime lire *L'état sauvage*. Notons que l'action se passe en vingt-quatre heures, respectant ainsi

> l'unité de lieu et de temps de la tragédie classique. L'on peut voir là une intention de l'auteur, une manière de tourner en ridicule la bassesse des petits drames de ces personnages. Mais ce procédé donne aussi une intensité, une densité au récit, rehaussées encore par la vivacité du style, l'ironie impitoyable, l'humour grinçant que Georges Conchon manie avec brio.[63]

This is all very well. But there is perhaps more to be expected from a book like *L'état sauvage* which though a work of fiction has as its core subject matter the sensitive issue of race and cultural relations in a recently independent African state as its author imagines this to be. A question readers of the book are likely to ask is whether Conchon, given his obvious European provenance, transcends in the context of his book the biases and prejudices he castigates in it. Does his unmasking of racial and cultural antagonisms suggest, if only in strictly fictional terms, an alternative to these antagonisms? One is reminded here of those pages of *Onitsha* and *Ouregano* that engage with aspects of Africa's oral culture or historical (pre-colonial) experience. What is dispiriting about *L'état sauvage* is that looking neither into Africa's past nor yet into its future, it creates an African time warp: a dystopia, in which the ex-coloniser though virulently unmasked as racist still stands to be corrected, in the sense that there emerges nothing from Conchon's pen to serve as a foil to the ex-coloniser's jaundiced image of Africa.

Thus for readers who are more concerned with issues of political and ideological content - race and cultural relations - than purely matters of literariness, Conchon's book is at the very least a disappointment. To the Beninois academic and novelist Jean Pliya, those who have a serious grasp of African issues will no doubt wonder at the superficial understanding of Africa that underpins Conchon's book. He claims that in treating a

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[63] 'Notes de lectures', *Notre librairie*, 91 (1988), 129-149 (p.138).

subject as serious and painful as racism, Conchon had the opportunity to throw light on 'la mentalité des victimes ou des auteurs du racisme hideux et surnois', but failed signally to do so because at bottom 'M. Conchon n'avait pas l'intention de faire oeuvre humanitaire'.[64] Jean Pliya's neighbour from Togo, Yao Améla, himself an academic, is no less damning in his judgement, lumping Conchon with Céline, author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit,*[65]part of which is set in an imaginary African colony, as 'les pires écrivains sur l'Afrique que j'aie fait étudier à mes élèves; ces auteurs étaient des racistes qui cherchaient à nous faire honte d'être nés noirs africains'.[66]

Such comments may sound extreme and undifferentiated readings of Conchon and Céline. In his fury Améla fails to distinguish between each author and his work or between the two authors or the two works themselves. Be that as it may, the accuations of Améla and Pliya may be explained for instance in terms of the profoundly ambiguous way Conchon's chief protagonist Avit and his anonymous narrator relate to Africans and the African world. Indeed if Avit and the narrator seem to distance themselves from the white community's intolerance of difference, their position is itself far from consistent. I showed how as young heroes, Fintan, Tiffany and Avit offer in their contact with Africa a cross-cultural perspective that counters the racial and cultural bigotry of the older Europeans. Yet it has to be said at this point that while both Fintan and Tiffany are children, Avit is already a person of some experience: he holds a higher academic degree and has been married and tasted the

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[64] For full details of Pliya's reading of Conchon's novel, see 'Une Caricature. Georges Conchon: *L'état sauvage*', *Preuves*, 168 (1965), pp.74-76.
[65] See Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris, Gallimard, 1956).
[66] See Yao Améla, 'Sony Labou Tansi, l'Amérique et moi', in *Travaux et Documents du Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire*, 65 (Bordeaux, 2000).

bitterness of infidelity and separation. This difference is crucial and may explain the changing and paradoxical nature of his attitude to black Africa.

To start with, Avit's liberal outlook and self-proclaimed commitment to Africa are made to look hollow following his discovery that his ex-wife Laurence's latest partner is an African. Laurence's sudden desertion and her elopement to Africa with Gravenoire, a glamorous yet amoral and venal adventurer, had been a humiliating and confidence-sapping experience for Avit. The wounds had taken time to heal. Coming to Africa on a cultural mission was in fact a welcome prospect: an opportunity to put the past behind him and make a new beginning. As the narrator observes, Renard's shock at Avit's readiness 'de manger l'Afrique toute crue'[67] stems from his ignorance of what the UNESCO official had been through. But one would have thought that Avit who is so quick to proclaim that he is no racist would see nothing wrong with Laurence's relationship with Doumbé. After all, by Avit's own Western standards, Doumbé has made a success of life. He is an intellectual and a medical doctor trained in Montpellier. Even Avit's guide and mentor Orlaville, for whom sexuality is an enormous difficulty for Europeans living in tropical Africa (including himself), concedes that Doumbé has something in him. Avit at some point disputes the link Orlaville establishes between his ex-wife's behaviour and Africa's climate and wonders whether Laurence's attachment to Doumbé is not just a question of love, 'l'amour pur et nu',[68] as he puts it. It is to his credit that he is able to put his finger on the root cause of the white community's hostility to Laurence's affair with Doumbé. In a society which until recently has lorded it over the natives of Fort-Jacul, the idea of

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[67] Ibid., p. 14.
[68] Ibid., p. 109.

a rational relationship, 'd'un amour de tête'[69] as he calls it, between a white woman and a black man would seem profoundly scandalous, indeed difficult to sustain as it undermines the very foundation of colonial society. Yet Avit's insight is blunted by the fact that it points ironically to the limits of his own declared liberalism and anti-racism. In Paris a white woman's love for a black man would to him represent a marked progress in race relations. In Fort-Jacul such a relationship appears to him at bottom unthinkable: an irrational and morally indefensible act on the part of Laurence, even though he admits that her black partner Doumbé does possess 'des qualitiés humaines'[70]. In point of fact, Avit is prepared to live with the fact of being cuckolded by Gravenoire, who is white and therefore a common measure of things, however unpleasant these might be. Strangely enough, he takes solace from the fact that it is not him but Gravenoire that Laurence abandons for Doumbé. To him, the moment his ex-wife's initial fall from grace takes the comical dimension of an affair with an African, he no longer has any say in the matter, adding, 'une femme qui dégringole ainsi, forcément, on n'est pas son cousin'.[71]

And where the narrator is concerned, certain pronouncements on difference, attributable in the novel only to a heterodiegetic narrator are clearly as unflattering and biased vis-à-vis Africans as Renard's opinion is of the minister of information. I grant that Renard's immunity to the madness of racism to which his compatriots are prone finally crumbles in the face of Avit's enthusiasm and all-knowing attitude towards Africa; the narrator's own comment that the African minister Renard despises 'n'était pas

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[69] Ibid., p. 109.
[70] Ibid., p. 110
[71] Ibid., p. 75.

un aigle. Pas même une belle animale'[72], humorous as it may sound, is yet profoundly disturbing. That remark in fact marks the beginning of a passage in which the minister's physical attributes and indeed those of his African environment are held up to ridicule. He apparently lacks the physical stature of Africans from such other regions as Senegal and Ethiopia who, according to the narrator, have stirred people's imagination in Paris, where they are viewed as 'de beaux enfants de la campagne, des muscles, des torses, des hanches, tout un modelé!... et toutes sortes d'avantages. Le cliché tirailleur'.[73] It is true that by the choice of words and tone, the narrator is simply playing on certain African stereotypes which he in fact rejects. Yet what the narrator replaces them with is no less stereotypical. Indeed Modimbo Antoine's country becomes '[la] verminière centrale' where, in the absence of the 'tirailleurs', tsetse flies, carriers of the sleeping sickness virus, abound, and where 'l'aviation moustiques toujours en chasse' seeks the most fragile human tissues to deposit 'ses soutes à virus'.[74] This image of a disease-ridden African environment clearly replays the biases and prejudices of those in whom the narrator sees a 'folie meurtrière' at work in their dealings with Africans.

In *L'état sauvage* then, the most important loci of cross-cultural empathy - the narrator and the chief protagonist Avit - end up being trapped in the racial prejudices and biases they appear at one point to denounce. In this way, the novel leaves an even darker impression of a world consumed by racial bigotry. In that world and unlike the worlds of *Onitsha*, *Ouregano* and *Les flamboyants*, not even the faintest hope of an empathetic engagement with racial and cultural difference is offered.

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[72] Ibid., p. 17
[73] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[74] Ibid., p. 18.

Conclusion

To conclude this investigation of post-War scholarly and imaginative writings on black Africa from metropolitan France, I will take a detour and raise the issue of African writers. Do the positive and negative models of cross-cultural representation I have analysed characterise the works of French writers alone? Does the method used to identify the presence of the models in question yield entirely different results when applied to works by black African scholars and writers dealing with issues relating to their continent? If, as Kennedy suggests in her critique of Said, a consideration of non-Western writers may lead to a different assessment of the imperialist project, is one to assume for instance that because it was written by an African, Camara Laye's autobiographical piece *L'enfant noir* which evokes aspects of traditional life in its author's native upper Guinea, offers a far more credible image of black Africa than Le Clézio's *Onitsha*, whose reference to traditional Igbo creation myths and the Yoruba spiritual pantheon could be faulted because of the author's European hegemonic cultural provenance?

This is perhaps too large a question to be addressed adequately in the concluding pages of a thesis limited to post-war metropolitan French material. It should however be noted that if following its publication in 1953 Laye's novel attracted much critical acclaim from European readers and in fact won the Prix Charles Veillon, it drew the wrath of African readers like Mongo Beti. A Camerounian and a writer himself, Beti accused Laye of needlessly romanticising Africa and of thus pandering to the coloniser's exoticist visions of the continent. Beti felt that in writing his book Laye closed his eyes to the crucial

issue of European colonial oppression and thus failed in his duty as an African to promote his continent's struggle against foreign domination.[1]

Beti's criticism of Laye should in fact be placed in a wider context: the debate about the use to which the African writer working through the medium of a European language should put his cultural heritage. This leads us to the issue of Negritude, which Girardet identifies as being one strand of resistance and opposition both in the inter-War years and afterwards to France's colonial project and its attendant cross-cultural discourse. But we have seen that although widely acclaimed for pioneering black people's fitting response to the violence and arrogance of the European coloniser, Negritude was none the less fiercely criticised for reworking rather than undoing an externalised, Eurocentric perspective on Africa.

It is true that Soyinka's reaction to *L'enfant noir* differs radically from Beti's. Soyinka calls the book 'a deft exposition of the African world view', seeing it as epitomising a significant departure from the Eurocentrism he associates with Negritude.[2] Yet Adele King's recent study of the issue of the authorship of Laye's works seems to validate Beti's view of his uncritical acceptance of the colonial status quo. King had set out to disprove Lilyan Kesteloot's allegation that Laye was not the author of his second novel *Le regard du roi*, which had appeared barely a year after *L'enfant noir* was published. Laye had apparently admitted to Kesteloot that the true author of the novel was a white man.[3] King's findings lead her instead to confirm, not disprove, Kesteloot's claim. Drawing on archival material from France and Belgium, on published works, and on interviews, meetings and correspondence with Laye, with his relatives and friends and

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[1] For details of Beti's critical hostility to Laye's novel, see *Présence africaine*, 16 (1954), pp. 419-420.
[2] *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p. 122.
[3] Lilyan Kesteloot, *Anthlologie négro-africaine* (Verviers, Marabout, 1981), p. 468.

other people who had known and worked with the novelist in Europe and in Africa. she throws light among other things on what she calls 'the French government's involvement in the creation and promotion of areas of modern African culture, showing the extent to which a pliable young African [Laye] could be encouraged to support the official policy of creating a French Union rather than to advocate African independence'.[4] She argues that *Le regard du roi* is basically the work of a little-known Belgian author called Soulié. She adds that far from being the result of simple editorial help Laye had received while writing *L'enfant noir*, this book, though based on his early life, is itself the product of literary collaboration; its paternity being shared by Laye and two or three Europeans, some of whom had connections with the French colonial establishment. King is of course aware of the controversial nature of her claims and hastens to say that her assessment of Laye does not in any way invalidate the literary merits of such figures as Achebe and Soyinka.

In a recent issue of *Research in African Literatures* devoted to the problem of textual ownership in Francophone Africa, Abiola Irele offers a robust response to King's reassessment of Laye's authorship of his works, accusing her of basing her claim on insufficient evidence and of indeed discrediting a major African author.[5] Irele highlights King's critical inflexibility, seeing in her work a desire to press on with her case: that the Guinean author lacked the education needed to produce the books whose authorship has been attributed to him. To Irele, King not only fails to produce firm evidence for her claims but ignores a vital issue: the unique and complex situation that shapes cultural production in Africa. He argues that any meaningful discussion of questions of textual

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[4] Adele King, *Rereading Camara Laye* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 5-6.
[5] Abiola F Irele,'In Search of Camara Laye', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2006) 110-127.

ownership in contemporary Francophone Africa must bear in mind Africa's pre-modern cultural mode of production, that is, its oral tradition, where

> proverbs and stories represented a common fund from which all creative effort derived not only in its fundamental impulse but also its material, which the oral artist was free to develop according to the dynamics of the performance event. Such material thus formed part of a collective cultural capital and imaginative resource.[6]

Irele of course accepts that the same African texts are also shaped by the impulse behind the metropolitan European corpus, from which they are in part derived. They are thus also amenable to the conventions of authorship within that corpus, namely European modernity's valuation of individual genius. Irele's point of emphasis then is 'the ambiguous status of the text in the Africa context',[7] the implication being that the authorship of works by Laye and others is far too complex an issue to be settled by invoking metropolitan literary conventions alone.

This brings us to Fanon. Writing several decades before King's and Irele's respective interventions on the problem of textual ownership in the context of colonised or formerly colonised cultures, Fanon assesses the place of culture in the struggle for social and political liberation and transformation. In so doing, he locates the presence of European modes of thought in the writings of colonised people in three phases of decreasing order of influence. The first phase is what he calls 'la période d'assimilation intégrale', where the writer aims to prove he has assimilated the culture of the coloniser to perfection; his works can thus be related directly to literary schools, movements and traditions in the metropolis. The second phase of literary creativity Fanon regards as a period of soul searching as the writer, shaken by his confrontation with the West, decides by way of

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[6] Ibid., p. 123.
[7] Ibid.

memory to recover his identity. But having been alienated from his society by his encounter with the West, he can do no more than remember what he was. Recollections of childhood and of old legends permeate his works but such recollections are interpreted in terms of an aesthetic and a worldview borrowed from outside. It is a period of anxiety and malaise translated into themes of death, of nausea, indeed of self-abhorrence. The last and final phase Fanon calls the period of struggle, where the intellectual, having failed to integrate himself by way of memory into his society, decides to take that society head on, shaking it, rousing it out of its lethargy, thereby infusing into it the energy it needs to shake off the yoke of colonialism. Fanon calls this phase 'littérature de combat, littérature révolutionnaire, littérature nationale'.[8] That literature, presumably free from the constraints of borrowed philosophies and modes of thought, responds adequately to the need the writer feels 'de dire la nation, de composer la phrase qui exprime le peuple, de se faire le porte-parole d'une nouvelle realité en actes'.[9]

These arguments concerning the constraining influence of European intervention on colonised people's cultural expressions are perhaps given their most sustained formulation by the Congolese novelist and critic Mudimbe, whose *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*[10] and its sequel *The Idea of Africa*[11] explore the fundamental difficulty faced by specialists of African culture, be these Westerners or Africans. Mudimbe's core argument is that these specialists operate within a western cultural frame of reference, deploying categories and concepts derived from a western epistemological order. That situation leads him to wonder whether

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[8] Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* [1961] (Paris, Gallimard, 1968), p. 268.
[9] ibid.
[10] V. Y. Mudimbe *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988).
[11] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994).

'African Weltanschauungen and African traditional systems of thought are unthinkable and cannot be made explicit within the frame of their own rationality'.[12] One could respond by saying that deploying categories and concepts of foreign epistemological provenance to give an account of a specific culture need not be intellectually inhibiting: that in an age of increasing globalisation cultures become inevitably hybrid and in consequence all the richer. But one could also ask in the name of that very hybrid cultural ideal, and guarding against what the eminent French Orientalist Jacques Berque calls in his *Dépossession du monde*[13] the improvising uniformity imposed on the world by the nineteenth-century European coloniser: which culture is it that initiates that globalisation and regulates its pace, and which other or others is it that even in the context of their freedoms have to adapt willy-nilly and in so doing risk being swamped?

The implication of all this is that a thesis like mine, which focuses on the nature and function of one culture's perception and representation of another in a historical context shaped by colonialism and its after-effects, cannot simply be a critical exercise undertaken for its own sake. Rather, it is an exercise which, at the risk of being taxed with undue moralisation, seeks to highlight the laudable goal the writers investigated set themselves explicitly or otherwise, namely the promotion of cross-cultural understanding in which Europe's colonial project has been found wanting. As I noted earlier, Girardet argues that what was absent among proponents and opponents of France's colonial expansionist policy was respect for difference and the will to understand it. This is perhaps too harsh a judgement to make, underplaying as it does the anti-colonial and cultural self-critical discourses he investigates, especially in view of the fact that he

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[12] *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, p. x.
[13] Jacques Berque, *Dépossession du monde* (Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1964).

himself falls into the trap of cultural self-congratulation that he associates with those he criticises. As regards Said, I noted that by taking for granted as he does in his *Orientalism* a western author's involvement with the power structures of his culture, one may underplay the ways in which that writer calls into question the very values and ideologies that shape the imperial closure within which he writes. The focus of chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis on features of the positive model of cross-cultural representation is prompted by a desire to emphasise the need for a constant discriminatory attitude towards non-African representations of Africa. There are clear attempts at cross-cultural understanding, problematic though the end product of such attempts often is. I hope my discussion of the themes of anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and celebration of difference which are central to essays as varied as those by the philosopher and critic Sartre, the sociologist Balandier and the human-rights activists Verschave, and to novels as different as those by Le Clézio, Constant and Grainville, has shown this to be the case. Today, in a polarised and dangerous world characterised by mutual distrust and the fear and violence it generates, the existence and value of such anti-colonialism, cultural self-criticism and celebration of difference need to be recognised. This brings to mind the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the latter's subsequent military riposte in Afghanistan and Iraq; a polarised world of fear and violence which the distinguished African writer Wole Soyinka described in the 2004 series of Reith lectures in these memorable words: 'I am right; you are dead'.[14] It is thus important to recall here Constant's words relating to Tiffany and Moïse for the constructive and harmonious intercultural possibilities they suggest. Described as 'une marche vers quelque chose de

[14] Significantly, the lectures themselves carry the general title of 'climate of fear', which captures appropriately the general mood of terror unleashed by the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath. For details of the lectures, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2004/ >[accessed 31 May 2004].

plus loin, une nécessité charnelle, un apaisement. Car il y avait de la tendresse à être là ensemble, et à n'être rien que d'être l'autre, le complément et le but', the relationship betweenTiffany and Moïse holds the promise of an alternative cross-cultural encounter. It is an encounter founded not on fear and violence that intolerance to difference engenders, but on reciprocal respect, love and understanding.

That said, misconceptions about other cultures die hard in again today's world, which, at another level, is characterised primarily, the official dislocation of empire notwithstanding, by the global reach of western economic and technological ascendancy and its attendant global political, intellectual and cultural outcomes. Thus the second issue I have sought to address in the thesis and in chapter 4 in particular is this: while the scholars and writers examined openly acknowledge the injustices of European colonial exploitation and celebrate aspects of African culture, their essays and novels are flawed by unacknowledged assumptions of the superiority of European culture and modes of thought. As intellectuals, they may have had no vested interest in the economic exploitation and political subjugation of black Africa (as the colonial regimes and their apologists once did). Yet their benevolent discourse, emancipatory in appearance and doubtless in intention, remains nonetheless affiliated to the discourse of control. For all their attempt to shed the colonial mentality, they still exemplify in certain respects the alienation which Fanon characterises as 'Le Blanc, esclave de sa supériorité'.[15] I hope the theme of cultural self-reassertion that I have analysed demonstrates the pertinence of this qualification. I grant that a text like Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* written at the height of European imperialism does contain as Porter demonstrates in his critique of Said, voices that conflict with and indeed contradict the supremacist values and

[15] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, Seuil, 1952), p. 48.

ideologies that text foregrounds. The fact still remains that texts like those of Sartre, Dumont, Constant and Grainville written in the closing years of European imperialism or afterwards and overtly hostile to the latter, seem to replay paradoxically the colonial and neo-colonial mentality they otherwise reject.

To say this about the scholars and writers is not to discredit them but to do two things; firstly, to highlight and endorse the anti-colonial and culturally self-critical thrust of their essays and novels, and secondly, to emphasise by drawing attention to the cultural self-reassertive dimension of the same essays and novels, the need for continued vigilance, as the legacy of colonialism, which was premised on Europe's self-assigned moral right to take control of the supposedly backward corners of the earth, is still alive.

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