

Representations of the School in Sub-Saharan African Francophone Literature:  
Towards a Decolonial Turn

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how sub-Saharan African French-language authors represent the school and its impact on the memory, identity, family, and community of schooled children and adults. The fundamental role played by the colonial school in the *mission civilisatrice* is widely acknowledged in historical, educational, and literary studies. However, African writers' continual and conspicuous fixation on the school in their literature indicates a more complex posture toward the institution that merits renewed understandings. By scrutinizing the school's systems, structures, and epistemologies as they appear in literary form, this dissertation re-problematizes the Western-model educational institution, unveiling those subtle carriers of coloniality that persist in contemporary contexts.

Attentive to the varied sociocultural factors, historical contexts, and intersectional identities that inform how authors take on school, I trace shifts in its representation across a temporally and geographically diverse corpus. By examining the literary portrayals of the school and schooled children in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953), Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* (1957), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961), Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* (1982), Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012), and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), I shed light on how coloniality is coded into the school's spaces, pedagogies, and knowledges but also into some of the narratives themselves. I illustrate that while the "classic" works muster less resistance to colonial education, contemporary authors challenge the designs of the (post)colonial school and even harness schooling for counterhegemonic ends. Engaging with concepts of modernity/coloniality, epistemic disobedience, and re-existence explored by decolonial thinkers like Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, I uncover how these authors inscribe feats of resistance and re-existence that delink from or wield schooling. I reveal if their critiques signify a decolonial turn in contemporary appraisals of the school. As modern discourses of "progress" and "development" claim school instruction as an absolute good in the Global South, these authors expose the "decolonial cracks" in the institution, making way for modes of thinking, learning, and being beyond the Western model.

## NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

I have used existing English translations wherever possible. All other translations are my own and are aimed at facilitating the reading of French texts.

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## INTRODUCTION

By examining francophone literary works spanning nearly 60 years, this project highlights the endurance of the school as setting, agent, political debate, and ideological challenge in sub-Saharan African fiction and autofiction. It rejuvenates the long-standing education question in sub-Saharan African literature by engaging contemporary novels in the conversation. By “education question,” I mean the debate sparked by the introduction of the French colonial schooling that weighs not only *if* African children should go to French school but also what is gained and what is irrevocably lost in attending. Early literary representations tackle this debate with particular attunement to the newness of the institution and its role to play in colonization. The persistence of the school in contemporary texts speaks in part to its immutability. However, more recent representations—informed by mutations of modernity, capitalism, globalization, and sovereignty, in concert with which coloniality also transforms—merit an updated understanding of the institution.

The term “school” carries capacious meaning in this project but holds tight to specific cultural and colonial origins.<sup>1</sup> It refers to a formalized institution of education developed in Western Europe beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and introduced to sub-Saharan Africa during colonization. It is distinguishable from local and pre-existing forms of education in Africa such as apprenticeships, Quranic schools, and literacy drives. It was a key tool of the *mise en valeur* and *mission civilisatrice* projects and is therefore a colonizing entity at its origins. Debates around the education question in post/colonial contexts often highlight the alterity of the content that African children were meant to learn and criticize not only its irrelevance but its capacity to

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<sup>1</sup> I also use the terms “French school,” “colonial school,” “Western-model school” to refer to this institution. My use of the term “schooling” also alludes to the same idea but evokes more of the process of learning at school or an individual’s experience therein.



sow cultural dissonances. For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* ([1981] 2005) delineates how colonial curricular material, especially the colonial language of instruction, alienates the child from their home culture. My project expands the discussion to interrogate other carriers of epistemology, such as scholastic pedagogies, instructional space, and student-teacher relationships, and how they, too, can be tools of oppression or sites of resistance. These elements are inherent to my definition of the school, which is recognizable through consistent features like spatial configurations (classrooms with a “front” and “back,” differing elevations of teacher and students), teaching tools (desks, blackboards or similar technologies), and hierarchies (teacher imparting knowledge to a group of students). However, this project also detects the school in broader senses, beyond the space of the classroom and far past the school's walls. The idea and influence of school, especially as a tool of colonization, infuse into identities, subjectivities, homes, politics, religion—all of which appear in the texts explored here. By interrogating how the school, its values, and its apparatuses shape the student, their community, and the textual narratives themselves, we can unveil persistent coloniality embedded in this educational institution. In turn, by determining how the students, communities, and narratives harness and shape the school, we can begin to consider the decolonial possibilities and options for education in (neo)colonial contexts.

In this dissertation, I specifically analyze the devices authors use to represent schooling and conduct close readings to determine how literary approaches to constructing memory, space, knowledge, and epistemology mask or expose the de/coloniality of this scholastic institution. I ask: how do these authors represent the formations of identity, subjectivity, and oftentimes psychological complexes resultant of their schooling? Through this line of questioning, I argue that authors like Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ken Bugul, Scholastique

Mukasonga, and Fatou Diome, whether purposefully or not, lay bare the school in ways that help us reconsider this globally pervasive and generally accepted form of education. Their narrative artistry reveals colonial logics and decolonial possibilities of the school that cannot be determined solely from test scores, literacy rates, or development reports. While African authors are hardly the only ones to represent the scholastic setting, I posit that these novels expose a particular enduring coloniality in postcolonial regions embedded in contemporary rhetorics of modernity, development, and education.

The school permeates numerous sub-Saharan African novels starting as early as 1920 with the first Francophone novel by an African writer: Amadou Mapaté Diagne's *Les Trois volontés de Malic*.<sup>2</sup> Why does school and the traces it leaves persist as a topic across time, geography, and genre? The texts studied here offer several points of entry to broach this question, as each author pays attention to unique elements of the schooling experience and their approaches reveal different aspects of its (often oppressive) systems. My corpus covers an extensive span in publication dates, which also allows us to identify shifts in representation over time. In order to explore these shifts, I categorize my corpus into two general temporal periods labeled "classic" and "contemporary." The two periods do not demonstrate a clean break in their depiction of the school and its significance. Rather, they show nuanced evolutions indicating changes in the school's portrayal and impact. Chapter One presents new takes on Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953), Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* (1957), and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961). I refer to these works as "classic" not only to suggest their

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<sup>2</sup> Other sub-Saharan African French-language texts in which the school's influence is represented include Bernard Dadié's *Climbié* (1956), Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956), and Sedou Badian's *Sous l'orage* (1957). The school also inevitably appears in the philosophical and political essays and speeches of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Sékou Touré, the first presidents of Senegal and Guinea, respectively. We see the school and the education question in literary output from Caribbean authors as well, like in the poetry of Aimé Césaire (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* 1939) and the prose of Joseph Zobel (*La rue Cases-Nègres* 1950).

anteriority to the other works in my corpus, but also because they figure widely in literary criticism on the subject of the education question. Furthermore, they are frequently read in classrooms, cited in scholarship outside of literary studies, and referenced as archetypal models of the francophone African childhood or coming-of-age story.<sup>3</sup> The classic works confront primarily the tension between the hazards and the value of formal colonial schooling. In these portrayals of school in Guinea, Cameroon, and Senegal respectively, the characters must navigate their education's relative novelty in their societies, its transformative effects, and its deeper intellectual and psychological repercussions as they grapple with a growing distance and difference between themselves and their communities. Furthermore, their narratives reveal traces of the school and its epistemologies. *L'Enfant noir* offers a powerful rendering of the classroom, narrating the devices of its disciplinary configuration and how they uphold stringent physical and epistemological control. *Mission terminée* moves outside the school's walls to demonstrate how its credentialism can rob a student of his agency, especially in an African community all too willing to wield its power on his behalf. *L'Aventure ambiguë* displays two educations side by side, but ultimately eludes an either/or solution to the education dilemma. My analyses of Kane's work show that breaking from binaries reveals a more complex—albeit ambiguous—treatment of the education question. Ultimately, the students in these novels are allowed little agency in their education, and they are unable to draw upon their schooling in self-determining—let alone anti-colonial—ways.

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<sup>3</sup> I draw from Claire Ducournau's determination of "classic," which she elaborates in *La Fabrique des classiques africains* (2017). The appellation is characterized by "une certaine insistance dans l'édition et le discours critique à propos des écrivains" [a certain insistence in publishing and critical discourse about the writers] (9). However, her argument posits that above all, classics are made ("ils se fabriquent") due to fluctuating geographical and social determinants (15). For example, the authors dubbed "classic" usually belong to a social, cultural, and cosmopolitan elite (394). Accordingly, I use the term "classic" acknowledging the dynamic, even fickle, nature of the term.

These classic works establish important foundations for Chapters Two, Three, and Four, in which I study Ken Bugul's *Le Babobab fou* (1982), Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012), and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003). Indeed, contemporary novels also demonstrate how strongly the schooling experience affects the characters' subjectivity and identity.<sup>4</sup> However, these contemporary authors are decidedly more critical of the school, indicating one important shift between the two periods studied. In Senegalese author Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*, the main character is misguided in her quest for identity which is founded on the notorious textbook statement that surfaces in most critiques of the French colonial school system: "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois." In fact, the school has a tendency to sow false narratives. In Rwandan-French author Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil*, the eponymous boarding school is painted as a key mechanism in building ethnic myths that ultimately lead to atrocity in 1973 Rwanda. Mukasonga mirrors this building tension in the region through the novel's very salient representation of the school space and the ways in which her characters interact within, outside, and across it. While Mukasonga unearths the dark side of school, Senegalese-French author Fatou Diome's main character in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* harnesses her education as the vehicle by which she, an illegitimate child, can escape an insular and marginalized existence in her home community.

My analyses identify the dynamic and complex ways in which race, ethnicity, class, gender, social status, citizenship, and other factors shape individual identities and their relationships to education. More broadly, I aim to reveal that the works in my corpus offer a

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<sup>4</sup> See also Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979), Boubacar Boris Diop's *Le Temps de Tamango* (1981), Aminata Sow Fall's *L'appel des arènes* (1993) and *Festins de la détresse* (2005), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000), Henri Lopes's *Une enfant de Poto-Poto* (2012), and Alain Mabanckou's *Petit Piment* (2015) as well as Caribbean author Patrick Chamoiseau's *Chemin d'école* (1994) and Maryse Condé's collection of short stories *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* (1999). The school makes its way into early West African film too, as Rama in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975) embodies the post-independence university student and as Anta completes her schoolwork in the opening scene of Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki bouki* (1973).

diversity of perspectives on education that illustrate a shift in how student characters and their authors harness schooling for decolonial ends.

### **Historical Context: Colonial inheritances and contemporary models**

Before delving into the literary setting of the school, it is pertinent to contextualize its historical development in these regions since these novels reflect the motivations of colonial school and the inheritances of its policy. The biographical nature and publication dates of the classic novels indicate that the childhoods depicted therein took place between the 1930s and 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The established schooling structures in these decades were formed by fluctuating colonial education policy beginning at the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which Genova (2004) correspondingly describes as “erratic governmental praxis...instabilities that reflected the fundamental tension embedded in French colonialism in AOF” (5). Arguably, as I elaborate below, post-independence and contemporary policy changes continue to reflect the values of powers in the Global North through the rhetoric of international financial and development organizations.

The school’s status in colonial and post-colonial contexts follows the evolving values and motivations of colonial policy, neocolonial agendas, and post-independence intentions for economic and political advancement in the formerly colonized nations of Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, and Rwanda. Many parallels exist between these different geographical contexts. Still, important distinctions define the implementation and influence of schooling systems, particularly between that of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa—which includes Senegal, Guinea, and Cameroon—and that of Rwanda. For instance, the school has always

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<sup>5</sup> Camara Laye and Cheikh Hamidou Kane were both born in 1928 and started school in the mid-1930s. Mongo Beti, born in 1932, started school toward the end of the 1930s.

interacted dynamically with the customary, indigenous, and religious forms of education in each region and each individual experience. The following historical contextualization will also demonstrate that, despite the many reforms and resistances, schooling carries a long history of colonial educational policy that endures systems, practices, and values today.

The school is a foreign entity inserted among local forms of education existing long before Europeans arrived in sub-Saharan Africa beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Pre-colonial societies used various educational structures to rear children, teach them valued skillsets, and form their social identities. As Awouma (1968) shows, these “traditional” educations in many regions consisted of specific content (*la parole* and *le geste*) and pedagogy (*le rite* and *les relations interindividuelles*) that formed youth to eventually assume their place within the community. In a specific example from *L’Enfant noir* discussed in Chapter One, Mandike custom uses silence and knowledge withholding to help youth develop critical self-reflection and “the necessary mental associations between personal experience and traditional knowledge” (Bourgeacq 1990, 504). Furthermore, the arrival of Islam in Senegal and Guinea in the 9<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for a strong presence of Quranic schools throughout this region. Colonial powers dismissed, attempted to dismantle, or simply did not acknowledge these existing forms of education. Upon the arrival of Europeans, mission schools were quickly set up in order to provide the education (i.e., European language and Christian indoctrination) the regions had been “lacking.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Struggle for the School* (1970), John Edward Anderson highlights those aspects of the school that differentiate it from other forms of education and that persist in mass schooling to this day. “The Europeans did not bring the idea of formal education to Africa; in many ways this had been established in African societies long before their arrival. Yet through such practices as grouping children into classrooms for regular daily lessons, emphasizing the importance of reading and writing and showing particular concern over examination results and certificates, Europeans have done much to shape Africa’s more recent understandings of schools” (1). Anderson aptly isolates the devices of the school—its groupings, routines, conception of literacy, and measures of success—that are particular to the Western-model of education. My analyses in the following chapters bring these devices to the fore as they manifest in the novels of my corpus and often contribute to the colonality of the institution.

France colonized the larger regions of Senegal and Guinea by the mid-1890s but had controlled the important coastal ports of St. Louis and Gorée since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As such, these were the sites of some of the first Western-model schools in West Africa. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French schools really only existed in the four Senegalese communes (Gorée, St. Louis, Dakar, and Rufisque) and had been mostly stewarded by the Catholic religious order of the Frères Ploërmel, who were recruited due to lack of lay personnel in 1837 (Bolibaugh 1972). The enrolled students consisted mostly of white and mixed-race children of colonists with certain exceptions for Black students.<sup>7</sup>

Louis Faidherbe, military general and governor of the colony of Senegal from 1852 to 1865, led the push for education as a way to advance the colonial project. Meeting resistance from indigenous peoples over sending their children to colonial educational institutions, Faidherbe opened the École des Otages in St. Louis in 1855, a school whose name explicitly recalls the coercive circumstances under which students were “enrolled” and instructed. Concurrently, in order to counteract the well-established Islamic education that existed in the region, Faidherbe instigated a mandatory Quranic school inspection, applying colonial and French rules to this extant form of education. Margaret Pretty’s report on the history of education in Guinea (1968) speaks to the persistence of the clash when in 1921, Qur’an schools in Guinea were banned from holding class during “‘les heures de classe’ (entendons: les classes primaires)” (134).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of these exceptions was Blaise Diagne, Senegal’s first Black African politician elected to the Chamber of Deputies in France who attended the school in Saint Louis. He had been adopted by a prominent mixed-race family at an early age.

<sup>8</sup> “class hours (that is to say: the primary school classes).” In her report, Margaret Pretty even cites Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* as proof that, in Guinea, “le travail scolaire était pris très au sérieux (sic) par les enfants qui avaient la chance d’y pouvoir participer” [school work was taken very seriously by student who had the chance to participate] (135). Pretty’s allusion to the novel once again shows how the literary informs the social sciences of education and vice versa.

French colonial policy regarding education is best understood through its origins in the *mission civilisatrice*. The project took root around 1870, at the height of France's imperial expansion. The civilizing mission—or the paternalistic duty and right France bestowed upon itself to mold Africa and its people to French cultural, political, and economic standards—originates in the larger narrative propagated by early European missionary, trader, and explorer travel accounts that depicted Africans as “primitive” and “backward.” The rhetoric in turn presupposes the scientific and technological but also cultural, social, and moral superiority of Europe, and especially France. In *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (1997), Alice Conklin provides an extensive and impressive study of how the civilizing mission consistently mutated during the period of France's Third Republic. For instance, the initial “civilizing” strategy aimed to convert Africans to Christianity. However, because this method caused such significant clashes with the majority Muslim populations in West Africa, Faidherbe decided to develop a lay education in the mid-1800s to advance colonial school projects.<sup>9</sup> Running parallel to the *mission civilisatrice* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the *mise en valeur* mindset, which Conklin translates to ““rational economic development”” (23). Beyond infrastructural development (e.g., the building of railroads to transport raw materials from inland to the coast), *mise en valeur* sought to profit from human

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that schooling in France also underwent significant shifts in this same time period. The 1881 and 1882 Jules Ferry laws conceived of a public school that offered free, compulsory, secular education for both girls and boys in France. Ferry—republican philosopher and politician during France's Third Republic—saw a need to break from dogmatic education and power of the Church and to generate French citizens and national identity. This would happen through schooling. These laws conspicuously coincided with the height of French colonial expansion, a project in which Jules Ferry was a central administrative participant. These concurrent projects demonstrate the Third Republic's efforts to strengthen its power and identity as a nation-state, particularly after the loss of the Franco-Prussian war. Their simultaneity speaks to how integral both education and imperialism was to French national identity. The Jules Ferry republican education established the model for public schooling existing today in much of the world and upheld in several international human rights documents (Baer 2019, 5). Nevertheless, these ideals translated differently in the colonies. Free and secular education was not a value in the colonies until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even the so-called “universality” of the right to an education retains its colonial valence (Kirchgasler and Desai 2020, 22).



resources in the colonies by advancing “cultural and moral progress.” This happened through schooling (Conklin 1997; Kamara 2005). The material and psychological *mise en valeur* projects appear in tandem in *L’Enfant noir* as Laye describes the railroad running through the region, and the existence of his rural community life alongside the school/train further highlight the policy changes coming to the region of Guinea.

The establishment of the federation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale française, or AOF) in 1895 marks an important turn in educational policy in French-colonized West Africa. It was through this government body that the civilizing mission continued to manifest itself in public health, judicial, scholastic policy, which aimed to expand and entrench France’s economic and political objectives in its colonies. The control of schooling was officially shifted away from Christian missions and centralized through the AOF. As early as 1848, French citizenship was extended to habitants of the Four Communes, although a French education was eventually required for this right. Nevertheless, when schooling began to spread into other regions and become more anchored in the colonial project, the goal of producing Frenchmen through education, or assimilation, was abandoned.

Indeed, the *policy* of assimilation was not as enduring as discourses around colonial schooling imply. In *L’École aux colonies: Entre mission civilisatrice et racialisation 1816-1940* (2020), Carole Reynaud Paligot surveys schooling policy (“la politique scolaire”) across French colonies leading up to the second World War. Her study interrogates, even debunks, some common narratives surrounding colonial school, for example the pervasive expression “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” (discussed more in depth in Chapter Two) and the framework of assimilation. Even when assimilation was the going policy in the colonies, its practical meaning was never to produce Frenchmen, Reynaud Paligot argues. Assimilation “eut alors le sens de

rapprochement des deux populations dans l'intérêt du projet colonial, il ne signifiait pas l'octroi des mêmes droits, ni de la même éducation" (139).<sup>10</sup> Ernest Roume, Governor of French West Africa from 1902 to 1907, cemented the difference by instituting "adapted" education in 1903 (Conklin 1997, 78). Focusing more on agricultural production and professional skills and less on French literature and philosophy, Roume's plan touted a more applicable education for African peoples and their milieu. Implicitly, adapted education meant the colonial administration carefully regulated who received this education and what it entailed. For example, Mohamed Kamara (2005) notes in *Colonial Legacies in Francophone African Literature: The School and the Invention of the Bourgeoisie* that school administrators were careful to pick students with the correct "disposition" to pursue French education. Despite the growth of schooling infrastructure and the rhetorical push to bring education to more of the African population, adapted education limited the number of elite produced by the colonial school and thus the number of possible resisters to the colonial project, reconciling desires for "progress" and "social stability" at the same time (Reynaud Paligot 2020, 215–17).

The specified curriculums of adapted education were reflected in the forms of schooling that existed in 1903, namely primary education (divided into village schools, urban schools, and regional schools that had their own curriculum), professional education, higher primary education, and commercial and teacher training (Conklin 1997). Nevertheless, this adapted curriculum held traces of older assimilationist pedagogies. Primary education still focused on language arts, so it was difficult to transition to the agricultural focus as students moved to secondary levels as we see in *L'Enfant noir* when Laye is unhappy with the lack of rigor at his

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<sup>10</sup> "...then meant bringing the two populations together in the interest of the colonial project, it did not mean granting the same rights, nor the same education."

professional training school in Conakry. Agricultural work was also treated as inferior or even punitive.

Roume's reforms were taken up and even further championed by his successors, William Merlaud-Ponty, Governor of French West Africa from 1908 to 1915, who engaged Georges Hardy as Director of the Colonial School in 1926. Reynaud Paligot communicates that these policy makers instigated educational reform around their worries: worry about mixing races, worry about creating groups of schooled "déclassés," worry about a lack of jobs for an over-educated population. As such, their tenure was also characterized by different attempts at adapted education, "cherchant à freiner la mobilité sociale" (Reynaud Paligot 2020, 220).<sup>11</sup> The sheer number of types of schools (écoles préparatoires, écoles élémentaires, écoles régionales, écoles professionnelles, école primaire supérieure, etc.) demonstrate the intention to categorize, hierarchize, and stratify students and therefore the whole population of colonized peoples in French West Africa. Hardy gives us the most potent insights into how school was conceived to fit into the colonial project in *Une Conquête morale : l'enseignement en A.O.F.* (1917). "Mise en valeur du pays, attachement raisonné de l'indigène à notre œuvre, tel est donc l'objet de la nouvelle conquête. Conquête moins rapide et brillante que la première, mais aussi féconde et méritoire et dont l'instrument ne peut être que l'école" (4).<sup>12</sup> In the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, assimilation policy was hardly on the table, not when the administration was carefully limiting the number of educated people and balancing the level and type of education they received.

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<sup>11</sup> "...looking to restrict social mobility."

<sup>12</sup> "Development of the country, reasoned attachment of the native to our work, such is the object of the new conquest. A slower and less brilliant conquest than the first, but just as fruitful and meritorious and for whose instrument can only be the school."

A similar educational infrastructure to that of Senegal and Guinea was adopted when France took over colonial rule of Cameroon in 1914 after Germany's defeat in WWI. As Kamara states, "when it comes to colonial policies and practices, regarding education more specifically, the difference between Afrique occidentale française (AOF) and Afrique équatoriale française (AEF [...]) was merely geographic" (2023, 3). Indeed, Medza's Cameroonian schooling trajectory in Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* reflects the same educational structure existing in French-colonized West Africa, seen when he rattles off his degrees: "certificate d'études primaires, brevet élémentaire, premier bachot..." (202).<sup>13</sup>

African perspectives and encounters with the school were and continue to be dynamic, sometimes characterized by resistance, sometimes submission, and sometimes strategic acceptance. Jean-Hervé Jézéquel (2003) warns against reducing this history to a linear, binary trajectory of rejection-then-acceptance. He states, "Pourtant, les sociologues de l'éducation montrent que le rapport actuel des sociétés africaines à l'École occidentale s'inscrit dans des relations complexe et fluctuantes" (410).<sup>14</sup> In this same vein, Kelly Duke Bryant's monograph *Education as politics: Colonial schooling and political debate in Senegal, 1850s-1914* (2015) explores how the school provided avenues and tools of resistance to traditional or colonial hegemonies. Certain parents, students, and communities "found schools to be useful resources in

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<sup>13</sup> There was a stronger Christian presence in Cameroon than in West Africa where Islam had existed as a major religion beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, Catholic schools still existed in West Africa (Bouche 1975; Conklin 1997; O. White 1999), although in over the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only 15% of students were attending non-state-run schools (B. W. White 1996). The schools established and led by missionaries throughout sub-Saharan Africa functioned on the basis of salvation, their central goal to "save" Africans through conversion to Christianity. Although the French colonial script evolved from conversion to "civilization" in the name of secularization, the rhetoric of salvation continued to resonate throughout the colonizing process and persists until today, and ties to Christian tradition still (latently and explicitly) permeate the educative norms around the world, let alone in former colonies, e.g., the school calendar, its hierarchies and terminology, and its pervasive understandings of the child (Burke and Segall 2011). The present study does not focus on the Christian values upheld by the colonial schooling system, but their endurance in practices and understandings of the school illustrate how Eurocentric and colonial ideologies and epistemologies embed in scholastic frameworks.

<sup>14</sup> "However, sociologists of education show that the current connection between African societies and Western schooling is characterized by complex and variable relationships."

challenging African hierarchies of authority and, sometimes, in calling into question the power of the colonial state” (8). The following chapters will also explore this dynamic relationship with the school. Notably, the students in the classic works of my corpus do not (or cannot) harness school to challenge structures of domination, although my analyses of the character of La Grande Royale in *L’Aventure ambiguë* argues that she challenges the hierarchical status quo that is stunting the Diallobé people’s survival. The contemporary works, on the other hand, show increasing promise in authors’ and students’ ability to draw on their schooling to resist oppressions of racist, patriarchal, and colonial powers.

In the historical and political context of Rwanda, we confront a different set of colonial inheritances. Chapter Three explores this history more in depth, but a few notable variations are worth mentioning here. First, Rwanda was not a French colony, unlike each other geographical context of my corpus. The Berlin Conference of 1884 gave control of the region to Germany. After World War I, Belgium gained control through the League of Nations Mandate of 1916. As such, the schooling system was not run through a centralized governmental body like the A.O.F. European Christian missions ran the majority of schools throughout the country during and after the colonial period. A second distinction related to this difference in governing framework is that colonial powers relied more on preexisting power structures in the region. This also meant that they manipulated and more deeply entrenched ethnic classifications. The Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa peoples functioned in social and political systems that colonial powers eventually exploited in order to advance their own projects. For example, in an attempt to gain a stronger footing in the region, the Church showed favor toward the Tutsi nobility. At the same time, the mission schools—eager to take in as many students as possible—generated a population of Western-educated Hutus who had embraced schooling, recognizing the link between catechism education

and social advancement within the colonial structure (Erny 2001b). This shift of the status quo and the Church's favoritism toward the ruling group played a pivotal role in the country's developing ethnic conflict that lasted well into the post-independence era.

The post-independence shifts (as well as consistencies) in educational policy and practice inform the representations of the school in the contemporary works of my corpus.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the Church in Rwanda was quick to alter its allegiances after the revolution of 1958 and Rwandan independence in 1962, when Hutu leaders came into power. Christian-affiliated schools like the one featured in Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* therefore adopted quotas to limit the number of Tutsis allowed to enroll. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-Tutsi measures only escalated. Violence and pogroms targeting Tutsis began as early as 1959, the events of which echo throughout Mukasonga's œuvre as well. The 1973 military coup depicted in the denouement of *Notre-Dame du Nil* further exposed Tutsi people to violence, death, and displacement. Finally, ethnic tensions exploded during the one hundred days of killing in 1994 when hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus were targeted and killed in genocidal violence. In *L'enseignement au Rwanda après l'indépendance (1962-1980)* (2003), Pierre Erny aptly summarizes the role the school had to play in the violence due particularly to its ability to institute, spread, but also disguise political policy that exacerbated divisions and inequalities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ken Bugul was born in 1947, Scholastique Mukasonga in 1956, and Fatou Diome in 1968. Therefore, these authors began attending school in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, respectively. Fatou Diome's novel, however, depicts a more contemporary moment in time as adult Salie navigates her transatlantic relationships and identity in the early 2000s.

<sup>16</sup> "Son action différenciatrice [de l'école] a accentué les clivages entre villes et campagnes, entre catégories sociales, entre régions, entre générations, et bien entendu, au premier chef, entre tradition et modernité. Par toute sa dynamique, l'école telle qu'elle s'est implantée au Rwanda favorise une dichotomie et une hiérarchisation qui induisent tout naturellement de nouveaux rapports de domination et de subordination" [Its differentiating effect accentuated the divides between cities and countryside, between social categories, between regions, between generations, and of course, first and foremost, between tradition and modernity. Through all its dynamics, the school as it has been established in Rwanda favors a dichotomy and a hierarchization that quite naturally leads to new relationships of domination and subordination] (Erny 2003, 201).

*Notre-Dame du Nil* portrays this very phenomenon from the perspectives of the students who were there to witness it.

While ethnic competition and reversals in the ruling group swayed post-independence educational policy in Rwanda, schooling in Senegal remained more stagnant after the (official) colonial period. In theory, as Pierre Erny (2001a) puts it, “les responsables africains ont senti l’urgence d’une réorientation profonde en ce domaine,”<sup>17</sup> particularly as it came to developing a national consciousness following independence from colonial rule (14-15). In practice, according to Selly (1993), former AOF countries like Senegal did not tackle education development with the same urgency as they did more “productive” infrastructure like agriculture and industry. In Senegal, where the French had established its strongest and longest running education system, school attendance was at 36% of eligible populations in 1960, a relatively high rate compared to neighboring nations. As Manière (2012) shows through his study of official gatherings of francophone African educational policy makers from 1960-1969, many nations chose to retain “l’enseignement de type français”<sup>18</sup> despite desires for “Africanization” (81). This paradox speaks to the conflicting realities of independence in general. On one hand were efforts to develop a unified nation state and on the other were persistent dependent relationships sustained by the former colonial powers.

Despite prioritizing other areas of social and economic development, schooling was still an important part of post-independence political conversations. At the 1961 Conference of Ministers of Education held in Addis Ababa, organized by UNESCO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, new African governments agreed on an effort to develop universal primary education in Africa. However, these declarations did not produce the changes

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<sup>17</sup> “African leaders felt an urgency for a profound reorientation in this sector”

<sup>18</sup> “the French form of education”

that many Africans, especially Senegalese citizens, sought. Ken in *Le Baobab fou* echoes this same disenchantment with independence as she notes a disappointing lack of change in the years after 1960. Ken laments, “Mais l’indépendance m’avait déçue. Je croyais que l’indépendance allait me sauver. Je ne constatais aucune acquisition d’identité propre, aucun souffle.

L’indépendance était comme la reconnaissance et l’officialisation de la dépendance” (176).<sup>19</sup> In 1968 and 1969, teachers across Senegal participated in protest movements, objecting to poor working conditions, inadequate teacher pay, and lack of infrastructure. Monsieur Ndétare’s activism in unions, to which Fatou Diome alludes in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*, reflects this specific tumultuous time in the educational history of Senegal. The widespread strikes drove the Senegalese government to develop “The National Educational Orientation Act,” presented in 1971. With laudable goals for the Africanization of curriculum and personnel, this reform nonetheless did not come to full fruition, sparking more strikes in the next decade (Sylla 1993).

In the years following independence and into the structural adjustment era, external parties—including but not limited to the United Nations, USAID, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—have assumed significant roles in education studies and funding in most regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Their reports and success measures focus on enrollment rates, completion rates, and “quality” of education determined through test scores. Shortfalls in these measures are often traced to teacher training (DeStefano, Lynd, and Thornton 2009; Carneiro et al. 2016). The late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century education reforms led by these organizations in sub-Saharan Africa (including in Senegal and Rwanda) do not directly inform our readings of the novels studied in this dissertation since the schooling taking place therein

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<sup>19</sup> “But independence disappointed me. I had thought independence would save me. It was not an acquiring of my own identity at all, not a breath of it. Independence was rather a recognizing of dependence and making it official” (125). All English translations of this novel come from Jager, Marjolijn de, trans. 1991. *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese woman*. Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books.



only extends into the 70s and 80s with young Salie from *Ventre de l'Atlantique*. However, we can continue to trace modern rhetoric of development in the initiatives of international organizations concerned with education, which also arise in the novels studied here. For instance, over 150 countries around the world joined the *Education for All* movement—organized by branches of the United Nations and the World Bank, launched in 1990, and reaffirmed in 2000. Its framework declared intentions to establish universal basic education by 2015. More recently, the UN presented its Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the fourth of which is “Ensuring Inclusive, Equitable, and Quality Education and the Promotion of Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All.” Education-focused government policy as well as third-party organizations in sub-Saharan Africa largely adhere to these international movements and campaigns.

A major focus of more contemporary development projects that inform education in formerly colonized regions is their emphasis on girls' education. Historically, focus on educating girls was limited. In French West Africa, small Catholic institutions taught girls, in Gorée for example, beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but colonial administrators did not systematically consider female education until the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even then, Barthel (1985) explains in her ethnographic study of the colonial school experience for girls that it was the educated African elite seeking schooling for their daughters that led the impetus to include girls in the scholarization project. Colonial education policy makers did, however, see advantages to recruiting more female students. Georges Hardy expressed trepidation over the colonial schooling setup creating two dichotomous social groups: the schooled male population, inculcated with colonial values, and the un-schooled female population who posed a potential threat to and disobedience toward those values. For the small population of girls who were selected to attend school during the colonial period, their education still only consisted of

“teaching European notions of hygiene and child care to future mothers” (Barthel 1985, 145). Hardy’s concerns resulted in a rather insignificant uptick in female education in the colonial period, because according to a 1970 report by UNESCO, in the year 1961, 98.9% of women over the age of 14 were not literate in French (89.6% among men) (Eliou 1972, 44). Nevertheless, steady increases in girls enrolled in school toward the end of the colonial period and into independence help explain the spike in representations of school in literary works by female authors like Ken Bugul, Scholastique Mukasonga, and Fatou Diome in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, not to mention the increase in female francophone authors altogether.

The push for female education in these regions gained its momentum in more contemporary times when a link was established between female education and development. However, the definition of development still carries Western-centric values. In their article “‘Girl’ in Crisis: Colonial Residues of Domesticity in Transnational School Reforms” (2020), Kirchgasler and Desai trace the endurance of colonial educational rhetoric of gender roles and domesticity in modern day educational reforms and practices. They point to the discourses of both “promise and peril” that the girl has embodied across development campaigns (386). As such, even the worthy aim of gender equity in education can carry traces of coloniality if that aim is led or influenced largely by organizations and powers of The Global North.

The post-independence educational situation in sub-Saharan Africa is summarized by educationist and sociologist Ali A. Abdi (2021) thus: “we entered the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century without any wide and counter-hegemonic critical responses to the established knowledge and learning valuations status quo” (3). In other words, colonial inheritances persist well past the official administrative conclusion of colonization. Broadly speaking, major international organizations (largely led and defined by Western nations, values, and educational forms)

advocate for educational reform as a means of development in formerly colonized regions. However, as I will explore shortly, decolonial thinkers demonstrate how the concepts of development are part of a rhetoric of modernity that has a darker side: coloniality. Nevertheless, Abdi also acknowledges the “widening multicentric (if slow) epistemic and social well-being discussions” (3) emerging contemporary eras, and it is my intention to explore if these surfacing sociopolitical discussions of an educational otherwise echo in more recent literary depictions of the school.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Postcolonial theory and decolonial praxis inform my analyses of the school in literary form. These dynamic fields of thought often complement each other. For example, both frameworks expose the enduring psychological repercussions of colonization as well as the deeper power dynamics it establishes. Moreover, many of their important scholars and contributors draw from the writings of key transatlantic, Black, anticolonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. Their affinities as well as their divergences generate interesting avenues of inquiry when it comes to education, subjectivity formation, and relationships of power in a (neo)colonial world.

#### *Alienation, Assimilation, and Ambivalence*

I situate my readings of both classic and contemporary representations of the school among concepts from postcolonial studies. Whether directly or implicitly, important postcolonial theorists engage education by exploring cultural alienation, assimilation, and “universality.” In *Decolonising the Mind* ([1981] 2005), Kenyan author and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o draws a

direct connection between schooling and cultural alienation. According to Ngũgĩ, the imposition of foreign colonial language on schoolchildren created (creates) a dissonance between the family/community environment and the school-world. Consequently, the harmony of history, self, and relationship formation—inherent to language—is “irrevocably broken.” He states that the language imposition “resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The alienation becomes reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the centre of the universe” (17). Ngũgĩ experienced a British form of schooling, where English was imposed over his native language of Gĩkũyũ, but the phenomenon applies in French colonial contexts as well where French-centric curriculum took priority and superiority and all else was pushed to the margins. Language proves particularly significant in this alienation process. Ngũgĩ even cites Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal, who, in Ngũgĩ’s words, “becomes lyrical in his subservience to French” (2005, 19). Language as a cultural and even racial marker arises in the critical texts of famed Martinican theorist Frantz Fanon, who writes in *Peau noire, masques blancs* ([1952] 2015), “le Noir antillais sera d’autant plus blanc, c’est-à-dire se rapprochera d’autant plus du véritable homme, qu’il aura fait sienne la langue française” (16).<sup>20</sup> We see this rapprochement of language and race in Mongo Beti’s *Mission terminée*, explored in Chapter One, when the community sends Medza on the eponymous mission because of his instruction and therefore his proximity to whiteness.

Ngũgĩ founds his critique of the colonial school (and continued education practices after independence) on the premise that language is an essential bearer of culture. Impressions of children

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<sup>20</sup> “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (18). All English translations of this text come from Markmann, Charles Lam, trans. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

with foreign languages therefore disrupts the formation of their individual, cultural, and societal identities. The narrator in *L'Enfant noir* suffers this dissonance, witnessed in the difficulty he experiences attempting to recall memories about village customs. The French language contributes to his mnemonic interference, yet additional pedagogical experiences also have a role to play. One goal of the present study is to expand these notions of colonial and cultural alienation beyond the impact of language and show how other aspects of education—the school's teaching methods, materialities, and relations—are also imbued with cultural meaning that can produce alienating effects.

Ngũgĩ also explains how the process of colonial alienation happens in two simultaneous steps: “an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment” (28).<sup>21</sup> This “identification” with foreign ways of thinking and being evokes what many thinkers cited in postcolonial studies have said about assimilation. The colonial enterprise founded an “economy of difference,” which Achille Mbembe, Cameroonian scholar and intellectual, describes in *Critique de la raison nègre* (2013). “Difference” established grounds for European superiority over Black populations, especially because the (particularly French) concept of universal humanity found Africans lacking in its two necessary attributes: language and reason. Therefore, the presiding order of fundamental difference obliged that “Ni ce monde commun à tous les êtres humains, ni cette similitude ne seraient cependant données d'emblée à l'indigène” (131-132).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This two-formed process is fracturing. “It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person” (28). The mind-body separation Ngũgĩ describes here is, I would argue, not only reminiscent of a general cultural alienation but also a very specific epistemology of the school stemming from the Cartesian mind-body dyad. In Chapter One, I explore the ways the school's pedagogy embodies this binary in my comparison of the Quranic school and the French school in Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*.

<sup>22</sup> “But this world common to all human beings, this similarity, was not granted outright to natives” (87). All English translations of this text come from Dubois, Laurent, trans. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. New York: Duke University Press.

Assimilation was offered as remedy to the lack. Ultimately, it is a learning process, evidenced by the terminology Mbembe uses to describe the transformation, an operation of “conversion” and “cultivation.” “Cette *éducation* serait la condition pour qu’il soit perçu et reconnu comme notre semblable et pour que son humanité cesse d’être infigurable et insaisissable” (132, emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> The reprogramming would involve traversing a continuum from primitivism toward civilization and humanity, all concepts created, defined, and controlled by the West. This linear process is built into the very notion of schooling, which runs on a system of levels and benchmarks. This linearity can manifest elsewhere as a trace of the school. It is seen particularly in the classic novels studied here, from a physical and emotional distancing of students from their home communities as they progress in school to the chronological linearity of their narrative arcs.

Mbembe describes the learning process in rather brutal terms. “[L]a différence pourrait être abolie, effacée ou résorbée” (132).<sup>24</sup> The passive construction here suggests that both the colonizer and the colonized play a role in this (un)learning process. Furthermore, Mbembe’s word choice reveals the coercive nature of this progression, which, I argue, is inherent to the schooling process and present in many of the novels studied in this dissertation. Advancing along the continuum towards Western reason and civilization must be coupled with rejecting the indigenous self, customs, language, epistemologies and cosmologies, as Mbembe as well as Fanon describe. Assimilation is therefore, paradoxically, a filling of a lack and a replacement, a double movement of learning and unlearning.

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<sup>23</sup> “*Education* would be the condition under which they could be perceived and recognized as fellow human beings. Through it, their humanity would cease to be indefinable and incomprehensible” (87).

<sup>24</sup> “Difference could be abolished, erased, or reabsorbed” (87).

To reiterate, the official policy of assimilation through schooling did not last long in French West Africa. It was replaced by “adapted” education that proclaimed a more culturally relevant curriculum but really sought to cap the number and level of education for West Africans. Nevertheless, assimilation remained an undergirding ambition—conscious or not—for many among colonized populations. After all, since colonial powers posited themselves as the world’s moral, scientific, and religious authority, the colonized were convinced or coerced into accepting that. In establishing an asymmetrical power dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized, it would easily follow, as Albert Memmi explains in *Portrait du colonisé* ([1950] 2002), that “l’ambition première du colonisé sera d’égaliser ce modèle prestigieux” (137).<sup>25</sup> With that comes the inferiority complexes of which both Fanon (2015, 16) and Césaire ([1950] 1989) write.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the universality upon which the civilizing mission and assimilation are founded, the “economy of difference” obliges assimilation to be impossible. Fanon and Mbembe explore the innate paradoxes of its achievability, in majority part due to the inventions, elisions, and illusions of race and racial difference.<sup>27</sup> Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry illustrates how infeasibility is in fact constitutive of assimilation. According to Bhabha, the

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<sup>25</sup> “The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model” (120). All English translations of this text come from Greenfield, Howard, trans. 1965. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. New York: The Orion Press.

<sup>26</sup> Césaire writes in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, “Je parle de millions d’hommes à qui on a inculqué savamment la peur, le complexe d’infériorité, le tremblement, l’agenouillement, le désespoir, le larbinisme” (20). [I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies (43)]. All English translations of this text come from Pinkham, Joan, trans. 2000. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

<sup>27</sup> In the infamous narrative of his experience on the Paris metro, Fanon describes how he as a Black non-European is made especially aware of the fixedness of difference when he is confronted by “le regard du blanc” (108) [the white man’s eyes (110)]. When a young white boy cries out in fear at the sight Fanon, a Black man, the white mother comforts her son, saying Fanon is, notably, “aussi civilisé que nous” (111) [as civilized as we (113)]. The inescapable and “imprisoning” racialization is a constant reminder to the Western-educated non-European that the white gaze will forever reject the equality that was promised through assimilation. What results from this encounter is a “disorientation,” an instability of the self that deprives it of belonging and subjectivity.

Western-educated colonized individual is necessarily “almost the same [as the colonizer], but not quite” (1994, 86). He later formulates the concept as “almost the same, but not white” (1984, 130), underlining the centrality of race in assimilation’s inachievability. The perpetually stunted “not quite/white” suggests that the educated colonial or postcolonial subject will always exist in partiality in Western-centric structures even after a thorough dedication to Western reason and rejection of indigenous self and culture. The colonized (schooled) individual’s mimicry is therefore one of “ambivalence,” because “in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 1984, 126). The protagonist of *Le Baobab fou* experiences the phenomenon of alienating racialization first-hand under the gaze of the saleswoman in the wig shop in Belgium. My reading of the episode demonstrates how Ken’s situation also intersects with gender, as feminine notions of beauty contribute to her racialization. Ken’s “flawed colonial mimesis,” as Bhabha puts it, consistently traces back to her misleading schooling.

As the colonial administration eventually noticed (perhaps too late), assimilation is a double-edge sword. “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 1994, 88). In the educative context, this means that the schooled non-European can also be a threat to the colonial system itself. The Western-educated African possesses a significant power to challenge colonization and its systems. Of interest to this study is how students represented in certain novels successfully or unsuccessfully navigate fracture, alienation, and rejection within themselves, within their communities, and in the metropole. In the following analyses of schooled African subjectivities, crafted by schooled authors, we will explore if the disruptive edge of mimicry offers itself as a form of resistance to the colonial school. Likewise, we will see



if characters and authors alike are able to evade the long-enduring entrapment of identification with the West and rejection of what is African—from physical appearance, to language, to narrative form.

### *De/coloniality, development, and disobedience*

Anti-colonial scholars such as Ngũgĩ critique scholastic impositions that undoubtedly cause ruptures and culturally alienating identifications within the student. However, the interferences extend beyond language and subject material learned in school. Concepts of de/coloniality help reveal and consider other carriers of Western epistemology that perpetuate coloniality and alienate the student from their culture of origin. For example, the systems, spaces, and pedagogies of the school are also vehicles of oppression as well as sites of resistance. Decolonial thinking can also help elucidate how discourses around the school are reflective and constitutive of a positive rhetoric of modernity, which masks its darker side of coloniality.

The praxis of decoloniality has existed since the beginning of colonization and coloniality. However, activists, scholars, and thinkers largely based in Latin and South America began conceptualizing de/coloniality in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Decoloniality interrogates the endurances of the colonial project and explores how to divest from them, particularly in the domain of knowledge. As such, the praxis opens to other epistemologies and forms of existence by critiquing the purported universality of Euro-Amero-centric ways of thinking, knowing, and being—a central tenet of coloniality. One of the founding conceptualizers of decolonial thought, Anibal Quijano defines coloniality as the “corner stone”

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<sup>28</sup> Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh show in *On Decoloniality* (2018) that coloniality and decoloniality were simultaneously born. “With colonialism and coloniality came resistance and refusal. Decoloniality necessarily follows, derives from, and responds to coloniality and the ongoing colonial process and condition” (17). Coloniality is a concept of decoloniality, thus the co-constitutive construction “de/coloniality” (107).

of Euro-Amero-centric global power, domination, and repression that persisted “once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (2007, 170). Building off of this concept in *On Decoloniality* (2018), Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh consider coloniality—short for the colonial matrix of power—as Western civilization’s “set of structural relations and flows” that allow for the management and control of political, economic, racial, epistemic, and cultural macronarratives (114).

These macronarratives are positioned under the larger project and concept of modernity. As Mignolo casts it, coloniality and modernity go hand in hand, and the positive rhetoric surrounding modernity helps hide its darker colonial designs. He describes modernity as “a three-headed hydra, even though it only reveals one head: the rhetoric of salvation and progress” (2011a, 46). Its other two very dubious heads, namely coloniality and capitalism, are much more elusive and obscured or hidden behind the promises of modernity. For the present study, it is vital to recognize that the language of this rhetoric has morphed over time. The “logic of coloniality” has gone through “successive and cumulative stages presented positively in the rhetoric of modernity: specifically, in the terms salvation, progress, development, modernization, and democracy” (Mignolo 2011a, 13–14).<sup>29</sup> As elaborated above, the civilizing mission and its

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<sup>29</sup> Achille Mbembe also speaks to this non-change, how the idea of “civilization” was simply replaced by the term “progress.” (2013, 133). Aimé Césaire also reveals this paradox in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, “On me parle de progrès, de ‘réalisations’, de maladies guéries, de niveaux de vie élevés au-dessus d’eux-mêmes. Moi, je parle de sociétés vidées d’elles-mêmes, des cultures piétinées, d’institutions minées, de terres confisquées, de religions assassinées, de magnificences artistiques anéanties, d’extraordinaires *possibilités* supprimées” [They talk to me about progress, about “achievements,” diseases cured, improved standards of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out] (1989, 19–20). Similarly, Albert Memmi questions the positive rhetoric of development by the oft raised question, “le colonisé n’a-t-il pas, *tout de même*, profité de la colonisation? *Tout de même*, le colonisateur n’a-t-il pas ouvert des routes, bâti des hôpitaux et des écoles?” [Didn’t the colonized nonetheless profit by colonization? Did the colonizer not open roads, build hospitals and schools?], to which he responds, “Qu’en savons-nous? Pourquoi devons-nous supposer que le colonisé se serait figé dans l’état où l’a trouvé le colonisateur? On pourrait aussi bien affirmer le contraire: si la colonisation n’avait pas eu lieu, il y aurait eu plus d’écoles et plus d’hôpitaux” [How do we know? Why must we suppose that the colonized would have remained frozen in the state in which the colonizer found him? We could just as well put

rhetoric fits into this same progression of the rhetoric of modernity. In sum, contemporary discourse surrounding the school stems from this progression, the origins of which are rooted in coloniality.

Because such positive language continues to be wielded to justify coloniality's projects. For example, "development" discourse is a mutation of modernity/coloniality in contemporary times. As Walsh understands it, development is "a western model of judgement and control over life itself" (2010, 15), and education is a major target of this judgement in the Global South. (We can recall again the "Education for all" movement and the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development goals where education—but schooling in particular—sits close to the top of the list at number four.) Under the guise of development, the West implements its own measures of what education should look like. Walsh cites educational theorist Paolo Freire, who describes how the concept of "quality education" is part of the coded discourse of neoliberal ideology. She explains that this is especially true "in the so-called developing world where educational quality is synonymous with modernization, development, and the universalization of one model of schooling: the model of the Global North or West" (2021, 470). As modern discourses of development continue to claim school-based instruction as a universal good, I posit that this educational institution is a key apparatus in the colonial matrix of power. By exploring how this Western education model manifests in the novels of francophone authors, I aim to reveal the ways in which the institution of school epitomizes the illusory rhetoric of modernity, preaching salvation and progress while upholding the oppressive matrices of coloniality.

South African decolonial thinker Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni speaks to how coloniality functions in an African context specifically in *Empire, Global Coloniality and African*

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forward the opposite view. If colonization had not taken place, there would have been more schools and more hospitals] (2002, 129–30).

*Subjectivity* (2013). Coloniality “enabled control of subjectivity and knowledge, including the imposition of Euro-American epistemology and the shaping of formative processes of development of black subjectivity” (31). Subjectivity formation evokes the schooling process where, as Ngũgĩ explained, imposition of foreign knowledges caused dissonance in students’ sense of self. What Ndlovu-Gatsheni reveals here, however, is that beyond language and content like history and geography, coloniality (and the school) impose an entire epistemology that impacts African subjectivities long beyond decolonization (let alone the tenure of assimilation policy). This facet of the colonial matrix of power is called the “coloniality of knowledge,” which, I argue, the school helps create, perpetuate, and mutate. Quijano summarizes the hegemony of Western knowledge thus: “The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual” (2007, 169). The coloniality of knowledge is a particularly volatile and slippery pillar of the colonial matrix of power because, as Mignolo explains, knowledge exists on two different planes. The analogy he uses to describe these planes is effective, so I will site it at length.

Knowledge has a privileged position: it occupies the level of the enunciated, where the content of the conversation is established, and it occupies the level of enunciation, which regulates the terms of the conversation. A pedagogical metaphor would help clarify the point I am making here. Think of a puppeteer: you do not see the puppeteer (the enunciator); you only see the puppets (the enunciated). You are drawn by the puppets, by their movements and dialogues. What you see and hear is the content of the conversation. In order to “see” the terms of the conversation, you would have to disengage from the illusion and focus on the puppeteer behind the scenes, who is regulating the conversation. (2018, 144)

By “conversation,” Mignolo is referring to the larger domains, discourses, and designs that drive the idea of modernity. However, this notion of knowledge’s dual position has relevant

applications to the school as well because the school plays a major role in defining both what students learn (the content of the conversation) and how, when, and why they learn it (the terms of the conversation). In other words, the material learned in school and its transference between teacher and student represent the enunciated, the more overt, visible displays of knowledge production and transmission. On the other hand, the level of enunciation—the plane of knowledge production and transmission that resides behind the illusion—comprises the less apparent elements of school: the pedagogy, the classroom space, the power dynamics.<sup>30</sup>

Mignolo explains that decolonizing knowledge involves challenging knowledge on both of its planes. It “demands changing the *terms* of the conversation and making visible the tricks and the designs of the puppeteer: it aims at altering the principles and assumptions of knowledge creation, transformation, and dissemination. Dewesternization, by contrast, disputes the *content* of the conversation” (2018, 144–45). Therefore, in my analyses of the novels in my corpus I seek out and challenge those principles and assumptions associated with the school. Furthermore, I examine the contents of the narration in these novels as well as the terms of the narration, the more subtle narratological, epistemological, and psychological traces of school, its illusions, its tricks, its designs.

In his essay “Degrees of Coloniality in Fiction from Africa” (2005), literary scholar Brian Worsfold provides a useful conceptualization of this way in which coloniality arises in fiction. First, Worsfold describes coloniality as the residues left from colonization, the “cosmic dust” floating around and settling on every surface, thin and often invisibilized to those untrained to

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<sup>30</sup> One potential risk of Mignolo’s metaphor is equating the anthropomorphized puppeteer with a specific person or people in the projects of coloniality. In the schooling context, it would be easy to mistake the puppeteer for the teacher or school directors. However, I approach these novels considering terms of the conversation (the puppeteer) as the systems, structures, and practices that dictate how teachers and administrators carry out schooling. These actors are equally embroiled in hegemonic power structures perpetuated by the school.

see it or not targeted by its project. He continues to explain how these traces manifest in African literature. “While coloniality itself is immutable, gradations also occur in its effect on content, authorial intention, discursive objectives, characterization, and style” (259). This is precisely the subject of the following analyses: I explore how the coloniality of the school infuses in these literary texts.

I also seek to find if and how characters and authors resist this coloniality, because the novels I study offer instances of Quijano’s “delinking” and Mignolo’s “epistemic disobedience.” Ndlovu-Gatsheni cites Samir Amin, who defines delinking as “the refusal to submit to the demands of the world-wide law of value” (2013b, 12). I also ask if characters—as well as authors—can wield schooling on their own terms, to contest not only coloniality but also patriarchy, ethnic violence, religious corruption, racism, capitalism, and contemporary globalization. In short, do they participate in a decolonial turn, liberating “the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity” (Quijano 2007, 177)? Do the works in question show signs of challenging not only school’s content (the conversation, the enunciated) but also the “principles and assumptions” of the school (the level of the enunciation, the terms, the tricks and designs of the puppeteer)?

While at a certain point both the classic and contemporary works throw into question the institution of the school, its coloniality is a web from which students in classic works are largely unable to escape. However, I find that the more contemporary works begin to change the terms of the conversation. The evolving terrains and contexts between the two periods contribute to the transformations in these representations and their implications on a broader sociopolitical level. For instance, the classic works suggest a certain inevitability of the Western school’s dominance. The fathers in *L’Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée* present their sons with no other option than to

attend the French school. La Grande Royale in *L'Aventure ambiguë* is convinced that sending Diallobé children to the colonial school is the only way to save the Diallobé people. However, in later portrayals we see more resistance to or wielding of the school for purposes of “re-existence,” a delinking from Western modernity’s designs for self-determination. Ken Bugul and Scholastique Mukasonga’s novels tend toward the decolonial because they explicitly and critically lay bare the imbedded coloniality of the school. As for *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, the young protagonist sneaks *into* school, and this subversive act eventually helps her reach re-existence through her writing. She harnesses her education to destabilize the status quo. Furthermore, newer conceptions of school work to challenge and subvert the rhetoric of modernity, although they do not reject formal education altogether. This is one such shift that may suggest a decolonial turn.

The decolonial turn as it applies to school necessarily implies breaking away from the alleged universality and positivity of the school, away from development as well as progress and modernity. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the decolonial turn begs that “new studies of empire and global coloniality should deliberately aim at transcending both the rhetorics of modernity and myths of decolonization” (2013b, 26). The decolonial turn, however, has two major, concurrent steps. One is to “illuminate the work of the rhetoric of modernity...illuminate the *constitution* of the colonial matrix of power (CMP) which *destitutes* praxes of living, knowing and thinking that become an encumbrance for the constitution and marches Western modernity and Westernisation forward all at once” (Mignolo 2020, 1). In other words, decolonial thinking seeks to, in part, reveal coloniality and critically examine the institutions that perpetuate it. The school, therefore, and the traces it leaves are essential sites where the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being can burrow but also where it can be exposed and challenged.

A second piece of the decolonial turn aims for “a recovery of that/those knowledge(s) that were displaced by triumphalist Euro-American epistemologies” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b, xii). Although the contemporary novels studied here show signs of the first part of the decolonial project, they show fewer of the second, the “epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution” (Mignolo 2020, 1). African and Africanist philosophers and scholars of education are embarking in this work (Waghid 2014; Tshifhumulo and Makhanikhe 2021; Abdi 2021). However, the endurance of the school in fiction may speak to its persistence in overwhelming indigenous knowledges and non-Western epistemologies, thus only moving *toward* a decolonial turn. Since this study focuses on Euro-centric views of education, it is not a complete decolonial project. Nevertheless, it is a movement in the decolonial direction.

### *Theories of Schooling and Education*

It is not coincidental that decolonial thinkers such as Catherine Walsh frequently dialogue with the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire.<sup>31</sup> Although rooted in Marxist class analysis, his work on critical pedagogy and oppressive hegemonic world systems demonstrates several affinities between concepts of de/coloniality. His preeminent work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1967] 2018) conceptualizes these systems of oppression through the domain of education, schooling specifically. For instance, Freire illustrates the concept of “banking” education and how it perpetuates imbalances of power in the classroom. It functions on the premise that the student is an empty vessel that must be filled with information, which can only be imparted through the teacher. He argues that this pedagogy ultimately reproduces hegemony as it leads to stagnancy and a destructive lack of creativity. Freire also challenges the normative

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Walsh’s essays “Decolonial pedagogies walking and asking: Notes to Paulo Freire from Abya Yala” (2015) and “(Decolonial) Notes to Paulo Freire: Walking and Asking” (2019).



student-teacher relationship and the oppressive methods of instruction “banking” imposes, “which mirror oppressive society as a whole” (73). Some of these relationships are:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined (73).

The list continues. Importantly, Freire posits that although the teacher possesses power over students in these relationships, they too are embroiled in and victims of the cycle of dehumanization. We will see examples of this phenomenon in the novels studied here, for example in the violent way the teachers in Ken’s school in *Le Baobab fou* lash out toward their students, which even Ken recognizes as a pent-up anger over the colonial condition.

To break from the cycle, Freire calls for liberatory approaches to education, the opposite of banking education. “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals [sic] of information” (79). He proposes his concept of critical pedagogy as a way for learners to generate knowledge through problem-posing methods and praxis, which help them (as well as the educator) develop a critical consciousness to then transform and emancipate the world. We see a glimpse of what could be called critical pedagogy in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* when Salie uses her subversive schooling to construct herself a transatlantic identity through writing. Ultimately, Freire’s work illustrates that learning relationships as well as pedagogy itself can be imbued with oppressive and/or liberatory valences. Thanks to authors’ detailed descriptions of the learning process in novels such as the ones studied here, we can decipher those embedded motivations in the representations of the school and of other educations depicted therein.

Michel Foucault is another important theorist who shows the connection between schooling methods and motivations of control. His work *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la*

*prison* ([1975] 2006) shows the evolution of machines of discipline developed in Europe.

Although the subtitle of the work evokes the carceral system as the ultimate form of evolving corrective and disciplinary tactics, Foucault shows how the same measures of training and power over the body developed concurrently in projects of mass education.<sup>32</sup> The school is specifically characterized by mechanisms of surveillance and correction, where the most miniscule of techniques to train (“dresser”) students in the classroom contribute to an entire politic of the body, what Foucault calls a “‘microphysique’ du pouvoir” (163).<sup>33</sup> Over time, the school developed from being a preventative measure of forming children out of (what philosophies of the time considered to be) their sinful nature to a productive measure of forming children to be useful. (Notably, this utility through school was and is solidly linked to the values of the Republic and national identity in France and was in turn present at the origins of school in the French empire.)

The schoolroom is a quintessential site of order and discipline. The structures of the classroom in its contemporary recognizable forms were and are primarily designed to regulate behavior and facilitate conditioning of the body. In *Buildings and Power* (1993), building historian Thomas Markus illustrates that those original designs of order in the classroom endure, i.e., the inverted theater as a means of surveillance, discipline (as in punishment), silence, productive work, and hierarchy (41-42). The tools of the schoolroom contribute to a carefully established order. Let’s consider the blackboard, a classic symbol of the school. In the

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<sup>32</sup> In a footnote, Foucault also notes how similar disciplinary technologies play a role in colonization. He notes, “Je choisirai les exemples dans les institutions militaires, médicales, scolaires et industrielles. D’autres exemples auraient pu être pris dans la colonisation, l’esclavage, les soins à la première enfance” (166) [I shall choose examples from military, medical, educational and industrial institutions. Other examples might have been taken from colonization, slavery and child rearing (314)]. Foucault engages conspicuously little with the colonial project. Nevertheless, the connection he draws further justifies the use of the school as a tool of colonization and biopolitical control.

<sup>33</sup> “‘micro-physics’ of power” (139).

introduction to *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards* (2016), Robert Launay exposes the pedagogical weight of this implement by comparing it to the writing boards pervasively used in Islamic education. He explains that these tools “do not simply symbolize two different systems of education, but in a deeper sense literally embody them materially. Each of these supports called for different postures, different attitudes, and different behaviors, which served to inscribe different disciplinary projects on the bodies of pupils” (1-2). Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* paints a particularly potent image of how the blackboard controls the learning space for the young students, which I explore in Chapter One.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise put, teaching tools are bearers of their education’s epistemologies.

In colonial and postcolonial settings, these features and tools of the school’s space reflect as well as inform larger structures of power. We can see connections to Fanon’s description of the compartmentalized colonial city in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), with its demarcations and surveillance. Fanon adds that what upholds such stringent compartmentalization is, in fact, a carefully devised education.

Dans les sociétés de type capitaliste, l’enseignement, religieux ou laïque, la formation de réflexes moraux transmissibles de père en fils, l’honnêteté exemplaire d’ouvriers décorés après cinquante années de bons et loyaux services, l’amour encouragé de l’harmonie et de la sagesse, ces formes esthétiques du respect de l’ordre établi, créent autour de l’exploité

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<sup>34</sup> Laye’s recollection of his schooling experience also communicates this “microphysique du pouvoir” in his memory of handwriting lessons. “[I]l suffisait en vérité, dans les lettres que nous tracions, d’un jambage qui ne fût pas à la hauteur des autres, pour que nous fussions invités soit à prendre, le dimanche, une leçon supplémentaire, soit à faire visite au maître, durant la récréation, dans une classe qu’on appelait la classe enfantine, pour y recevoir sur le derrière une correction toujours mémorable. Notre maître avait les jambages irréguliers en spéciale horreur : il examinait nos copies à la loupe et puis nous distribuait autant de coups de trique qu’il avait trouvé d’irrégularités. Or, je le rappelle, c’était un homme comme du vif-argent, et il maniait le bâton avec une joyeuse verve !” (85) [If we made one downward stroke not precisely of the same height as the others, we were required to do extra lessons on Sunday, or were sent during recess to the first grade for a caning—a caning, I should add, one did not easily forget. Irregular downward strokes made our teacher furious. He examined our exercises under a magnifying glass, and dealt out his blows accordingly. He was indeed quicksilver, and he wielded his rod with joyous *élan* (80)]. I explore the relationship between these minutiae of the educative disciplinary process and Laye’s own epistemological interference in Chapter One.

une atmosphère de soumission et d'inhibition qui allège considérablement la tâche des forces de l'ordre. (31)<sup>35</sup>

What follows, however, is that a site of perfect order can also be a site of subversion and disobedience. Fanon even opposes the ordered colonial world with his definition of decolonization as “total disorder.” In the chapters to follow, I seek out the ways in which learners can (or cannot) disrupt these power structures inherent to the school in order to resist their coloniality and/or attain means of self-determination and liberation.

### **Literary criticism and the education question**

The recurring subject of the schooling experience in literature has not gone unnoticed by scholars of literary production. French author and teacher of educational sciences Claude Pujade-Renaud proposes in *L'école dans la littérature* (1986) that literary representations of school across time and place demonstrate “une certaine universalité des comportements et des sentiments suscités par l'école” (13).<sup>36</sup> However, the history of school in sub-Saharan Africa shows that the school itself is not a universal or universalizable form of education. I propose that the presence of school in literature takes on distinct meanings in post/neo/colonial contexts. Any purported universality of the schooling experience is compromised by underlying coloniality traceable in these narratives. In critical studies pertaining to sub-Saharan African literature, both Bernard Mouralis and Christopher Miller have touched on the education question in *Littérature et développement* (1984) and *Theories of Africans* (1990), respectively. Many literary critics have also examined the prevalence of education in sub-Saharan African fiction through the

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<sup>35</sup> “In capitalist societies, education, whether secular or religious, the teaching of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary integrity of workers decorated after fifty years of loyal and faithful service, the fostering of love for harmony and wisdom, those aesthetic forms of respect for the status quo, instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents of law and order” (3).

<sup>36</sup> “...a certain universality of behaviors and feelings aroused by school.”

concept of the *Bildungsroman*. Some posit that these authors subvert the traditional European framework of the coming-of-age story through infusing their work with African narrative and aesthetic techniques (Nyatetū-Waigwa 1996; Okolie 1998; Austen 2015; Haskell 2016; Hoagland 2019). Finally, the critical works of Samba Gadjigo, Brigitte Alessandri, Ben Conisbee Baer, and Mohamed Kamara have interrogated the school to the deeper extent I aim for in this dissertation. Though they do not feature centrally in the chapters to follow, this project dialogues with and complements their contributions to the study of the school in literary form and (post)colonial contexts.

My project follows the example of Samba Gadjigo's *École blanche, Afrique noire* (1990) wherein this scholar demonstrates how literary texts provide better insight into the psychological and social impact of the school in francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Gadjigo argues that what official colonial documents and testimonies from teachers and administration lack is an inside look "que seuls pouvaient offrir des auteurs dont l'être et la conscience ont été façonnés par une expérience directe de l'institution scolaire coloniale" (81).<sup>37</sup> With special attunement to the social, cultural, and historical frameworks on which these authors construct their narrative—oftentimes autobiographical—, Gadjigo establishes what he names a "socio-diagnostique" of the school in francophone sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial period. Along with Bernard Dadié's autobiographical novel *Climbié* (1956), Gadjigo also delves into *L'Enfant noir*, *Mission terminée*, *L'Aventure ambiguë*, further indicating the affinities between these francophone texts, namely their intimate narration of childhood, rupture, and the scholastic learning process. The author notices a change in tone around the school between the interwar period and the post-war period, which more broadly reflects the change in larger (literary) perceptions of colonization

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<sup>37</sup> "...that only authors whose being and consciousness have been shaped by direct experience of the colonial educational institution could offer."

(78). More specifically, whereas the characters' encounters with the school in *Climbié*, *L'Enfant noir*, and *L'Aventure ambiguë* are more resigned or strategic, *Mission terminée*—the events of which Gadjigo places in the post-war period—is decidedly more defiant. Expanding on Gadjigo's assertion that these narratives should contribute significantly to the education question in francophone sub-Saharan Africa, I revisit some of these same works, paying closer attention to the school's devices of coloniality and extending the conversation into more recent eras by bringing in a new suite of contemporary texts.

Like Gadjigo, Brigitte Alessandri also examines the intersection between literary representation and social reality via school in *L'école dans le roman africain: Des premiers écrivains francophones à Boubacar Boris Diop* (2004). This scholar aims for a wide-reaching survey of texts that feature the educational institution, incorporating over 60 works written since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century into her comprehensive investigation of the school. By surveying a large corpus of texts, Alessandri traces transformations in francophone African novels over time, positioning Senegalese author Diop in the contemporary trajectory of representation of school. The literary transformations she notes—particularly growing liberties of form, genre, and language—continue to echo and intensify in the works of even more recent novelists studied in Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation. Alessandri divides her analyses thematically, summarizing, for example, the content of the education; the discipline; identity formation; and various additional actors such as teachers, family, and community. Alessandri's work sets an important precedent in noting how often-overlooked scholastic elements such as temporality, materials, and symbols contribute to the alterity of the school in these sociocultural contexts. Her analyses show how this then causes rupturing and identity warping consequences for the student. While Alessandri's analysis is impressive in its breadth, my study analyzes the few chosen texts

more profoundly in order to illuminate the complex ways they bear coloniality and their effects upon the narratives themselves.

In *Indigenous Vanguard: Education, National Liberation, and the Limits of Modernism* (2019), Ben Conisbee Baer theorizes the school at the intersection of class revolution and post-independence state development. In this comparative literature study, Baer conceptualizes the relationship between education, class, nation, democratic citizenship, and freedom, drawing from Marxist theory, colonial and postcolonial studies, and sociohistorical context in his analysis of literary works from throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He establishes how schooling is an integral tool in developing “modern” subjects, especially as it comes to state formation and even more specifically for formerly colonized regions who inherited this educational apparatus. Baer draws from Althusser (1970), highlighting that “ideological State apparatuses,” the school among them, are both “stake” and “site” of struggle (30). In (post)colonial contexts, he underlines that “common education is a pharmakon: it is *both* poison and medicine (poison *as* medicine)” and that “it is in the work of modernist literary experimenters, who put themselves and their work as close to developing educational institutions as possible, that this duality becomes clear, along with the ‘unprecedented difficulties’ it carried for colonial and postcolonial societies” (43). Although my analyses focus less on state formation and class struggle, Baer’s attention to the implications of the school and authorship in these matters inform my understandings of education’s political positioning in modern societies. Furthermore, Baer dedicates a chapter to the Africanizing educational revisions of Léopold Sédar Senghor and another to the poetic pedagogies of Aimé Césaire. While these two francophone literary and political titans do not feature greatly in my analyses to come, their influence undoubtedly echoes in the novels I study

and speak to what Baer calls a “fixation” (4) on education that extends beyond Senghor and Césaire.

The juncture of class and education also informs Mohamed Kamara’s *Colonial Legacies in Francophone African Literature: The School and the Invention of the Bourgeoisie* (2023). The social and economic strata formed by the colonial school, he argues, was “a calculated creation of the colonial enterprise” (8). Complementing the work of Gadjigo, Kamara performs close readings of 18 sub-Saharan African francophone texts (novels, plays, and films) from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to ultimately demonstrate how the school impacts society and politics, with particular attention to class formation. He explores the literary strategies used to show the “intimate connection between the school and social transformation” (21). The assertion that this new group of African elite was born of explicit (rather than organic) social design begs us to consider other underlying, though deliberate, strategies baked into the school. In a bleak conclusion, Kamara places much of the blame for the corruption, violence, uncertainty, and insecurity under African bourgeois leadership on their substandard education engineered by colonial theory. He claims that failure is the pervading outcome of the texts he studies. “Even where the individual is represented as having succeeded, their success is often depicted as a hollow one, precisely because it is built on a dubious foundation and unable to translate into societal progress” (218).

While the contemporary novels examined in this dissertation do provide some hope, I would argue that the persistent coloniality of the school reproduces the impression of failure even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nevertheless, the authors studied in Chapters Two, Three, and Four poke holes in the designs of the school and shed light on those gaps, participating in the decolonial project to “illuminate the work of the rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo 2020, 1). The students whom Ken Bugul, Scholastique Mukasonga, and Fatou Diome depict may not be able to



harness their schooling for complete re-existence, but the decoloniality of these works exists in the act of writing itself as they criticize, satirize, and disobey the codes of modernity and the school.

## Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I analyze three “classic” literary texts by sub-Saharan African francophone writers for how the mechanisms of the school impact the subjectivities-in-formation of the three young male protagonists. One of the first autobiographical portrayals of West African childhood published in French, *L’Enfant noir* by Guinean author Camara Laye is an apt point of departure for this study. A consistent motif across each work in my corpus, *L’Enfant noir* treats conflicting forms of education and young Laye’s alienation from his African communities. Notably, *L’Enfant noir* also offers a rich portrait of the classroom itself, depicting the spatial configurations, power dynamics, and tools that govern the classroom, the students, and even the instructors. I shed light on these structures and pedagogies—inherent to the Western-model school—and determine how they contribute to coloniality’s “complex structure of management and control” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 125). My examination of the classroom configuration in *L’Enfant noir* offers a model of reading the school space in literary form that I will continue to use throughout this study.

Paradoxically, Mongo Beti’s *Mission terminée* (1957) takes place entirely outside of the educational institution. Nevertheless, this novel runs rife with facsimiles of the school and pokes fun at its misuse by African “tradition.” In this analysis, I explore the ways in which schooling is commodified within the African communities of the novel to carry great social and economic value. However, this value cannot be wielded by the student himself. Drawing from Bourdieu’s

concepts of institutionalized cultural capital, I discover how the social transactions that exploit schooling result in the objectification (and often humiliation) of the student. Because the influence of instruction and diplomas within the African communities depends on a proximity to coloniality, their value is therefore wrapped up in the coloniality of power.

The final analysis in Chapter One offers a new look into Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961). As a son of Diallobé royalty, an extraordinary Islamic disciple, and a gifted French school student, the main character, Samba Diallo, is pulled in conflicting directions. Like Medza, Samba Diallo is unable to wield his instruction for his own resistance or re-existence as he is pulled between two types of education. However, I venture beyond the binary of "West African Sufi Islam" versus "the West" to which the narrative can be easily reduced. I do so by examining the pivotal character of La Grande Royale in how she negotiates the coming of the colonial school. I posit that because of her complex positionality in the Diallobé community as a Muslim woman of royal blood, she is able to usher the Diallobé people into a new paradigm, while other, more single-faceted leaders in the community are paralyzed in the face of changing times. Ultimately, however, colonial schooling is a "necessary evil" to save the Diallobé people, and therefore I argue this literary representation cannot fully wield schooling for counterhegemonic purposes.

In Chapter Two, I turn to Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* (1982), thus entering a more contemporary era with marked shifts in the representation of the school. Nevertheless, this novel is a logical pivot in our updated understanding of the schooling experience precisely because of its affinities with the classic novels, specifically its emphasis on points of rupture and alienation caused by schooling. Nevertheless, the work takes on a much more explicit critique of the (post)colonial school, and I draw from feminist and migration studies to examine how Ken's

experience differs from Laye's, Medza's, and Samba Diallo's. This chapter explores how Ken Bugul's autobiographical novel represents the formation and deformation of identity for an entire generation of African children. The novel presents a pained process of un-learning and re-learning in the protagonist Ken's quest for belonging originally denied by the departure of her mother when she was young. Her schooling becomes a surrogate through which she desperately seeks acceptance. However, after Ken migrates to Europe to pursue her studies, she is confronted with dissonances between her school-informed understanding of self and the identity thrust upon her in Belgium. The crises that Ken faces in Belgium drive her to draw upon her school-days memories in order to reconcile her misleading indoctrination and incoherent, discontented sense of self. My readings show how *Le Baobab fou* portrays the particular identity-(de)forming and identity-falsifying power of the school and its consequences for the uprooted student through the physical, psychological, and narrative splitting of the first-person subject.

Chapter Three analyzes the physical school environment alongside notions of myth and historical referents in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012). I demonstrate how the school space in *Notre-Dame du Nil* is portrayed as both physically and figuratively inaccessible, reflecting the immense difficulty the Tutsi students face in order to enroll there. Despite its lofty locale, its high, sturdy walls, and its impressive reputation, the school space is consistently breached throughout the novel. In fact, these constructions of the school itself contribute to its oppressive practices. In other words, even if the carefully devised goals, systems, and physical space of the school are meant to advance the position of these young women in Rwandan society, they also provide, paradoxically, ideal conditions for abuse, temptation, and eventually an explosion of violence. I examine how the school space is constructed and protected and then how different forces consistently exploit its porosity. The

contradiction of the high school's wholesome façade and its disastrous reality contribute to Mukasonga's ironic and critical appraisal of the school. The physical and moral precarity of the school, I also argue, reflects the political, social, and moral precarity of the country itself in 1973. Thus, I will demonstrate how Mukasonga's work helps us reconsider the broader impact of this Western-model educational institution in addition to its involvement in Rwanda's violent history.

While these first two contemporary authors offer critical conceptions of schooling in neocolonial contexts, Salie, the main character in Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), is explicit in her veneration of formal schooling and her gratitude for the opportunities it awarded her. Despite Salie's appreciation, this novel also speaks to the ambivalence of formal education in contemporary times; only a certain type of person from the island of Niodior is able to benefit from schooling. Chapter Four explores the conditional aspects of Salie's success through education. I determine that because of her disobedience (her very existence as an illegitimate child, her initial clandestine presence in school, and her refusal to conform to patriarchal norms), she is able to harness her schooling to evade the customary roles to which women on the island are assigned in its insular, patriarchal society. The insularity of the island also produces an echo chamber, where a steady influx of advertisements and anecdotes about Europe reverberate, promising a paradise in France and inspiring the island youth, like Salie's brother Madické, to migrate. However, school does not provide Madické with the same escape as it did for Salie, and he instead chooses football as the vehicle to attain his dream. This chapter will explore the tenuous nature of schooling as well as its liberatory potential when, despite its limitations, the student can harness her schooling for purposes of dignity and self-determination.

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Why is reading the school in fiction important? These intimate narratives provide a more wholistic image of the school as an experience, process, and educational apparatus. I subscribe to a similar line of thought to that of Filipe Delfim Santos in his monograph *Education and the Boarding School Novel* (2017). He states, “The most pertinent point about school novels and memoirs is that they are the product of the recollection of memories by those who had been schooled as youngsters. As such, they are unique in conveying the psychological effects of the schooling experience on the schooled mind. This point of view is lacking in all other sources” (6-7). Although Santos explores fiction outside of the African continent, his argument for engaging fictional texts in educational research makes an important case for what this literature can provide. This position also implies that authors’ complex representations of and relations with the schooling experience are inevitably embroiled with the act of writing itself. Authors are driven to write about their experience precisely because of the lasting impact of schooling on their memories and senses of self. Therefore, the school in fiction is an interface through and by which one can understand the construction (written or otherwise) of self. It is also where, in a (post)colonial context, one can detect the intangible yet ubiquitous structures of coloniality in the school and/or how students defy or harness the designs of the school for their own re-existence. By reading the school in this way, I propose one can also practice identifying and transcending the coloniality embedded in other institutions as well as the very educational apparatuses of which we are a part.

## CHAPTER 1

### Pedagogy, Community, and Student Agency in Three Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Novels

Matters of education have featured widely in sub-Saharan African French-language literature, appearing in even the very earliest of publications. Amadou Mapaté Diagne's *Les Trois volontés de Malic* (1920), which is often named the first fictional work in French by a sub-Saharan African author (Murphy 2008; O. C. Diop 2021), depicts its main character's ardent desire to attend French school and ultimately transcend his traditionally prescribed social and vocational class. From its first literary representation, schooling is portrayed as a means to attain social and economic advancement as well as a certain dignity that accompanies providing for one's family. Diagne's text also reflects a tendency for these representations to reveal, latently or explicitly, how foreign schooling disrupts African customs and societal structures. Since Diagne's propagandistic text, other authors have taken more critical or complex stances in their literary engagement with the school. These more nuanced depictions reflect evolving attitudes toward the colonial project itself. Decades after the civilizing mission began embedding the institution into African societies, these many textual representations debate the merits and drawbacks of the colonial school. However, their detailed portrayals of the school space, community discourse around education, and students' psychological, affective, and embodied experiences provide fruitful ground from which to unveil how schooling carries, embeds, and disseminates coloniality.

Deeply entwined in the colonial project, schooling inevitably takes on political significance in these texts. On the other hand, the accounts are also extremely personal, drawing from their author's own experiences of learning, forming identity, growing up, and growing apart from their home culture. In this chapter, I examine three such French-language novels published

during the mid-twentieth century by sub-Saharan African authors in order to peel back the layers of their representation of the school and the education question. Guinean author Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953), Cameroonian author Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* (1957), and Senegalese author Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) each offer a unique take on how students experience their schooling and how communities confront the ever-encroaching presence of French education. Their stances range from school-positive to school-averse, oftentimes within the same novel, woven among layers of critique, nostalgia, necessity, and even indifference toward the foreign educational institution. In turn, each novel uses distinctive literary strategies to form their stance vis-à-vis the school. Together, these narratives can inform our broader understanding of the colonial school in African societies. Each author's narrative and experiential idiosyncrasies speak to both a collective and individual effort to reckon with the experience of schooling and the imposition (or embrace) of this foreign educational institution in different sub-Saharan African contexts.

The first novel, *L'Enfant Noir* tells the story of a Guinean boy growing up among family and community in northeastern Guinea and attending school, which steadily distances him—physically and culturally—from home. In its vivid descriptions of the classroom, distinct from his native Mandinka learning customs, this novel reflects how the school bears coloniality in its pedagogies and spaces. Close readings further reveal that those Western ways of knowing and being also burrow into the narrative level of *L'Enfant noir*.

The second novel, *Mission terminée*, uses a satirical register to depict the student Jean-Marie Medza, whose community has tasked him to travel to the remote village of Kala to demand the return of his cousin's runaway wife. Medza is meant to wield his many diplomas to intimidate the Kalans, despite (ironically) having just failed his baccalaureate exam. Analyses of

school-related discourse in *Mission terminée* show that schooling is given powerful social value within the African communities of the novel, though it cannot be wielded by the student himself. Because of the particular way the “traditional” African community commodifies schooling, Medza loses his agency in the constant transactions and manipulations of his instruction.

In the third novel, *L'Aventure ambiguë*, the Diallobé people of northern Senegal grapple over whether or not to send their children to colonial school. At the center of the debate between community figureheads is Samba Diallo, an exceptional Islamic disciple, French school student, and member of Diallobé royalty. Kane's novel sets in opposition the materiality of Western culture and the lightness of Islamic spirituality. However, by considering the motivations of characters outside of those strict categorizations, especially La Grande Royale, we see other social, political, gendered, and material factors informing the schooling dilemma. The following chapter will explore the various angles each novel brings to this dissertation's more comprehensive reading of the school. This study does not necessarily seek to determine the authors' political or moral stance toward the French school. It primarily asks what their depictions can uncover about the epistemologies, architectures, and pedagogies of the school and how they convey coloniality.

While distinct in their nuances, these works share several thematic through lines. In the following pages, I will also compare how these novels engage similarly with community involvement in and attitudes toward schooling, student agency (or lack thereof), and the materiality of schooling. The identities of the authors also connect these novels and, in certain ways, distinguish them from the works studied in the latter three chapters of this dissertation. First, each of these writers married their literary endeavors with their political or governmental day jobs, taking up authorship as more of a secondary activity. Of central importance is that all



these authors are also extensively educated in the French system. They therefore fall into the category of “évolué,” or the French-educated African elite formed during the colonial period. Genova (2004, 4) reminds us of how this group was “pivotal in defining citizenship, constructions of French identity, and the production of *imaginaires* about the real African” throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into independence, and their literary works are elements in this larger imaginary. It is therefore fitting to analyze their schooling representations and ask how they in turn inform African identity and citizenship.

These mid-century novels are an important point of departure for understanding the wider representation of school in the Francophone African literary universe. Scholars of literature and education alike have extensively studied these texts for how they portray clashes of educational culture during colonial times (the attention they have received in literary criticism helping render them “classics”). Despite this extensive scholarship, these novels have more to reveal about the epistemological traces that the school embeds in students and communities. They can provide a framework for studying the school in its many literary representations, which is precisely what subsequent chapters of this dissertation endeavor to do. These classic representations of schooling have set up the literary landscape for more contemporary authors’ takes on the educational institution and ultimately help trace how that landscape has changed over time.

### **Discordant Pedagogies in Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir***

Camara Laye’s novel presents a subtle, yet poignant portrayal of the cultural alienation of a schooled African child coming of age in a colonial context. Original critiques of the work claim that *L’Enfant noir* panders to European audiences by painting African childhood under colonial rule in all too idyllic terms. Conversely, I argue that Camara Laye’s novel illustrates

tensions of coloniality, especially in regard to education, that manifest in the plot and narration. Ultimately, colonial schooling distances the young protagonist, Laye, from the customs and culture of his home community. Substantiated by notions of autobiography and narratological perspective, the novel's first-person narrator reveals the intimate psychological and mnemonic impacts of conflicting educational values on his identity, memory, and knowledge. Although each novel studied in this dissertation draws from its author's personal experiences, only Camara Laye and Ken Bugul specify their texts as fully autobiographical. Therefore, these texts narrate the schooling experience through a style of authenticity and realism curated by their authors. As we will see, this designation differently impacts the reception and critique of the novels as well.

*L'Enfant noir* is a generative starting point in this study because the coming-of-age story offers ample entry points into analyzing representations of education in literary form. It repeatedly details pedagogical practice in Laye's different contexts, and learning processes are positioned in side-by-side comparison, which very clearly highlights their contrasting elements. Additionally, several episodes lend particular attention to classroom spatial arrangements, power dynamics between students and teachers, and varied affective responses to the learning process, indicating the strong impression these conditions made on the young protagonist. These detailed recollections of the narrator's experience in school also invite investigations into how coloniality is coded into these school structures. As such, the analysis that follows proposes a model for reading the school that will inform subsequent examinations of the other works featured in this dissertation. This model calls for a heightened attention to the school's architectures, hierarchies, and pedagogies in order to illuminate the (colonial) epistemologies embedded there. The influence of the school also extends beyond the walls of the classroom in *L'Enfant noir*. School permeates the entire text as the label of *écolier* seems to define Laye's identity even starting with

some of his earliest memories. Therefore, this model also accounts for traces of the school's knowledge and values outside of the educational institution. Strikingly, these traces can appear at the level of narration, i.e., in the terms and constructions used by the narrative voice. In dialogue with conceptions of the colonality of knowledge (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), this section reveals how these diegetic and narrative elements intermingle to convey the epistemologies and colonality passed on by scholastic instruction.

The autobiographical authenticity of *L'Enfant noir* has been called into question since its publication, but the contours of its narrative are certainly based on Camara Laye's life.<sup>1</sup> Camara was born in Guinea in the northeastern city of Kouroussa in 1928 where he grew up living with his mother and his father, a blacksmith. He also attended the local French colonial school. Camara's schooling eventually took him to Conakry where he pursued technical studies at the Collège Poiret and then to France where he continued his education in Argenteuil at the Centre-École Automobile and finally the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers. After some years in France, pangs of nostalgia inspired this engineer to start writing what would become his first literary work. *L'Enfant noir* was printed in 1953 by the publishing house Plon. After this first publication, Camara continued his technical studies and also continued to publish books including the following year *Le Regard du roi* (1954), and later *Dramouss* (1966) and *Le Maître de la parole* (1978). He eventually returned to Guinea and held several official positions within the newly independent government but eventually moved to Dakar because of political clashes and resided there more permanently until his passing in 1980.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mongo Beti's 1954 review in *Présence Africaine* as well as his 1955 essay "Afrique noire, littérature rose." Adele King has written the most extensive studies of Camara's works and life in *The Writings of Camara Laye* (1980) and *Rereading Camara Laye* (2002), the latter of which reignited doubts on *L'Enfant noir*'s authenticity.

The novel depicts episodes in the life of Laye, the protagonist, starting when he is around five years old and ending when he departs from Guinea to continue his studies in Paris. The first-person narrator recounts regular occurrences in the life of his younger self alongside some meaningful specific memories: his father's practices of goldsmithing for local clients; his mother's extraordinary if not supernatural intuition; his summer trips to visit family in the village of Tindican; and important community rituals such as the yearly harvest, the coming-of-age rite of Kondén Diara, and the customs of circumcision. He also describes his experiences as an *écolier*, attending the French colonial school in Kouroussa and his eventual move to Conakry to live with his uncle while pursuing a higher level of formal technical instruction. While on the surface the novel conveys a picturesque account of Laye's Guinean childhood, steady nostalgia and regret pulses through the work. Beneath the quaint descriptions, the narrator's regretful tone reveals more adverse elements of Laye's trajectory and a deeper political engagement.

*L'Enfant noir* received positive reviews within France and Europe, winning the Prix Charles Veillon. On the other hand, Cameroonian author Mongo Beti, under the pseudonym B.A., had a much more critical reaction. In an infamously biting review published in *Présence africaine* in 1954, Mongo Beti criticizes Camara Laye's lack of engagement and lack of condemnation of the colonial system, arguing that the work provides nothing more than a trite and unrealistic portrait of West African childhood for European readers. "Laye, lui, se complait décidément dans l'anodin et surtout le pittoresque le plus facile—donc le plus payant—, érige le poncif en procédé d'art. Malgré l'apparence, c'est une image stéréotypée—donc fausse—de l'Afrique et des Africains qu'il s'acharne à montrer..." (Beti 1954, 420).<sup>2</sup> When asked about this

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<sup>2</sup> "Laye, for his part, certainly delights in the anodyne and above all the easiest picturesque—therefore the most profitable—, and establishes the cliché as artistic process. Despite appearances, it is a stereotypical—therefore false—image of Africa and Africans that he insists on showing."

criticism in an interview with Jacqueline Leiner (1975), Camara himself exerts that “*L’Enfant noir* n’avait tout simplement rien à faire avec la politique !” (153).<sup>3</sup> While the author himself may not acknowledge a political or anti-colonial message, closer studies do in fact reveal a critical valence in the novel.<sup>4</sup> For example, the slippage between romantic and regretful registers provides fertile ground for analysis of the ambiguities of growing up under a French colonial regime. The tension between over-idealized and subtly critical tonalities in this work informs my own reading of Camara’s novel. While *L’Enfant noir* valorizes important Mandinka practices and Laye’s formative moments in his home community, the work also carries traces of the Western school and its epistemology.<sup>5</sup> By closely reading episodes of learning and formative events, by tracing different and conflicting pedagogies, and by following patterns in jumps between narrative levels, I will advance the argument that school in this novel is in fact a major agent not only in the formation of Laye’s identity but also in the acts of remembering and knowing. These traces of school will ultimately demonstrate that the “terms of the conversation,” which Walsh and Mignolo (2018) attribute to the discursive level of the colonality of knowledge, have not changed.

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<sup>3</sup> “*L’Enfant noir* simply had nothing to do with politics!”

<sup>4</sup> These studies have sought to reveal the ways in which *L’Enfant noir* presents a more complex vision of African childhood. Peter C. van Lent (1975) argues that critiques of the over-idealized portrait fail to see how the work itself is actually a process of maturation and self-realization for Laye. Alioune Sow (2010) states that Camara’s work is “far from being mere nostalgic accounts of ideal childhood stripped of colonial context” (502). Sow argues that childhood autobiographical narratives from Africa, such as Mapaté Diagne’s *Les trois volontés de Malic* (1913), Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *Amkoullel l’enfant peul* (1991), Wole Soyinka’s *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), as well as *L’Enfant noir*, consist of multiple modalities, and their variations reflect diversity in childhood experiences.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Bourgeacq (1984, 1990), Donald R. Wehrs (2005), and Wendy Belcher (2007) explore the elements of *L’Enfant noir* that echo Mandika cultural practices and values and how the narrative weaves in these elements as a means of subverting a Western reader’s voyeuristic and anthropological lens.

*Before school: Pedagogies of proximity and mystery*

It is not until the sixth chapter of the work that the narrator directly recounts memories of his schooling. In the first five chapters, the narrating Laye relays memories from his childhood outside of the formal educational institution, although the presence of school is always looming. The “pre-school” chapters provide a basis from which to observe the psychological, epistemological, and narrative shifts that occur between these initial descriptions of Laye’s home community and those of his schooling.

The very first paragraph of *L’Enfant noir* contains noteworthy narrative elements that persist throughout the novel. The incipit begins with a memory of a formative moment in Laye’s childhood. One day while Laye is playing, a snake comes into his family’s compound. Naively, Laye begins poking at it with a stick, and right when the snake is poised to strike, Laye is lifted to safety by an apprentice of his father’s forge. Despite the danger, the way the narrator sets the scene conveys the sense of comfort and security Laye felt among his family as a child. “J’étais enfant et je jouais près de la case de mon père. Quel âge avais-je en ce temps-là? Je ne me rappelle pas exactement. Je devais être très jeune encore: cinq ans, six ans peut-être. Ma mère était dans l’atelier, près de mon père, et leurs voix me parvenaient, rassurantes, tranquilles, mêlées à celles des clients de la forge et au bruit de l’enclume” (9).<sup>6</sup> First, this description of Laye’s early childhood highlights proximity: proximity to his father and mother and proximity to his home community. The repetition of the spatial marker “près” as well as the oral immediacy of the voices within the workshop both found and contribute to Laye’s feelings of comfort and

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<sup>6</sup> “I was a little boy playing around my father’s hut. How old would I have been at the time? I can not remember exactly. I must still have been very young: five, maybe six years old. My mother was in the workshop with my father, and I could just hear their familiar voices above the noise of the anvil and the conversation of the customers” (17). All English translations of this novel come from Kirkup, James & Ernest Jones, trans. 1954. *The Dark Child*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous.

protection in this home environment. Second, the narrator's intervention is a frequent structure in *L'Enfant noir*. While the first descriptive sentence places the protagonist within a memory, the question that follows switches the narrative level. Narrator intervention in memory is commonplace in autobiography, what Genette (1972) names the slippage between the *Je narrant* and the *Je narré*. This structure is particularly interesting in this study as the narrator's interventions are indicative of his epistemological mindset. For instance, it is important to note that the narrator intervenes in his own memory with a question. It could be purely rhetorical, a gesture of remembering. It could also be read as an element of orality in written form. Whatever its purpose, the question jostles the flow of the memory by jumping narrative levels, wrenching the narrative from diegesis to extradiegesis within the first two sentences.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is not insignificant that the question is followed by a lapse in memory, and narrator's uncertainty unsettles the memory all the more on top of the interdiegetic lurch. Doubts of memory saturate the entire work. Miller (1990) and Carr-West (2001) also posit that these questions demonstrate Laye's gaps in knowledge or memory due to the interreference stemming from conflicting pedagogies.<sup>8</sup> I will take an analysis of the narrator's many interventions of this sort even further

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<sup>7</sup> As Genette (1972) states regarding the *héros-narrateur*, "Comme nous l'avons déjà noté, le héros de la matinée ne s'identifie pas encore *en acte* au narrateur final... mais les deux instances se rejoignent déjà en 'pensée,' c'est-à-dire en parole, puisqu'elles partagent la même vérité, qui peut maintenant glisser sans rectification, et comme sans heurt, d'un discours à l'autre, d'un temps (l'imparfait du héros) à l'autre (le présent du narrateur)" (261). [As we have already noticed, the hero of the matinée is not yet identified with the final narrator *in act*, since the work written by the latter is yet to come for the former; but the two instances have already met in "thought," that is, in speech, since they share the same truth, which now can slip without clashing and the need for correction from one discourse to the other, from one tense (the hero's imperfect) to the other (the narrator's present) (254)]. The ease of alternance is due to a shared "vérité," a common truth between protagonist and narrator that Genette calls the "*je sais*." This "knowing" on the part of both the protagonist and the narrator, however, is thrown into doubt in *L'Enfant noir*, and therefore insinuates an interference between protagonist and narrator, making these narrator interventions less stable and the slippage less smooth. All English translations of this text come from Lewin, Jane E., trans. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Miller (1990) states, "From the second sentence of the novel, there is a problem of knowledge and recollection that disrupts the narrative process and seems to call the narrator's authority and command into question, even before it is established... The narrator's project of relating his education and upbringing is full of holes, lapses of memory, and excuses for never having known" (130). Furthermore, Carr-West (2001) argues that "the passage represents an epistemological crisis between past and present. The negation of present knowledge about the past demonstrates the gap between them; the irreversibility of Laye's cultural journey" (28).

to show that they demonstrate an epistemological trace of his schooling in the very narrative layers of *L'Enfant noir*.

Narrator interventions in this first chapter also serve to anticipate a change and indicate that this proximity to family is temporary. As Laye is describing his father's craft and detailing the different protective practices of the goldsmith, the rather intensive explanations are abruptly halted. In the middle of describing the important objects for his father's methods, the narrator intervenes: "...chaque liquid, chaque gri-gri a sa propriété particulière; mais quelle vertu précise? Je l'ignore: j'ai quitté mon père trop tôt" (11).<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this instance represents a gap in knowledge rather than a lapse in memory. It is a recognition that the narrator never knew this information because he never learned it. Like Laye is cut off from that traditional knowledge because of an imminent separation, the description of that traditional knowledge is cut off by the reminder that Laye leaves. The proximity established in this first chapter is juxtaposed with the sudden and rather morose "j'ai quitté mon père trop tôt," which communicates that the comfort of family will be temporary for Laye and sets in motion a steady distancing that takes place throughout the work.

Alongside proximity, these "pre-school" chapters depict the pedagogical value and practice of mystery in Laye's home community. For example, when Laye asks his father about his *génie*, a spiritual guide that visits Laye's father in the form of a snake, his father hesitates to give his son the explanation he seeks, which Laye attributes to his young age: "Sans doute pensait-il à mon âge, sans doute se demandait-il s'il n'était pas un peu tôt pour confier ce secret à un enfant de douze ans" (17).<sup>10</sup> Here Laye conveys a central tenet of his community's approach

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<sup>9</sup> "...each liquid...each charm had its own particular property: but *what* property I did not know: I had left my father's house too soon" (19).

<sup>10</sup> "Perhaps he was thinking about how old I was, perhaps he was wondering if it was not a little too soon to confide such a secret to a twelve-year-old boy" (23-24).



to teaching children and a particular pedagogical factor in Mandinka culture: age. In his community, access to knowledge depends on age and the coming-of-age rites that a young Mandinka must complete. The word “secret” also indicates at the importance of knowledge withholding, and the other rites Laye undergoes in this work emphasize the use of mystery in Mandinka pedagogy. Jacques Bourgeacq (1990) explores at length the use of secrecy and mystery in Mandinka education and how that method is apparent in *L’Enfant noir*. Bourgeacq and others have examined how the mysterious and the fantastic tie this work to Mandinka culture (many in response to Adele King’s claims that *L’Enfant noir* was most likely written by Europeans). Nevertheless, these pedagogies and the epistemologies they carry are interrupted as Laye grows older because of his enrollment in the local French school.

*At school: Pedagogies of discipline and hierarchy*

As mentioned above, the narrator of *L’Enfant noir* delays describing his schooling experiences until the novel’s sixth chapter, despite opening it with “J’ai fréquenté très tôt l’école” (81).<sup>11</sup> Laye suspends this key element of his childhood, which generates anticipation around the school. The separation along with other shifts in this schooldays section suggest that the narrator and the novel itself conceive of school and those memories differently. It indicates differentiated ways of learning and knowing that in turn reflect residues of school in this work. One such shift that few other studies of this novel acknowledge is that school pedagogy is characterized by coercive disciplinary measures and hierarchical relationships of imbalanced power, which contrast starkly with the pedagogies of Laye’s home community. Scholar Roger Berger (2010) does recognize the inherent violence of the schooling process in the novel. “The

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<sup>11</sup> “I was very young when I began school” (77).

primary school [Laye] attends is in particular a site of physical and psychological violence, humiliation, and alienated work, although Laye seems almost unconsciously compelled to succeed in it” (37). Berger’s astute observation highlights the paradoxically positive attitude Laye assumes in the face of this violent pedagogy, a positivity that camouflages the darker realities of the classroom. To enhance this reading of the school, I propose a deeper dive into its depictions to expose its relationships of power and then uncover its traces throughout the rest of the novel.

Laye’s school memories begin with the students’ walk to the official compound. The social aspects of this commute exhibit a key shift in youth dynamics that align with their participation in school. First, Laye describes how the students separate into groups of girls and boys on the way to school. This is the first time that he mentions a boy/girl separation, previously referring to his friends as “mes petits camarades” or “mes petits compagnons” (49-50).<sup>12</sup> This new consciousness of gender could demonstrate the children’s developing maturity. However, the fact that the distinction coincides with Laye’s attendance at school and with the introduction of school in the narrative suggests that the institution plays a role in the categorization of the group.<sup>13</sup>

This newly established separation on the road to school is all the more juxtaposed with the previous, more amicable interactions Laye has with other children because the two groups of students fight: “...quand nous [the boys] leur tirions les cheveux, elles ne se contenaient plus de lazzi, elles se défendaient bec et ongles...” (81-82).<sup>14</sup> This is a second shift in youth dynamics that corresponds with school. While the narrator dismisses the behavior to a generalized

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<sup>12</sup> “playmates” (51-52).

<sup>13</sup> For an in depth analysis of how colonialism wielded gender to carry out imperial objectives, see, for example, Oyeronke Oyewumi’s *Invention of Women : Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997).

<sup>14</sup> “...when we pulled their hair they fought back, scratching and biting us...” (78).

childhood bickering, the daily ritual indicates a specific effect of schooling on the students, and further exploration of in-class and extracurricular constraints reveals why.

Upon arrival in the classroom, students must completely change their behavior.

Juxtaposed against the violent attacks and biting banter during the commute to school is a remarkable immobility and silence: “À l’école, nous gagnions nos places; filles et garçons mêlés, réconciliés et, sitôt assis, nous étions tout oreille, tout immobilité, si bien que le maître donnait ses leçons dans un silence impressionnant” (84).<sup>15</sup> The drastic difference between the motion of the children en route to school and their strict attention upon arrival is made stronger by the repetition of “tout”: “tout oreille, tout immobilité.” The construction insinuates a total attention, and the group becomes one whole, a static receptacle ready to receive knowledge. Thus, in this school chapter there is a double and paradoxical movement of categorization (boys and girls) and homogenization (a static whole). This portrayal of the children differs significantly from those in previous episodes that take place in Laye’s home community of Kouroussa and in Tindican.

Camara Laye’s novel is not the only classic work to exhibit important shifts when entering the school. During the classroom episode in Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë*, key narratological elements suggest different forces at work in the scholastic space. In this scene, the third-person omniscient narrator takes on the perspective of a minor character, Jean Lacroix. Jean is a white French student who recently moved to the town of L... in northern Senegal where his father, a member of the colonial administration, has been placed. *L’Aventure ambiguë* is the only classic work studied here that shifts focalization to a white character, and it is telling that it happens in the school. This is also the only scene that takes place in the scholastic setting. As such, it could be argued that whiteness controls the perception and

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<sup>15</sup> “Once at school, we went straight to our seats, boys and girls side by side, their quarrels over. So motionless and attentive did we sit, that it would have been wonderful to see what would have happened had we stirred” (79).

portrayal of the school space. For instance, when describing the other pupils, the narrative voice uses a racialized term: “C’est sur les bancs d’une salle de classe de cette école remplie de négrillons que Jean Lacroix fit la connaissance de Samba Diallo” (61-62).<sup>16</sup> The expression “remplie de négrillons” reveals two things. First, the brusque, reductive description implies a feeling of superiority of the white narrative focalization in the school space. Second, it highlights the singularity of the protagonist, Samba Diallo, compared to his fellow Black classmates. Indeed, Jean Lacroix’s perspective provides a unique portrait of the main character. The French boy actually senses Samba Diallo before seeing him. Initially, Jean perceives a presence (or absence), a sadness, a “point où tous les bruits étaient absorbés, où tous les frémissements [sic] se perdaient” (63).<sup>17</sup> It is not until Samba Diallo is called on to respond to a question that Jean even registers the source of the rift: it is his desk neighbor who is generating the breach of space and sound in the classroom. Importantly, Samba Diallo does not raise his hand and snap his fingers like the other students do when they wish to answer a question. When M. N’Diaye asks the class in which department Pau is located, no one volunteers to respond, but Samba Diallo is deliberately called on while the others remain silent. He responds with ease, demonstrating his extensive knowledge of French geography. This boy is not only a gifted Qur’anic disciple but also an excellent student, singled out even subconsciously by his white classmate. Yet in the white boy’s perception, Samba Diallo stands out because the rest of his peers are an anonymous, homogenous group of Black children. Therefore, in the classroom episode, a white perspective leverages Samba Diallo’s singular gifts in a way that still claims the school through whiteness. Despite Samba Diallo’s success in school and control of the classroom dynamic, the narrative

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<sup>16</sup> “It was on the classroom benches of this school filled with little black children that Jean Lacroix made the acquaintance of Samba Diallo” (50).

<sup>17</sup> “...point where all noises were absorbed, where all rustling sounds were lost” (51).

shift during the classroom scene in *L'Aventure ambiguë* implies that school is a white space, controlled by Western perspectives.

Depictions of the school space reveal these subtle yet meaningful narrative architectures of the educational institution. Next, let us observe the system of control that reigns in the classroom in *L'Enfant noir*. Upon entering the room, the students suddenly transform from bickering, active agents to soldier-like figures sitting at attention, which illustrates an ordered power dynamic of the classroom as well as the method used to impart learning.<sup>18</sup> In the excerpt cited above, the imperfect tense signifies repeated action, emphasizing the students' control and their strict training under these stringent expectations for the classroom. Furthermore, while the children sit, immobile and at complete attention, the teacher “gives” his lessons. The verb “donner” sets up a specific student-teacher power dynamic, positioning the teacher as the locus of knowledge who passes that knowledge down to empty receptacles. The teacher is active; the students are passive. This pedagogical rapport is all the more emphasized as the teacher is described as an incredibly mobile man: “[il] était comme du vif-argent; il ne demeurait pas en place; il était ici, il était là, comme du vif-argent” (84).<sup>19</sup> The rhythm of this description—short, fast-paced segments—communicates an agitation, a volatility of this character who represents the locus of knowledge. The teacher's rapidity and fluidity create a nervous atmosphere, an essential factor of the classroom dynamic in *L'Enfant noir*.

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<sup>18</sup> As Foucault demonstrates in *Surveiller et punir* ([1975] 2006), the Western school is less of an institution that cultivates knowledge and more of a system of discipline, a training where—through careful combinations of spatial repartition, time regulation, hierarchization, surveillance, and punishment—the smallest gesture of the student is controlled, modified, and solidified. The depictions of the schooling experience in *L'Enfant noir* depicts precisely the sorting of “les multitudes confuses, inutiles ou dangereuses, en multiplicités ordonnées” (174-175) [confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities (148)]. Therefore, the school and the type of learning it values is tightly linked to control of the student's body. All English translations of this text come from Sheridan, Alan, trans. 1995. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>19</sup> “Our teacher moved like quicksilver, here, there, everywhere” (79).

Finally, the narrator emphasizes the “exceptional” behavior of the students, which constitutes a third change in youth dynamics as the work finally enters the environment of the school.

...sa volubilité [du maître] eût étourdi des élèves moins attentifs que nous. Mais nous étions extraordinairement attentifs et nous l'étions sans nous forcer: pour tous, quelque jeunes que nous fussions, l'étude était chose sérieuse, passionnante; nous n'apprenions rien qui ne fût étrange, inattendu et comme venu d'une autre planète; et nous ne nous lassions jamais d'écouter. (84)<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, the expressions “extraordinairement attentifs” and “quelques jeunes que nous fussions” along with the hyperbolic and negative constructions “rien” and “jamais” all emphasize the abnormality and the exceptionality of the students’ behavior. It would seem that the lesson material itself inspires students to be so invested in their studies, and the alterity of the content enchants them to the point that they no longer act like normal children. Here the narrator implies that the students assumed of their own accord this immobile and attentive state due purely to their curiosity in the lesson. However, looking past the subject matter, the functioning of the school is indeed beholden to the discipline-centric colonial script. I propose that what the narrator conveys as the exceptionality of his classmates is actually the result of the school’s pedagogy, classroom space, and power dynamics—a stringent regime of physical and epistemological control. This passage from *L’Enfant noir* relates to Walter Dignolo’s metaphor of the puppeteer: “Coloniality of knowledge is enacted in that zone in which *what you see and hear from the puppets that enchant you distracts you* from the tricks and designs of the enunciator” (2018, 144, emphasis added). While Laye and his fellow students are enchanted by

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<sup>20</sup> “His [the teacher’s] flow of talk would have bewildered less attentive pupils; but we were extraordinarily attentive. Young though we were, we regarded our school work as a deadly serious matter. Nothing that we learned was old or expected; all came as though from another planet, and we never tired of listening” (79).

what they see and hear, they are distracted from the designs of the colonial school that are controlling them.

Mignolo's metaphor suggests that student enthrallment is camouflaging the powerful epistemological systems of control behind the schooling experience. Although the narrator says the students were devoted to school "sans nous forcer," in subsequent descriptions, students lose their agency as this internally-motivated passion shifts into externally-motivated obedience, and their dedication appears much more involuntary. Physical punishment also keeps the students at attention, although the narrator attributes a secondary importance to this stimulus. "En eût-il été autrement [had the lesson been less interesting] le silence n'eût pas été moins absolu sous la férule d'un maître qui semblait être partout à la fois et ne donnait à aucun occasion de dissiper personne" (84).<sup>21</sup> The ubiquitous presence of the teacher with his stick, as much as the narrator downplays its usage, acts as another tool of control in the classroom. It is also worth noting in this citation that "la férule" assumes the more active role. The disciplining object, more than the teacher himself, commands the students. Finally, by introducing the hypothetical "en eût-il été autrement" immediately after describing the captivating nature of the lessons, the narrator negates student interest as a real reason for their exceptional good behavior. The hypothetical alternative throws into question the legitimacy of the students' interest in the lesson and suggests the true reason behind their "passion": fear of corporal punishment. This closer reading of classroom dynamics reveals that hidden behind the enchanting material are the tricks and designs of the school that actually determine what is learned at school (the conversation) and how it is learned (the terms of the conversation).

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<sup>21</sup> "But even if we had wearied, this omnipresent teacher would never have given us an opportunity to interrupt" (79). The presence of the disciplining rod—symbolic or literal—is omitted from this translation.

Even more daunting than corporal punishment, the threat of public humiliation proves to be the strongest impetus for the students to behave. “Mais je l’ai dit : l’idée de dissipation ne nous effleurait même pas; c’est aussi que nous cherchions à attirer le moins possible l’attention du maître: nous vivions dans la crainte perpétuelle d’être envoyés au tableau” (84).<sup>22</sup> The narrator’s recollection of the blackboard is the final and most detailed description of control in the classroom, implying that the psychological turmoil it embodied was the strongest determinant in disciplining students. The value system of the Western school is defined by a tension between knowledge and discipline, and the blackboard’s power demonstrates it clearly.

Ce tableau noir était notre cauchemar : son miroir sombre ne reflétait que trop exactement notre savoir ; et ce savoir souvent était mince et quand bien même il ne l’était pas, il demeurait fragile ; un rien l’effarouchait. Or, si nous voulions ne pas être gratifiés d’une solide volée de coups de bâton, il s’agissait, la craie à la main, de payer comptant. C’est que le plus petit détail ici prenait de l’importance ; le fâcheux tableau amplifiait tout ; et il suffisait en vérité, dans les lettres que nous tracions, d’un jambage qui ne fût pas à la hauteur des autres, pour que nous fussions invités soit à prendre, le dimanche, une leçon supplémentaire, soit à faire visite au maître, durant la récréation, dans une classe qu’on appelait la classe enfantine, pour y recevoir sur le derrière une correction toujours mémorable. (84)<sup>23</sup>

This passage in particular reveals school-specific matrices of power that not only maintain order in the classroom but also establish an epistemological value system that would assume a dominant position in students and in the narrator. The blackboard is a salient agent of the classroom power dynamic. The traditional classroom arrangement attributes a significant authority to the object. It is a tool of communication but also a commanding presence. The blackboard indicates the front of the room, and students face it in an arrangement of reverence as

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<sup>22</sup> “Interruption was out of the question; the idea didn’t even occur to us. We wanted to be noticed as little as possible, for we lived in continual dread of being sent to the blackboard” (79-80).

<sup>23</sup> “This was our nightmare. The blackboard’s blank surface was an exact replica of our minds. We knew little, and the little that we knew came out haltingly. The slightest thing could inhibit us [scared off our knowledge]. When we were called to the blackboard we had to take the chalk and really work, if we were to avoid a beating. The smallest detail was of the utmost importance, and the blackboard magnified everything. If we made one downward stroke not precisely of the same height as the others, we were required to do extra lessons on Sunday, or were sent during recess to the first grade for a caning—a caning, I should add, one did not easily forget” (80).



well as submission. Looming before them, the blackboard demands attention and retention and is therefore a pedagogical force in and of itself.<sup>24</sup> In Laye's classroom, while the teacher is a highly mobile regulator of discipline, the blackboard is a fixed, dominant authority. This object and the classroom space itself are consequently pillars of the regime of discipline that controls the learning environment as depicted in this novel. According to this passage, it would seem that more than students' interest in the lesson and even more than the threat of the teachers stick, the blackboard possesses the most power and exerts the strongest influence over the learners. The blackboard is official pedagogical territory, a surface on which knowledge is inscribed, broadcast, erased, and ultimately, in the students' case, evaluated. Students fear most the psychological humiliation of committing errors.

Importantly, the narrator also describes the chalkboard as a mirror that “ne reflétait que trop exactement notre savoir” (84). The black surface upon which white chalk marks out meaning acts as a reflection of the students themselves. They are not only defined by what they know (limited to, of course, knowledge and gestures deemed valuable by the school), but their subjectivity is translated onto and by means of this Western pedagogical classroom authority. Because of its reflective qualities, when students go to the blackboard, they come face to face with their very selves as the colonial school defines them and run the risk of that selfhood being critiqued or worse. Like the chalk markings so easily removed from its surface, the students' knowledge and even their very selves are subject to evaluation and deletion. Whatever confidence or sense of self students may possess, it is likely to vanish at the blackboard: “un rien l'effarouchait.” Because of the blackboard's extreme power to define, intimidate, expose,

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<sup>24</sup> In his introduction to the edited volume *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, Robert Launay (2016b) expertly conceptualizes the blackboard as a symbol but also embodiment of the Western-model school. “Blackboards...exemplified the relative depersonalization of the educational process. They belonged to neither the teacher nor the student but instead to the school, the institution” (5).

humiliate, and erase, students direct terror into this solid presence that reveals and magnifies what they fear the most: not knowing.

It is here that I turn back to the impulse of the adult Laye to comment on holes in his narration. As in the work's incipit, he occasionally blames these gaps on a faulty memory, but more significant than lapses in memory are the narrator's gaps in knowledge. The way in which the narrator speaks of these gaps, their frequency, and the specific type of knowledge that he admits lacking represent remnants of the school in the narration. The most common explicit intervention from the narrator throughout the work—namely comments that appear in the present tense—contain verbs of knowing, or more so, not knowing. For example, there is Laye's lack of education on his father's gri-gri: "je l'ignore." Other instances abound.<sup>25</sup> These occurrences indicate the narrator's fixation with knowing and an anxiety over not knowing. The frequency with which the narrator points out gaps in his knowledge becomes obsessive, almost a reflex. I posit that Laye's constant acknowledgement of not knowing stems from his colonial schooling, particularly the nightmarish experience of displaying one's knowledge and self on the blackboard for everyone to see, evaluate, and more often than not, find wanting. The narrator is recounting under the same constraints that he experienced in school, that his knowledge is "meager" and "fragile" (84-85). This reflex, developed in an effort to withstand the

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<sup>25</sup> "Quelles paroles mon père pouvait-il bien former ? Je ne sais pas ; je ne sais pas exactement" (29); "...je ne sais rien de mon grand-père, rien qui le peigne un peu à mes yeux..." (39); "Il arrive que l'esprit seul des traditions survive, et il arrive aussi que la forme, l'enveloppe, en demeure l'unique expression. Qu'en était-il ici ? Je n'en puis juger ; si mes séjours à Tindican étaient fréquents, ils n'étaient pas si prolongés que je pusse connaître tout" (56); "Oui, le monde bouge, le monde change ; il bouge et change à telle enseigne que mon propre totem – j'ai mon totem aussi – m'est inconnu" (80). ["What words did my father utter? I do not know. At least I am not certain what they were" (35); "I never learned anything about my grandfather, anything which might have given me a sense of the sort of person he had been..." (44); "Sometimes only the spirit of a tradition survives; sometimes only its form. Its outer garments, as it were, remain. Was that what was involved here? I can not say. Although my visits to Tindican were frequent, I never stayed long enough to acquire a thorough knowledge of all that went on there" (56); "Yes, the world rolls on, the world changes; it rolls on and changes, and the proof of it is that my own totem—I too have my totem—is still unknown to me" (75).]

psychological humiliation of evaluation in the classroom, represents a trace of the colonial school epistemology in this work.

On the level of narration, as in the incipit, these present tense interventions that point out gaps in knowledge produce a double destabilization of the narrative. Camara Laye himself stated that this work of memory evolved into the desire to preserve a certain portrait of Guinean childhood, certain traditions and ways of life.<sup>26</sup> However, the foundation of this novel is constructed just as much on lacunae created, sustained, and magnified because of colonial schooling. Therefore, these gaps, represented by the repetition of “je ne sais pas” suggest that the narration itself, unable to shed this epistemological remnant of school, is still beholden to coloniality and therefore to the colonial “terms of the conversation.”<sup>27</sup>

It is significant that these gaps in knowledge almost exclusively involve customs and practices in young Laye’s community. They are therefore also linked to his home pedagogical culture of mystery and age-determined education benchmarks. Because Laye was not present in his community when he reached the appropriate age to learn certain customary secrets, his not knowing can also be traced to this particular pedagogy. However, as the grown narrator names and isolates what he does not know, these moments are consistently coupled with a tone of regret, an outcome unrelated to the Mandika culture of teaching. As Laye ages, progresses in school, and eventually leaves his community, the pedagogically fruitful approach of knowledge withholding matures into a source of angst. The mystery so integral to the learning process in

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<sup>26</sup> “Et peut être n’aurais-je pas mené ce travail à sa fin si, à mesure que le livre se faisait, je ne m’étais aperçu que je traçais de ma Guinée natale un portrait qui, certainement ne serait pas celui de la Guinée de demain – qui déjà n’est plus celui de la Guinée d’aujourd’hui” [And perhaps I would not have completed this work if, as the book was being written, I had not realized that I was painting a portrait of my native Guinea which would certainly not be that of Guinea of tomorrow – which is already no longer that of Guinea today] (Camara 1963, 125).

<sup>27</sup> While Genette’s *je-narré* and *je-narrant* alternate with ease because of their shared truth, or “je sais,” it would seem that in the case of *L’Enfant noir*, the shifts between narrative levels, between young Laye and the narrator are based on lacunae, on a “je ne sais pas.” This implies not only a difference in knowledge but also a disconnect in epistemology between the hero and the protagonist.

Laye's community loses its educational function when the child is removed from it. What is left is an adult like Laye, still curious about the secrets and mysteries of his community of origin, fixating on what he does not know, and having no real plan or hope to ever find out.

Analyses of the school episodes in *L'Enfant noir* showed that a pedagogy of mystery conflicts with and is sublimated by colonial school pedagogies. Because pedagogies are culturally and epistemologically imbued, educative methods and philosophies used in colonial and Western education are beholden to coloniality. To return to Mignolo's explanation, the coloniality of knowledge exists not only in the content, but in "the principles and assumptions of knowledge creation, transformation and dissemination" (2018, 145). *L'Enfant noir* certainly illustrates and gives value to different types of education, knowledges, and pedagogies both in Laye's community and in school. Despite the different educations portrayed within, the work carries traces of the school, ultimately demonstrating a prevalence of Western ways of knowing and a persistence of colonial "terms of conversation."

### **Adulterated Tradition and Alienated Schooling in Mongo Béti's *Mission terminée***

Beginning with the initial review of *L'Enfant noir* and persisting in his publications into the 1970s, Mongo Béti unambiguously critiques Camara Laye's portrayal of African customs and realities under colonial rule.<sup>28</sup> He discounts the novel as shallow and indulgent to European audiences. It is fitting then that Béti's works take a much different perspective and tone. The novel *Mission terminée* complexifies the representation of African society by portraying morally ambiguous characters through biting satire. Nearly every character—teachers, fathers, chiefs, and

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<sup>28</sup> For example, see Mongo Béti's review of *L'Enfant noir* (1954) which morphed into his famous critical essay "Afrique noire, littérature rose" (1955), both published in *Présence africaine* under the initials A.B., as well as a chapter in the anthology *Négritude: traditions et développement* entitled "Identité et tradition" (1978).

especially the protagonist himself—is at some point cast in an unbecoming light. As explored below, this corresponds with Beti’s larger goal to “desacralize” African “tradition” and therefore disavow essentializing narratives around African custom and society put in place by (neo)colonial discursive structures.<sup>29</sup> As such, beyond his comical rendering of the African communities featured in the novel, *Mission terminée* demonstrates how colonial value systems imbed themselves in African societies and/or how African societies adopt these systems for their own applications. However, I argue that the novel does not represent a liberatory appropriation of colonial structures. Specifically, by collectively validating scholastic instruction—the symbol of “diplômes” in particular—the African communities in *Mission terminée* commodify and hollow out the student, divesting him of agency and subjectivity.

My analysis of *Mission terminée* explores the social value attributed to schooling by the main character’s communities, yet this value cannot be wielded by the student himself. Moreover, the influence of instruction and diplomas within the African communities depends on a proximity to coloniality and therefore is linked to the coloniality of power. I will demonstrate the particular way characters exploit the social value of schooling and how it ultimately leads to the student’s objectification, disillusionment, and self-exile.

Alexandre Bidyidi Awala, who published works under the names Eza Bota and Mongo Beti, was born near Yaoundé, Cameroon in 1932. Inspired by his father’s political involvement, Mongo Beti also became a vocal dissident of colonialism. His outspokenness eventually led him to be dismissed from missionary school for “raisons d’indocilité” (Djiffack 2000, 57). In 1951,

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<sup>29</sup> In “Littérature et tradition” (1978), Mongo Beti locates “tradition” within (neo)colonial designs thus: “...l’idée que, dans la vie quotidienne, la première préoccupation des Africains est de protéger leurs traditions, quitte à ériger sans cesse des barricades autour d’elles et à y monter la garde frénétiquement, est un mythe Blanc, de colonisateur” [the idea that, in daily life, the primary concern of Africans is to protect their traditions, even if it means constantly erecting barricades around them and frantically standing guard, is a white, colonizer myth] (10).

after finishing his studies at the Lycée Leclerc in Yaoundé, he went to France to pursue a higher degree in literature on a scholarship financed by the colonial administration. By the time he finished his degrees in 1957—one from Aix-en-Provence and one from the Sorbonne in Paris—Beti had already written three outwardly anticolonial novels. The first was *Ville Cruelle* (1954). He gained major notoriety for his second novel *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956), which was banned in Cameroon for its incisive portrayals of missionaries and colonizers. And in 1957 he published *Mission terminée*. Beti continued to write both fiction and non-fiction texts throughout his life, including in his review called *Peuples Noirs-Peuples Africains* that he started with his wife in 1978. He held various teaching positions in France until his retirement in 1992. Returning permanently to Cameroon in 1994, Mongo Beti met censorship, abuse from the media, and even death attempts because of his public disapproval of Cameroonian political leaders and the neocolonial regime. However, he continued to write pieces with strong political and anti-neocolonial messages. Mongo Beti passed away in Cameroon in 2001.

*Mission terminée* follows the story of Jean-Marie Medza, a high school student who has just failed the baccalaureate oral exam. Returning to his hometown for summer break, he dreads the reaction of his father, whom Medza describes as “un dictateur à domicile, un tyran au foyer” (202).<sup>30</sup> When Medza arrives, however, his father is absent, and the local patriarchs are plotting other schemes for the young man. They convince Medza that he is the most fit to go and retrieve his brutish cousin’s runaway wife from the remote village of Kala. Medza journeys to Kala where he discovers a community that offers everything he lacks: close friendships, typical father-son relationships, sexual exploits, fun parties, and life experience, areas of growth that have been stunted because of Medza’s time in school. Both young and old community members hold him in

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<sup>30</sup> “...a private dictator, a domestic tyrant” (164). All English translations of this novel come from Green, Peter, trans. 1958. *Mission to Kala*. London: Heinemann.

high respect because of his schooling, a fascination narrated with a hyperbolized comedic style that runs throughout the majority of the novel. For instance, his cousin Zambo introduces him to other Kalan teens as a “prodige” because Medza ““est entré à l’école dès sa tendre enfance et il n’en est jamais sorti”” (48). In consequence, Medza harbors a complicated superiority complex over the inhabitants of Kala no matter how many times they prove his prejudices wrong. Ironically, Medza struggles time after time to prove himself worthy of their deference.

When Medza is not being invited into elder Kalans’ homes to be interrogated about his schooling experiences, he is galivanting with Zambo and other rowdy peers. Medza eventually falls for Edima, the daughter of Kala’s chief. In a scene of exemplary comedic irony, Medza shows up to a party only to learn that it is his own wedding that the chief arranged to marry him to Edima. However, when Medza leaves Kala, determined to finally exert himself against the cruelty of his father, the joke falls away. Medza returns home with a newfound—albeit somewhat unjustified—confidence, a wife, and enough liquid courage to confront his father. The final chapter of *Mission terminée* takes on a different register, far more serious and quite bleak. The work ends with Medza brawling with his father then leaving his hometown, his family, and his wife for good as he roams errantly with Zambo, “sans direction intellectuelle” (219).<sup>31</sup>

Despite vast differences in tone and critique, *L’Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée* are linked by the significant bearing school has on their students and the narratives. Medza, like Laye, faces cultural alienation, conflicting epistemologies, and pressure from family to succeed

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<sup>31</sup> “bereft of any intellectual compass” (181). In his study of the work, Nnolim (1976) contends that the final chapter ruins the novel. He argues that while the majority of *Mission terminée* effectively adheres to the archetypal journey narrative and ironic aesthetic, at the end, “the reader feels not only disappointed, frustrated, and cheated out of his expectations, but also feels in the sudden turn of events a distortion of the facts” (192). Although I agree that the shift in the final sections of the work is sudden, drastic, and even disappointing, I do not consider it an “artistic flop” but a purposeful choice in which Mongo Beti demonstrates the plight of the student that has been commodified through his schooling. Furthermore, the switch in tone is foreshadowed in the novel’s prologue, and if read attentively, it hints at a more tragic denouement than the rest of the work prepares the reader for.

in the colonial educational institution. Notably, however, *Mission terminée* narrates no events in the scholastic space. This shows that the reach and pull of the school extend outside the classroom by imbedding itself in social hierarchies, value systems, and personal conceptions of self-worth. School still looms in the novel in Medza's anxiety over failing the BAC, the regular mention of his diplomas, and the Kalans' interrogations about his instruction. As such, a reading of the school in this novel happens by way of the discourses around colonial education in Medza's reflections and within his communities. In Beti's portrayal, African communities incorporate the colonial scholastic symbols into their social hierarchies and in doing so embroil themselves in the colonality of power.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, the African communities in *Mission terminée* appropriate a system of credentialism introduced by colonization: degrees mean power. My readings of school value systems show that the community legitimizes (i.e., collectively places value in) the degrees Medza has earned all while paradoxically diminishing knowledge and skills actually learned in school.

### *Tracing refracted critiques in Mission terminée*

*Mission terminée* is a complex work, and its diegetic, narratological, and discursive maneuvers lend themselves to multiple interpretations.<sup>33</sup> For example, a summary of the work on the original edition published by Corrêa states, "Voici enfin un roman africain qui n'a pas d'arrière-pensée politique..."<sup>34</sup> In a review of *Mission terminée* in *Présence africaine*, David Diop (1957) likens the work to "an enjoyable holiday" and lightly reproaches Mongo Beti for

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<sup>32</sup> As a reminder, Quijano defines the colonality of power as "...a matrix of global power that has hierarchically classified populations, their knowledge, and cosmologic life systems according to a Eurocentric standard. This matrix of power has legitimized relations of domination, superiority/inferiority, and established a historical structural dependence related to capital and the world market (Quijano, 2000)" (Walsh 2010, 15).

<sup>33</sup> Nyatetũ-Waigwa (1996, 114) also notes this ambiguity in her study of these same three novels entitled *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*.

<sup>34</sup> "Here at last is an African novel with no political ulterior motive..."



failing to criticize the problem of colonization as he did so assiduously in his previous work *Ville Cruelle*. *Mission terminée* is perhaps more comical than Beti's other works, but the novel is anything but a-political, as elaborated below. These beguiling narrative and character elements set *Mission terminée* apart from the other classic works explored in this dissertation. They are worth exploring briefly because of their distinctiveness but also because they continue to complicate readings of *Mission terminée*, particularly its take on colonial schooling, and refract the novel's critiques through narrative layering and satirical characterization.

First, *Mission terminée*'s paratextual elements contribute to its sardonic tone and layered meanings. For instance, long ironic titles, or "notices" (Flannigan 1982), precede each chapter.

CHAPITRE PREMIER Au cours duquel le lecteur apprendra le voyage tumultueux du héros, prodrome inquiétant à ses vacances aventurières. Le lecteur sera également informé des vicissitudes matrimoniales à la suite desquelles le nommé Niam, personnage peu recommandable, en vint à charger sans scrupule ni vergogne un tout jeune garçon, presque un bébé, d'une expédition périlleuse dans un pays inconnu sinon hostile. (11)<sup>35</sup>

Consistent with the rest of the work, this chapter introduction simultaneously generates empathy for and belittles the main character. It both draws attention to the steep (albeit exaggerated) demands of the mission Medza is charged with and infantilizes the young man. Corresponding to what Cornwell (1987, 647) calls a "crowding of the narrative space," these notices influence (and complicate) the reader's posture toward the plot and characters beyond what they read in the text.

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<sup>35</sup> "Chapter One: In which the reader will learn of the eventful journey that forms an alarming prelude to our hero's adventures during his vacations; and also hear about certain matrimonial difficulties, as a result of which one Niam (a most untrustworthy person) without shame or scruple, sends a young boy hardly out of his cradle on a dangerous expedition into unknown and possibly hostile territory" (1). Other studies have explored affinities between Beti's writing and that of Voltaire. The chapter and paratextual structure along with the conventions of the Bildungsroman and some conspicuous reference to South American colonization and noble steeds do suggest several parallels, particularly between *Mission terminée* and *Candide*. Nevertheless, Mongo Beti attributes any likeness to coincidence, stating that every author is inevitably influenced by the other authors they read (Djiffack 2000, 40). Still, Célérier's (1995, 33) study of *Mission terminée* points out an important similarity between these two satirical authors: they both demand of their reader to recognize the critical stance despite the ludic tone.

These notices also take some narrative agency away from Medza who is the diegetic narrative voice. Like *L'Enfant noir*, *Mission terminée* is narrated by the main character at a more advanced age. This also complicates the interpretation of Beti's text, raising questions of memory, trustworthiness, and orality as Flannigan (1982) has shown. Differently than *L'Enfant noir*, however, the narrator in *Mission terminée* addresses a specific identity: a fellow student. For example, the narrating Medza invokes his interlocutor, or *narrataire*, during a tirade against sending children to the colonial school in the final, tonally incongruous, chapter.

Population pitoyable, ces jeunes enfants! Hébergés par de vagues parents autour de l'école ou de vagues relations de leur père, mal nourris, faméliques, rossés à la longueur de journée par des moniteurs ignares, abrutis par des livres qui leur présentaient un univers sans ressemblance avec le leur, se battant sans cesse, ces gosses-là, c'était nous, vous rappelez-vous ? Et ce sont nos parents qui nous poussaient. (203)<sup>36</sup>

The link between narrator and narrataire is solidified through the pronoun "nous" and the references to shared memories. Flannigan (1982, 841) argues that the shared experiences of the interlocutor with the narrator holds the latter to a certain measure of truthfulness, as the narrator must "stay faithful to the 'facts.'" In this moment of empathy shared with the narrataire, it would seem that the narrator recognizes how schooling disrupted his life. Again, however, this criticism of colonial schooling trends is refracted through other narrative elements. First, we could consider this more of a critique of Medza's mean-spirited father, who forces his son to go to school in the first place. Second, these moments of critique only crop up intermittently, and Medza is far more often the butt of the joke than the critical commentator. Lastly, Medza's credit is complicated by a final major difference from Laye and Samba Diallo: Medza is a failure.

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<sup>36</sup> "They formed a miserable floating population, these kids: lodged with distant relations who happened to live near the school, underfed, scrawny, bullied all day by ignorant monitors. The books in front of them presented a universe which had nothing in common with the one they knew: they battled endlessly with the unknown, astonished and desperate and terrified. We were those children – it is not easy to forget – and it was our parents who forced this torment upon us" (165).

Unlike each other student portrayed in the novels studied here, Medza is (at least partially) a poor student. These ways in which *Mission terminée* diverges from other portrayals—a satire that mocks an underperforming student—also serve to destabilize how we can read the work and its commentary. Are we supposed to pity Medza or laugh at him? Trust him or dismiss him as a hapless fool?

What can we make of Medza repudiating his education when it is refracted through all these satirizing narrative layers? During one of the “séances” wherein the Kalans pose him questions about his instruction, Medza again expresses a developing consciousness of what schooling robbed him of. He says the school “...aval[e] de jeunes garçons et les dig[ère] lentement comme une ogresse, pour ne les vomir que vidés de leur belle substance, de leur jeunesse—des squelettes,—mes griefs contre l’école-ogresse s’accumulaient pour ainsi dire au fil des jours” (90).<sup>37</sup> Certain scholars, like Djiffack (2000), have attributed these critical moments to Beti’s own anti-colonial stance. On the other hand, Palmer (1998) dismisses Medza’s criticism altogether. “*Mission to Kala* then is neither an attack on education nor on Western civilization; rather it is a brilliant satire directed at all those half-educated chaps who feel that, because of a partial exposure to Western ways, they have a right to feel superior to those of their brethren who still live the tribal life” (107). What is the target of critique? So far, conclusions do not align.

Mongo Beti’s choices in narration, characterization, and tone create an instability in the novel’s main character and narrative voice that hinder a sure reading of his commentaries on school. Cornwell (1987) aptly refers to *Mission terminée* as “a narrative space literally charged with cynical distortions of the facts being related” (644). While these other scholars have drawn their conclusions about pro-school or anti-school attitudes in this work, my reading does not aim

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<sup>37</sup> “swallow[s] young boys, digest[s] them slowly, vomiting them up again sucked dry of all their youthful essence, mere skeletons. [My complaints against the ogress-school accumulated, so to speak, over the days]” (68).

to draw conclusions on Medza's or Beti's posture on colonial education. Instead, this analysis is interested in how Medza's communities are affected by the colonial schooling complex. I find that they wield his instruction for their own advancement and to his own detriment. In fact, Mongo Beti took pride in his unfiltered portrayals of African societies in his literary production, and therefore I attend to their representation in order to shed light on the understudied ways that the school affects larger collective practices and values in African communities.

To understand the importance of the representation of local communities is in this novel, let us turn toward some of Mongo Beti's own literary goals. In his essay "Identité et tradition" (1978), Beti states that his written works are critical of "tradition" and African society. He writes, "...j'ai toujours, dans mes romans, adopté vis-à-vis de la tradition africaine, la seule attitude raisonnable, la vision critique" (21).<sup>38</sup> He continues to say that African literature has also fallen into the trap of portraying African custom as an immutable entity. Conversely, he argues that African tradition, like that of every society, is complex and ever changing and cannot be essentialized: "Les Africains se meuvent dans une réalité très riche où la tradition n'est qu'une donnée parmi bien d'autres" (10).<sup>39</sup> Beti argues that European ethnography, and for that matter Negritude, paints a picture of Africa with an "essence spécifique," ignoring the necessary adaptability and imperfection of tradition.<sup>40</sup> He explains how his critical literary eye applies broadly and that he adheres to the "double refus": "je veux dire aussi bien le refus d'une oppression occidentale que le refus d'une oppression interne à la faveur de traditions absurdes

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<sup>38</sup> "...in my novels, I have always adopted the only reasonable attitude towards the African tradition, the critical view."

<sup>39</sup> "Africans move in a very rich reality where tradition is only one given among many others."

<sup>40</sup> Mongo Beti's statements on European ethnography and the term he coins "ethnologisme" echo what V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) and Felwine Sarr (2016) have referred to as the "colonial library," or "l'ensemble des textes écrits sur le continent [africain] par les explorateurs, anthropologues, ethnologues européens qui ont fortement contribué à construire une vision et les imaginaires associés à l'Afrique" [all the texts written on the [African] continent by European explorers, anthropologists, ethnologists that have strongly contributed to building a vision and the imaginaries associated with Africa] (Sarr 2016, 31–32). See also Genova (2004, 6–7).

maintenues par le seul esprit de routine ou d'autorité" (17).<sup>41</sup> The unbecoming light in which *Mission terminée* portrays African communities encompasses a critique of their "misuse" of education. Still, because colonial structures and values of school are the root of this misuse, we can extend this judgement to the larger colonial situation as well. I conduct the following analyses through a lens that draws on Mongo Beti's endeavor to challenge African "tradition," particularly in how Medza's communities mingle schooling with those customs deemed traditional.

*Medza's voice of thunder: How schooling acquires "traditional" status*

Family and community attitudes toward formal schooling are important elements of each novel studied in this chapter. While students may be the leading characters and narrators, the communities in which they live are similarly implicated in the educational dilemma facing their society under colonization. In a colonial context, schooling is truly a community affair. This section will explore the rhetoric used in Medza's home community, particularly the way they manipulate schooling for personal gain. In brief, conceptions of schooling are interwoven into the local value systems, generating what Nyatetũ-Waigwa (1996) has called "adulterated" customs. The episode where Medza is recruited, if not duped, into taking on the task of fetching his cousin Niam's runaway wife demonstrates how his family and community appropriate his instruction into "tradition." Upon his return home, Medza enters into deliberations with the members of his community who want to send him to Kala. As we will see, Medza's use of Western rhetoric gained from schooling is the least effective in the deliberations, ironically clashing with the reason for choosing Medza to go on the mission in the first place. This scene

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<sup>41</sup> "I mean both the refusal of Western oppression and the refusal of internal oppression in favor of absurd traditions maintained by the sole spirit of routine or authority."

establishes how the colonial school extends beyond the walls of the classroom and intertwines its value systems into African communities existing within the larger sociocultural economy of colonialism.

When Niam comes to Medza with his plan, Medza refuses outright, believing that he is entitled to some time off to lick his wounds after failing his test. Prepared for this initial rejection, Niam enlists the authority of a community leader Bikokolo to help convince Medza to carry out this duty. Thus begins the “palabre,” a favorite trope of this author (Beti 1978, 22). What ensues is a series of tirades and deliberations that reveal the complex ways in which schooling is leveraged in this novel and by whom. First, Niam’s monologue tries to convince Medza and the rest of the community that his young cousin must go on this mission. “Debout au beau milieu du hameau, il n’arrêtait pas de plaider ; il pérorait, se répétait, insistait, se faisait insinuant, exposait les arguments contraires pour les réfuter, faisait mine de se résigner pour, l’instant d’après, revenir à la charge ; il riait, s’exclamait, interrogeait ses partisans, lesquels répondaient dans le sens espéré, évidemment. Quelle comédie !...” (25).<sup>42</sup> The description does not convey the content of Niam’s tirade. Instead it focuses on his performative rhetorical strategies rather than his reasoning. Niam receives positive affirmation from the crowd and mostly derision from Medza. Yet, when it is Medza’s turn to appeal to that audience, he fumbles because he does not grasp the rhetorical system of the audience to which he is appealing.

While Niam and then Bikokolo speak, Medza is busy preparing his own monologue based on what he has learned in school. “Durant le discours du patriarche, mon esprit avait

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<sup>42</sup> “There he stood in the market square like some shyster advocate, talking his head off. It was a classic performance. Rhetorical flourishes, careful repetition and emphasis, sly insinuations; hostile arguments set up and demolished, apparent surrender followed by immediate counter-attack, he tried them all. He roared with laughter, and produced nicely calculated exclamations of surprise. He asked his supporters questions and got exactly the answers he wanted. People came out on to their doorsteps to listen to him [What a farce!]” (12).

travaillé et tout à coup je découvris, dans l'arsenal de ma dialectique cartésienne, un argument qui, me semblait-il, ne pourrait manquer de faire mouche..." (26).<sup>43</sup> To make his point, Medza will employ what he considers to be the final blow of argumentation: Western reason. Ironically, his "weapons"—namely "les hésitations qui n'en sont pas, le suspense, l'ironie, le coup de théâtre" (26)<sup>44</sup>—actually mirror Niam's display, yet they are packaged in language of Western rhetoric.

Despite the sure-to-win energy Medza brings to the debate, the result of his argumentation is far from explosive. When he steps forward to speak, Medza appeals to the audience's context by drawing a rather bold comparison. "Savez-vous ce que c'est que de préparer un examen et de le passer? Non, n'est-ce pas? Imaginez-vous, hommes, une chose pire, plus terrible que de travailler dans une plantation avec un machette, du matin au soir..." (26).<sup>45</sup> The analogy captures the crowd because here Medza is leveraging his experience at school to bolster his argument. This is precisely what his community wants him to do in Kala: throw around his instruction. The use of schooling as a bargaining chip (no matter how stretched) holds sway in his home community. Finally, Medza drives his speech home with the logic that is supposed to hit the target: "Pourquoi moi plutôt qu'un autre?" (27).<sup>46</sup> After the dramatic buildup, Medza's audience (as well as the reader for that matter) is less than impressed with his rebuttal of "why me?": "L'effet se révéla pitoyable. Une rumeur de désappointement courut sur

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<sup>43</sup> "While the old man had been talking, I had been thinking hard. Suddenly I discovered, in the arsenals of my Cartesian dialectic, an argument which seemed absolutely unanswerable...." (13).

<sup>44</sup> "...feigned hesitation, suspense, irony, the whole gamut of theatrical rhetoric" (13).

<sup>45</sup> "Have any of you the least idea what preparing for an examination and sitting it entails? No, of course you haven't. Gentlemen, try and imagine something worse, far worse, than working in a plantation with a machete from dawn till dusk" (14).

<sup>46</sup> "Why me rather than anyone else?" (14).

toutes les vérandas” (27).<sup>47</sup> Medza does not understand how he is able to exploit his schooling, to the dissatisfaction of his community.

This speech and its effect on the spectators are particularly ironic in relation to Medza’s capabilities and the task he is asked to carry out. They have chosen him for this mission because of his schooling, but what Medza learned in school, namely his Cartesian dialectic, proves ineffective within the community.<sup>48</sup> The crowd’s reaction is all the more humiliating when one of Medza’s uncles responds, ““Ce garçon n’a peut-être rien compris à rien; il n’a certainement rien compris”” (27).<sup>49</sup> After underlining the young man’s obliviousness, this uncle goes on to blame Medza’s time at school for his incomprehension of the task laid before him. ““Songez donc, depuis qu’il ne vient parmi nous que par intermittence, depuis qu’il est à l’école, le miracle, ce serait bien plutôt qu’il soit encore à l’aise dans notre sagesse et dans nos coutumes. Au lieu de vous étonner, expliquez-lui donc...”” (27).<sup>50</sup> The uncle’s intervention prompts Bikokolo to explain why exactly Medza is the right person for the job, but the reader may be left wondering why Medza’s suitability for the task concerns local wisdom and custom.

The final argument, Bikokolo’s, demonstrates very clearly the particular power of school that has been adopted into his community’s value structures. Bikokolo’s lesson is so complex and full of digressions that the narrator decides to paraphrase. “Un homme, à son insu, parlait avec la voix du tonnerre; quel ne fut pas son étonnement de se voir chargé un jour d’une mission semblable à celle qui m’incombait aujourd’hui! Il se demanda notamment de quelle puissance

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<sup>47</sup> “The effect of my remarks was [pitiful]. A murmur of disappointment was audible from every veranda” (14).

<sup>48</sup> Similar disappointments characterize the gatherings in Kala when Medza fails to provide very satisfactory explanations of his school learning to the crowds gathered. Ironically, the Kalans prove to be much more astute in their discussions of Russia than Medza is as the only “educated” one in the room.

<sup>49</sup> “I’m not absolutely sure that the boy’s a congenital simpleton—though it wouldn’t surprise me in the least—but he obviously has no idea what he’s being asked to do now” (14).

<sup>50</sup> ““He only comes home occasionally. The really surprising thing is that he’s still familiar with our tribal wisdom and custom at all. Stop gaping, and *explain*”” (14).



surnaturelle il disposait pour réussir, lui, là où d'autres avaient échoué" (28).<sup>51</sup> Unsurprisingly, Bikokolo finishes by telling Medza that he is, in fact, that hero. What is most ironic about this revelatory moment is that Medza has just clearly demonstrated that his voice is not the least bit intimidating or effective.

Bikokolo's conclusion finally exposes how schooling is ultimately wielded in his community. "“Ta voix du tonnerre, sais-tu ce que c'est? Tes diplômes, ton instruction, ta connaissance des choses des Blancs”" (28).<sup>52</sup> Medza's influence over the people of Kala stems first and foremost from tangible, yet symbolic credentials: his degrees.<sup>53</sup> Schooling is valuable, but only for its titles and hardly for the knowledge it imparts. Moreover, any knowledge or understanding that does imbue value in schooling is directly due to its proximity to the colonizer.<sup>54</sup> What is particularly startling in this scene is how the manipulative power of schooling is woven into “tradition.” According to Medza's uncle, the problem lies in the fact that Medza is not familiar with “traditional” wisdom and custom. Subsequently, Bikokolo explains that what Medza does not grasp is the power that his schooling grants him. Herein lies a disconnect. The use of school (i.e., knowledge of the French language and the colonial administration) would not ostensibly fit within the categories of the community's “sagesse” and

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<sup>51</sup> “There was once a man who, all unbeknown to himself, spoke with the voice of the thunder. Imagine his astonishment when, one day, he was sent on a very similar mission to that which faced me now. In particular he asked himself what supernatural power *he* commanded to make him succeed where others had failed” (15).

<sup>52</sup> “Shall I tell you what your special thunder is? Your certificates, your learning, your knowledge of white men's secrets” (15).

<sup>53</sup> Although he has not passed the exam for his high school studies, Medza has earned several other diplomas throughout his schooling: “certificate d'études primaires, brevet élémentaire, premier bachot...” (202) [I collected my Primary and Elementary Certificates, and to the first part of the General Certificate... (164)].

<sup>54</sup> These same sentiments echo in Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Téno's documentary *Afrique, je te plumerai* (1992). The narrating voice over explains the status of schooling in his Cameroonian youth, not without a hint of irony itself. “L'espoir, c'était l'école. Le rêve, c'était les diplômes [...] Ensuite on devenait un monsieur, un blanc quoi.” [School was our one hope. The dream was diplomas... That's how you became somebody, a white person]. Unlike *Mission terminée*, Téno's film is explicitly critical of the psychological and epistemological impact of the school on the people of Cameroon. Additionally, the narrator of *Afrique, je te plumerai* implies that school did not only provide proximity to whiteness, but to do well in school was to become white.

“coutumes.” I suggest that this represents an important shift in the value system of Medza’s community: an understanding of the power that schooling provides is now considered local custom, as Medza’s uncle and Bikokolo imply. It indicates a value system intertwined with the colonial matrix of power.

Ironically, while Bikokolo extols these “powers” Medza possesses, he also, more subtly and to the obliviousness of the young man, undermines them: “‘Sais-tu ce que s’imaginent sérieusement ces bushmen de l’arrière-pays? Qu’il te suffirait d’adresser une lettre écrite en français, de parler en français au chef de la subdivision la plus proche, pour faire mettre en prison qui tu voudrais ou pour lui faire obtenir n’importe quelle faveur... Voilà ce que s’imaginent ces péquenots chez lesquels nous t’envoyons...’” (28).<sup>55</sup> The pejorative language Bikokolo uses to describe the Kalans point to the fact that he relies on the Kalans’ naivete and the illusion of Medza’s power to accomplish his mission. At the same time, Bikokolo reveals that he himself does not believe Medza actually has any real power. Medza’s influence is artificial. Ultimately, Medza eventually buys into the illusion. Medza’s accepts with little resistance the role of superiority that his community thrusts him into by means of flattery, albeit backhandedly dismissive.

In his study of the public debate, Sela (2018) highlights the intertwining of African and colonial structures and rhetoric both in Medza’s argumentation and Bikokolo’s. Sela concludes that this deliberation scene challenges the dominance of Western rhetoric because Medza ultimately “loses.” Although Medza’s occidental reason falls short in this instance, his community still relies on symbols of his instruction to complete the mission, and a rather ignoble

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<sup>55</sup> “‘Have you any idea what these upcountry bushmen will quite seriously believe about you? that you only have to write a letter in French, or speak French to the nearest Distric Officer, to have anyone you like imprisoned, or get any personal favour you want. That’s the kind of idiocy you’ll find waiting for you’” (15).

one at that. As such, they give school power which brings about adverse consequences on Medza's agency and self-determination. The community does not appropriate schooling for decolonial purposes. The men's valorization of schooling comes from a desire to manipulate and reap personal gain, and subjectivity is dissociated from the student by way of their education. Far from an anomaly, I argue that this process is inherent to the credential structures of the school.

### *Schooling as a form of capital*

Because of unique way in which credentials (i.e., degrees) are legitimized as leverage or currency in *Mission terminée*, it makes sense to engage with these transactions through a Bourdieusian framework.<sup>56</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's most well-known studies examine social stratification in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century French society, and through this research, he presented a framework by which to understand how social structures and hierarchies are sustained and intensified, particularly through schooling. By interrogating the unique way schooling is appropriated, wielded, and converted in this work, we can better understand how coloniality influences this particular representation of the school.

In "Forms of Capital" (1986), Bourdieu explains how cultural and social capital are forms of value that exist outside of financial terms, while the transmissibility and convertibility of cultural and social capital are indeed linked to economic capital. Cultural capital is the set of knowledge and ideals that are collectively legitimized as highly valued because they are defined through social structures and by those in dominant social positions (Lareau 2003). Nevertheless, different types of cultural capital have different values depending on the "field" in which they

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<sup>56</sup> Some scholars have recently argued for Bourdieu's relevance in postcolonial studies because of his early research that took place in Algeria and how it informs his later, well-known sociological concepts (Go 2013; Steinmetz 2016). Go (2013, 50) argues in particular that Bourdieu's work should be put in dialogue with matters of racial difference and colonial domination.

are activated. In the Bourdieusian framework, fields are “structured spaces that are organized around specific types of capital or combinations of capital” (Swartz 1997, 117). For example, the knowledge and ideals valued in Medza’s hometown differ than those valued in the French colonial school (e.g., “Cartesian dialectic”), and therefore Medza must straddle these two fields or adapt accordingly. Nevertheless, the communities of Medza’s hometown and Kala develop their own value systems that do indeed account for colonial schooling, for a “connaissance des choses des Blancs.” These value systems attribute significant power to schooling and its connection to the colonial administration. They are therefore still influenced by coloniality. These African communities are not necessarily beholden to the coloniality of knowledge, but their value system relies on the coloniality of power.<sup>57</sup>

In Medza’s communities, school’s worth lies not in the content learned or not even necessarily in the skills acquired but first and foremost in the symbolic weight of the diplomas earned.<sup>58</sup> Medza may possess the cultural capital, but he is not the one who activates it. Here Bourdieu’s concept of institutionalized cultural capital is enlightening. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can take on three different states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Bourdieu defines institutionalized cultural capital as the “objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications” (1986, 247). While valued knowledge and skills (cultural capital in the embodied state) cannot be activated outside of the biological limitations of an

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<sup>57</sup> I do not suggest here that African communities that adjust valued knowledges and cultural capital to account for colonial schooling are strictly beholden to the coloniality of power. For example, Kelly Duke Bryant illustrates in *Education as Politics* (2015) how African communities readily adapted and morphed their value of schooling and the social power it provided according to how it would best advance their own anti-colonial agendas. However, in *Mission terminée*, the specific way that schooling is wielded (dependent on threats and illusion and commodifying the student) points to the coloniality of power in this representation.

<sup>58</sup> Scholastique Mukasonga’s novel *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012), explored in Chapter Three shows a similar valuing of school. The majority of the young women attending the prestigious high school do so precisely for the prestige and protection the school (ostensibly) provides them in being perched high on a mountain away from the city.

individual, institutionalized cultural capital can be considered a separate extension of their bearer, and therefore it can function somewhat independently of the person.

With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time. (248)

This reflects precisely how the other characters in *Mission terminée* are able to wield Medza's institutionalized cultural capital, because of its separability from the bearer (Medza).

In *Mission terminée*, we see over and over the collectively generated value in Medza's instruction and how it turns into social currency and financial transaction. Niam, whose fields go uncultivated because he refuses to do "women's work," exploits Medza's degrees to get his wife (i.e., source of labor) back. Similar transactional practices take place in Kala. The chief in Kala plots to have his daughter marry Medza, bolstering his connections with the colonial administration. Elders in Kala continually invite Medza to their homes to hear about his schooling. While showering him with gifts such as sheep, elaborate meals, and American alcohol, the Kalans increase their clout in the community by hosting the honored guest. As Medza notices, "...tout le monde semblait considérer comme une faveur de pouvoir s'entretenir avec moi" (65-66).<sup>59</sup> Finally, Medza's Uncle Mama hustles the young man into giving him half of his gifted sheep, invoking traditional "blood ties" to compel Medza into the transaction. In each of these instances, someone else manipulates Medza for their own advancement, and the accumulation of these transactional exploitations take their toll.

The gatherings in Kalan homes in particular take on an exhibitory flavor and begin to dehumanize Medza. "Pour tout dire, j'étais devenu une espèce de coqueluche pour tout le village

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<sup>59</sup> "Everyone seemed to think it was a favour simply to talk with me" (47).

de Kala: je n'étais pas seulement une bête curieuse, j'étais aussi une bête que l'on aime bien voir de près, que l'on aime bien entendre barrir, ou glousser, ou braire, ou je ne sais plus quoi..."

(66).<sup>60</sup> The narrator explicitly equates young Medza to an animal and uses particularly discordant and nonsensical animal noise verbs to describe (and denigrate) what he has to say. This is in part because Medza believes his school knowledge carries little meaning for the Kalans but also because Medza's explanations are just so poor. Despite the hollowness of his knowledge, his very presence is still a social boon for those around him.

The transactional value of Medza's schooling and, by proxy, the young man himself grows more apparent during these gatherings. During the first evening when he is invited to a Kalan's home, Medza is taken aback by the attention he receives. A woman who comes to see him explains the Kalans' interest, "Fils...tu ne devrais pas t'offusquer de ce que l'on te regarde tant. Ce n'est pas tous les jours que nous voyons ici un garçon instruit comme toi et qui habite la ville par-dessus le marché" (66).<sup>61</sup> Once more, it is not Medza's knowledge or skills that impress them but simply the fact that he is "instructed." This woman also draws attention to the more urban zone where Medza comes from, about which he previously boasted for its colonial administrative outposts. Again, proximity to coloniality holds value. Medza exacerbates the objectification by likening himself to a tradable good: "...un bachelier, même virtuel, devait être une marchandise rare sur le marché de Kala" (66).<sup>62</sup> The transactional language he uses to talk about the scarcity of his own diplomas and instruction in Kala is precisely indicative of the larger lens through which schooling is portrayed and wielded in *Mission terminée*.

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<sup>60</sup> "I had become a kind of universal pet or mascot for the whole of Kala: not only a strange animal, but an animal that they liked to examine at close quarters, and hear roar, or howl, or bray, or whatever" (47).

<sup>61</sup> "Young man, she said, 'you shouldn't take offence at people being so interested in you. We don't see a college-educated boy like you here every day of the week – and a city-dweller into the bargain!'" (47).

<sup>62</sup> "...a diploma, even by default, was a rare enough commodity in the Kala market" (47-48).

What are the implications of these transactions on the student? Nyatetũ-Waigwa's study (1996) also points out the consistency with which Medza is commodified. "...the people of Kala take up the pawn and use it to achieve their own ends. In the same way that Jean-Marie has all his life served as a commodity for his father to dispose of, here too he automatically acquires the same status" (57). Notably, Medza has little agency in these social and economic exchanges. Time after time, Medza is pulled into exploitative and objectifying situations because of the alienability of his instruction. At first, he goes along with it, either oblivious or unconcerned about the manipulation. Eventually, his lack of self-determination in these transactions drive him to drastic ends.

Moreover, what happens when African communities weave the credentialism of the school structure into their customs and practices? Beti does not idealize the more remote or rural areas of Cameroon nor does he paint them as purer than urban zones. The inhabitants of the remote village also wield Medza's schooling for their own gain. Unlike Bikokolo's prediction, they are by no means ignorant of the social power of instruction. They have similarly appropriated schooling into their social exchanges. By collectively imposing recognition, or legitimizing, the diplomas earned in the colonial school, Medza's communities are, at least in part, legitimizing the colonial project.

### *The plight and flight of a commodified student*

Despite embarrassing experiences and objectification in Kala, Medza returns to his hometown having made friends, married a young woman he likes, and tasted what respect feels like. The high is short-lived. Medza arrives home apprehensive yet bitter, preparing to face his father who has since returned. After several days of obnoxious behavior trying to provoke his

father, Medza finally incites violence from the patriarch. The young man escapes a beating, but the public chase scene (not without its elements of comedy) drives Medza to depart for good. He abandons his wife, family, community to live “une vie d’errance sans fin” (219).<sup>63</sup> I argue that the concluding rupture and tragic tone of this final chapter arise from Medza’s constant objectification, the result of being defined and valued purely through his academic degrees. In other words, we could consider his crisis as a consequence of the alienating schooling structures that his communities have adopted from the colonial system.

Medza’s father places similar value in diplomas, intent on empty accumulation rather than meaningful knowledge. Moreover, it is likely that Medza’s father views school along the same lines of social and financial advancement that we see in Kala and Medza’s hometown. This final chapter reveals that Medza’s father is regionally infamous for usury and manipulation. Medza describes him as the quintessential abuser of colonial economic exploitation. “...c’était donc comme un exemple vivant de ce que le matérialisme mercantile et hypocrite de l’Occident allié à une intelligence fine peut donner de plus admirable, de plus étonnant chez un homme de chez nous appartenant à la génération de nos pères” (203-204).<sup>64</sup> Like with the diplomas, Medza’s father displays a compulsion for accumulation, facilitated by or even born from Western practices and mindsets. The father embodies most intensely the corruption and deleterious effects of adulterated customs, of adopting colonial structures and values.

In the final pages of the novel, Medza slips in a surprising detail considering his previous complaints about school: he ends up successfully retaking his exam. It would seem then that Medza’s grievance is not with the scholastic institution per se. Instead, *Mission terminée* presents

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<sup>63</sup> “...a life of endless wandering” (180).

<sup>64</sup> “He was a living example of the astonishing results that can occur when Western hypocrisy and commercial materialism are grafted on to a first-rate African intelligence. Some of the results were quite admirable, some disastrous: but my father was the quintessential Westernized native of one generation back” (166).



a critique, obfuscated in layers of irony and narrative voice, of the alienability of schooling and these communities' eagerness to manipulate it for their own gain. What is left is a young man with a pile of degrees but few life experiences and a lack of deep understanding of the world, his world. In the final pages of the novel, Medza summarizes his crisis thus: "...le drame dont souffre notre peuple, c'est celui d'un homme laissé à lui-même dans un monde qui ne lui appartient pas, un monde qu'il n'a pas fait, un monde où il ne comprend rien" (219).<sup>65</sup> The critique can easily be lost in the narrative elements of Beti's work, and it is easy to overlook Medza's loss of agency because *Mission terminée* is *funny*. Mongo Beti portrays a hapless character, amusing the reader and even implying that Medza deserves to be mocked. Nevertheless, my reading of the novel has revealed the reach of colonial scholastic systems outside of the classroom walls. Mongo Beti's work presents a potent example of how schooling and the new social currency that it brings have mutated certain "traditional" practices in African communities and customs can become adulterated through the coloniality. I agree with Nyatetũ-Waigwa in that "*Mission to Kala* resonates with revolt against a false tradition posing as authentic" (121). Because adaptations of "tradition" validate schooling precisely for its proximity to the colonial machine, *Mission terminée* portrays schooling as imbedded in the coloniality of power rather than a decolonial possibility.

The communities in *Mission terminée* demonstrate one way in which African communities navigate the introduction of colonial and colonial school values. The narrator and main character of *L'Enfant noir*, on the other hand, attempted a sort of separation of customary practices and school routines, depicting these experiences in discrete narrative sections or conveying a certain anxiety when his worlds were blended. In *L'Aventure ambiguë*, explored in

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<sup>65</sup> "...the tragedy which our nation is suffering today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand" (181).

the next section, the involvement of the Diallobé community reaches a critical peak in the education question, and the tragic main character Samba Diallo finds himself at the center of a number of forces that will determine the future of his people.

### **Reading Beyond Binaries in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë***

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) is cited widely and across disciplines when discussing the clash between colonial schooling and African custom.<sup>66</sup> Compared to *L'Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée*, Kane's novel debates education most explicitly because the question of whether or not to send children to the colonial school drives the central narrative dilemma. The stakes of the decision concern the survival the Diallobé people themselves, the Northern Senegalese ethnic community implicated in the novel. Leaders in the community recognize how their resources, along with their people, are dwindling due to colonization, and they admit to the opportunities the colonial school offers. However, more than in *L'Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée*, the characters in *L'Aventure ambiguë* acknowledge and hesitate over how the French school will change their world forever. The painstaking deliberations between Diallobé authority figures attest that the answer to the education question is ultimately political; it impacts an entire group of people as well as balances of power therein.

Many studies of *L'Aventure ambiguë* have explored its education debate within a binary framework, an opposition between the West—cast in metaphors of materiality—and Islam—cast in terms of lightness and spirituality.<sup>67</sup> In fact, dichotomies dominate conceptualizations of

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<sup>66</sup> For example, see Ware (2014), Duke Bryant (2015), Launay (2016b), Launay and Ware (2016), Tamari (2016), Abdi (2021). This scholarship, none of which would be categorized as literary criticism, engages with Kane's novel in their examinations of history, educational sciences, and beyond.

<sup>67</sup> Caplan (2005) summarizes this consistent motif stating, "Indeed, everywhere in this novel, the tradition is equated with night, infirmity, asceticism, and death; by contrast, modernity and Paris, the City of Light, are associated with daytime, material plenty, and technology" (950). Ba (2011) argues that the term ambiguity in the title speaks to two opposing forces in the work.

school across the classic works. My reading of *L'Aventure ambiguë* will venture beyond these binaries and shed light on the other forces at work in Kane's portrayal of the education question. For example, certain characters such as La Grande Royale and Demba represent social categories beyond "Western" and "traditional." Therefore, I will first explore the driving metaphors used to represent the school in this work that lend themselves to a binary reading. Then, I will unsettle the binary, particularly the diametric opposition between the two types of education represented, by engaging with how the body is implicated in both. Finally, I will examine the character of La Grande Royale to show how she negotiates the colonial encounter using a more composite approach. Attending to the multifarious social and political forces at work in this novel offers a more complex picture of the school and the way it impacts entire communities, their survival, and their identity. Through subtleties in narration and characterization, my analyses of *L'Aventure ambiguë* challenge readers to see the schooling question outside of limiting binaries.

A few important narrative and diegetic elements set *L'Aventure ambiguë* apart from the other classic novels. First, it is the only one of the three classic novels that is not recounted in the first person. As the omniscient narrator switches focalization throughout the work, we see the education question through different characters' understanding. Thus, *L'Aventure ambiguë* lends itself to a more complex understanding of the school because of its narrative heterogeneity.

Moreover, the main character of *L'Aventure ambiguë* is one of extreme exceptionality. Although both Laye and Medza are one-of-a-kind in their communities, Samba Diallo's gifts are other-worldly. Samba Diallo's extraordinary qualities position him to shoulder the heavy burden of conflicting epistemological, psychological, and social forces. *L'Aventure ambiguë* builds a sense of destiny for Samba Diallo, as if this character were fated for such an important mission because of his extraordinary gifts, both spiritual and intellectual. He is of noble Diallobé lineage,

a prodigy in his Qur’anic lessons, and eventually proves to be a remarkably gifted pupil at the French school. His socially privileged position sets him apart most especially from the characters featured in the contemporary novels explored in Chapters Two, Three, and Four where students are disadvantaged due to their status as outsider, their gender, ethnicity, or place in the family line. In *L’Aventure ambiguë*, Samba Diallo represents the confluence of the forces at work on the Diallobé people in this moment of decision and transition into a new world. Considering his complex positionality, will Samba Diallo be able to wield his schooling more effectively than Laye and Medza in the mission to save the Diallobé people from colonial erasure?

Furthermore, *L’Aventure ambiguë* is the only classic work studied here to recount the student’s experiences in the metropole. As such, he feels cultural alienation more vividly and narrates it more explicitly. ““Je ne suis pas un pays des Diallobé distinct, face à un Occident distinct [...] Je suis devenu les deux. Il n’y a pas une tête lucide entre deux termes d’un choix. Il y a une nature étrange, en détresse de n’être pas deux”” (162-163).<sup>68</sup> Many scholars have analyzed Samba Diallo’s eloquent and lucid comments on hybridity due to education. My reading of this novel is more interested in the politics surrounding schooling in the Diallobé community. Finally, *L’Aventure ambiguë* contributes unique perspectives on the schooling question within this corpus because of its strongly religious perspective, the first of its kind to deliver its anti-colonial stance “on the grounds of conventional Muslim views” (Harrow 1987, 70). While the strong religious perspective presents new grounds from which to explore school compared to the other works in my corpus, I posit that the other social forces at play are just as important to the understanding of schooling in this work, namely class and gender.

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<sup>68</sup> ““I am not a distinct country of the Diallobé facing a distinct Occident [...] I have become the two. There is not a clear mind deciding between the two factors of a choice. There is a strange nature, in distress over not being two”” (150-151). All English translations of this novel come from Woods, Katherine, trans. 1963. *Ambiguous Adventure*. New York: Walker and Company.

*L'Aventure ambiguë* was published in 1961, though Kane had been working on the text throughout the previous decade while living in France. Therefore, we can situate the novel within a similar colonial time frame and publishing context as Camara Laye's and Mongo Beti's works. *L'Aventure ambiguë* won the Grand prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire in 1962. Like *L'Enfant noir*, *L'Aventure ambiguë* draws from elements of its author's life, although Kane does not claim it as pure autobiography like Camara Laye does for his text. For example, though the African towns and regions are not named in the work, descriptions of the landscape indicate that Diallobé country represents the Futa Toro region where Kane was born in 1928 and where he spent the majority of his childhood. Cailler (1982) draws the connection between the main character's name and Kane's childhood appellation in the Fula language. Interviews with the author and subsequent studies also reveal how several of the main characters in the novel are based on real people in Kane's family (Cailler 1982, Little 2002, Ba-Curry 2008). Kane also grew up within the Sufi sect, "Islam's major mystical tradition" (Ware 2014, 6), the influence of which is clearly seen in *L'Aventure ambiguë* through the themes of spirituality and asceticism (Harrow 1987; Caplan 2005; Glover 2007). Like Samba Diallo, Kane attended Quranic school until the age of ten when he began attending the local French school. He continued his secondary education in Dakar and then his higher education in Paris at the Sorbonne, where he admits to experiencing unsettling cultural disorientation. In 1959, Kane returned to Senegal, advanced degrees in philosophy and law in hand, and in subsequent years assumed different roles within the Senegalese government and then in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. In 1995, Kane published his second work, *Les Gardiens du temple*, thirty-four years after the appearance of *L'Aventure ambiguë*.

*L'Aventure ambiguë* depicts a community in Northern Senegal wrestling over a difficult question: should they send their children to the French colonial school? In considering the decision, the Diallobé lament the destabilization of their traditions and religion due to colonial invasion and influence. Part One recounts several intense discussions between important Diallobé figures and their internal ruminations over the education dilemma. The Quran teacher, called Thierno or *le maître*, grieves the threat of the colonial school to the spirituality of the Diallobé. The chief of the Diallobé continually seeks the advice of the Quran teacher, knowing that the community will follow his authority, yet the teacher remains inconclusive when others ask for his stance. The chief, too, acknowledges how colonial education may jeopardize Diallobé customs as well as his own authority in the region. On the other hand, the chief's sister, La Grande Royale, a bastion of pre-colonial Diallobé custom, is determined to save their people through the paradoxical sacrifice of the children to the colonial school. While the schooling question concerns all Diallobé people, the important discussions and decisions are carried out solely by these characters with higher social status.

These debates eventually center one particular child: Samba Diallo, the young cousin of the Diallobé chief. Community leaders choose Samba Diallo, with the blessing of his father called the Knight, to send to the colonial school. Samba Diallo's schooling eventually leads him to Paris where, in Part Two of the novel, he studies philosophy; befriends a militant communist, Lucienne, along with her family; and meets the eccentric Pierre-Louis, an elderly man from the Caribbean who spent years fighting for liberation in West Africa. The young student wrestles with his dissolving spirituality due to his exposure to Western materiality until one day his father calls him back to Diallobé country, announcing the death of his Quran teacher. The wavering Samba Diallo returns home. When he arrives, he is greeted by the deceased Quran teacher's

companion “le fou,” the madman or fool, whose mental instabilities stem from his own mind-warping sojourn in France. In the final scene, Samba Diallo struggles interiorly, begging God not to leave him, while the fool is imploring him to pray. The fool mistakenly understands Samba Diallo’s audible cry of refusal to be abandoned by God as a refusal to pray and lashes out, killing the young man. The last chapter is a poetic, prayer-like dialogue between the dying or deceased Samba Diallo and a spiritual being wherein Samba Diallo reenounters the spirituality he had temporarily lost.

*Reconsidering the West vs. Islam Binary through corporeal pedagogies*

In *L’Aventure ambiguë*, French schooling is conceptualized using a motif of materiality, which also more broadly represents the West. For instance, the characters and narrative voice use architectural terms to discuss colonial schooling and describe it as a means to build lasting, sustainable “demeures” (homes or dwellings). Secondly, the school is conveyed as providing corporeal substance and physical strength. Conversely, Islamic spirituality is linked with the opposite of bodily mass in the novel. It is represented by lightness, suppression of physical pain, and the dissolution of the body itself. In analyzing these representations of school-as-substance alongside the opposite—the lightness of spirituality—*L’Aventure ambiguë* poses the issue of their coexistence. Can an individual or a whole people both benefit from Western materiality and nurture Islamic spirituality without one detracting from the other?

The first time that characters discuss school, they do so using terms related to building materials. In Chapter One, Thierno reflects on the moment he met Samba Diallo. In the memory, Thierno converses with Samba Diallo’s father, the chief, and the director of the local French while young Samba Diallo sits in obedient silence. During the cordial exchange, Thierno

abruptly asks the school director a loaded question: “‘quelle bonne nouvelle enseignez-vous donc aux fils des hommes pour qu’ils désertent nos foyers ardents au profit de vos écoles?’” (20).<sup>69</sup>

The change in subject is blunt and not without a suggestion of disapproval. The director responds, trying to minimize the incompatibility of the two educations. “‘Rien, grand maître... ou presque. L’école apprend aux hommes seulement à lier le bois au bois... pour faire des édifices de bois...’” (21).<sup>70</sup> Although his “seulement” attempts to diminish the foreign school’s interference, the director does imply a clash between the two systems of education in his hesitations. Notably, the director recasts the purpose of schooling into a metaphorical act: to learn how to build wooden structures. In this perspective, school is conceived of in terms of accumulation, construction, and linkages. This metaphor relies on the tactile and the pragmatic and therefore aligns with the materiality of the West, as the novel portrays, as well as the linear sequencing and accumulation of the Western-model school.

The rest of the conversation reveals that some Diallobé have appropriated the school and its material resources in order to survive and thrive. More than symbolically, school is a means through which the Diallobé can gain strength and substance, for example through the financial and social advantages that French schooling affords in the colonial context.<sup>71</sup> The director justifies his choice, albeit reluctant, of sending his own children to the foreign school. “‘Nous

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<sup>69</sup> “‘...what new good are you teaching men’s sons, to make them desert our glowing hearths for the benefit of your schools?’” (9).

<sup>70</sup> “‘Nothing, revered master—or almost nothing,’ the school principal answered. ‘The school only teaches men to join wood to wood—to make wooden buildings’” (9).

<sup>71</sup> Again, in *Education as Politics: Colonial Schooling and Political Debate in Senegal (1850s-1914)*, Kelly Duke Bryant (2015) explores the different reactions to the schooling dilemma that took place in Senegal leading up to the election of Blaise Diagne to the French National Assembly in 1914, Senegal’s first Black deputy. One of her arguments posits that resistance to education was simply one sort of response, and that African communities negotiated schooling in ways that demonstrated their own agency (8). Response to the schooling system in l’Afrique Occidentale Française was dynamic and, as Duke Bryant shows, offered certain individuals and groups of people power and/or a pathway of resistance. *L’Aventure ambiguë* provides an example of this very navigation, presenting different approaches from various characters with their own goals to reach, power to keep, survival to maintain, or resistance to advance.



refusions l'école pour demeurer nous-mêmes et pour conserver à Dieu sa place dans nos cœurs. Mais avons-nous encore suffisamment de force pour résister à l'école et de substance pour demeurer nous-mêmes ?” (21).<sup>72</sup> The impasse rests in sending children to school and losing them or refusing school only to die off anyway. On the surface, the novel presents the school's materiality—at moments conceived as physical substance necessary to survival and at others conceived as unnecessary accumulation and materialism—in increasing opposition to Islam's rejection of the body and earthly substance (Ongba 2012, 313).

During the long deliberations of community leaders in Part One of the novel, it becomes ever clearer that the Diallobé cannot sustain themselves on spirituality alone. The people need more “substance,” implying the physical strength, sustaining material resources, and population to withstand the infiltration and demands of colonization. Thierno frets over the Diallobé's shifting needs as he reflects on the question of whether or not he should endorse school attendance amongst his people. “Les hommes du Diallobé voulaient apprendre à ‘mieux lier le bois au bois.’ [...] les Diallobé, chaque jour un peu plus, s'inquiétaient de la fragilité de leurs demeures, du rachitisme de leur corps. Les Diallobé voulaient plus de poids. Lorsque sa pensée buta sur ce mot, le maître tressaillit. Le poids! Partout il rencontrait le poids” (43-44).<sup>73</sup> The teacher senses the desire for more substance as the encroachment of colonialism, and his fears reflect the incompatibility he sees between the educations' conflicting values of lightness and bodily weight.

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<sup>72</sup> ““We reject the foreign school in order to remain ourselves, and to preserve for God the place He holds in our hearts. But have we still enough force to resist the school, and enough substance to remain ourselves?” (10).

<sup>73</sup> “The men of the Diallobé wanted to learn ‘how better to join wood to wood’ [...] the people of the Diallobé were each day a little more anxious about the stability of their dwellings, the unhealthy state of their bodies. The Diallobé wanted more substance... Substance, weight... When his thought abutted on these words, the teacher shuddered. Weight! Everywhere he encountered weight” (32-33).

The link between Western-model education and the body is not unique to *L'Aventure ambiguë*. Laye experiences similar corporeal connections in his school learning in *L'Enfant noir*. In addition to the corporal punishment and a strict standard for handwriting, the novel reveals quite explicitly that the desire for school learning is itself a matter of the body. After describing the nightmarish experience of the blackboard, the narrator again credits the students' passion for learning as a key for enduring the school's methods. However, he complicates the pupils' alleged internal motivations for learning the material by throwing into question where that passion comes from. "Au vrai, j'ai connu une grande variété de punitions dans cette école, mais point de variété dans le déplaisir; et il fallait que le désir d'apprendre fût chevillé au corps, pour résister à semblable traitement" (85).<sup>74</sup> The expression "chevillé au corps" (literally, pegged to the body) can insinuate an innate sense or sensibility. Yet the verb "falloir" along with the passive construction "fût chevillé" implies not only a learned interest in school but also one instilled through coercive techniques. These coercive techniques—understood in terms of discipline—and this passage in particular speak to the inextricable link between learning and the body upon which the Western school functions. In *L'Enfant noir*, the corporal punishment, the regimented repartition of students, and their unnatural stillness to avoid being called on all contribute to the act of securely fastening a desire to learn to the body. The complex structure of discipline and control in the classroom, part and parcel of coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 125), links the body to learning, often in a violent way, and acts as a mechanism to convince students of their own buy-in. Whatever fascination with learning the narrator implies earlier is negated in this

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<sup>74</sup> "I underwent a vast variety of punishments in that school, and only one thing did not vary—my anguish. One's love of knowledge had to be very strong [planted deep in your bones] to survive these ordeals" (80).

passage; students' desire to learn (or more so obey) is physically forced upon and instilled into them.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, the jumps between narrative levels during school episodes in *L'Enfant noir* differ importantly from those in episodes in Laye's community. While recalling how the bullies would force the younger students to do all the manual labor of clearing the school courtyard, the narrator exclaims, "Je me souviens—mes mains, les bouts de mes doigts se souviennent !—de ce qui nous attendait au retour de l'année scolaire" (88).<sup>76</sup> The narrator intervenes here with a verb of remembering in the present tense. Unlike the many other instances of narrator intervention throughout the work, the vast majority of which point to holes in the memory, reflections on school remain vivid. The narrator admits to not knowing customary knowledge and not remembering certain details of what occurred in his home community, but his memory of and knowledge from school is, on the contrary, quite clear. These school episodes illustrate a strong connection between the school, the body, and memory. Memory is tied to, even stored in, the body ("mes mains, les bouts de mes doigts se souviennent!"). Laye completes physically arduous tasks and experiences physical pain throughout his childhood (e.g. working the harvest with his uncle, rites of circumcision), yet it is the corporeal memories of school that the narrator explicitly

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<sup>75</sup> The significant connection between the body and school appears throughout *L'Enfant noir*. When Laye begins attending technical school in Conakry later on in the novel, he is incredulous over the lack of rigor at his new school and complains to his uncle that he would not receive a proper general education at the technical school. His uncle informs Laye that the school would be transforming its program the coming year, but as Laye works in the mechanical line, he develops an ulcer in his foot that hospitalizes him and causes him to miss an entire school year. Laye's body rejects the trade labor he was learning at school. When he returns the following year with a more rigorous curriculum, Laye fares well. It could be argued that Laye's body reacted negatively to the learning content and environment that didn't fit his idea of a respectable education. The curricular change at this school in Conakry also reflects the transformations educational policy were undergoing in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The colonial administration was beginning to establish more traditional high schools in urban areas while trade and agricultural schools were the focus of rural zones.

<sup>76</sup> "I remember—my hands and fingertips can not forget—what lay in store for us when we returned to school after vacation" (82).

recalls. The physicality of Laye's learning experience at school results in its epistemological traces in the narrator's remembering and recounting.

*L'Aventure ambiguë* also evokes the body in the learning process, but it is not limited to the French school. The opening scene of the novel illustrates important pedagogical precepts of the Quranic school where Thierno teaches the disciples. The Foyer Ardent represents the form of classical Islamic education whose presence in Senegal dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Launay 2016b; Tamba 2016, 38). In such schools, pupils memorize the Quran through pedagogies of recitation and learn to read and write in Arabic over a duration of five to nine years (Panait 2021, 10). Although not indigenous to the region, classic Quranic education was the most prevalent form of institutionalized education in Western sub-Saharan Africa before the colonial period. It continues to be an important educational institution today.<sup>77</sup> Called *daaras* in Senegal, these Quranic schools often require learners, or disciples, to work or seek alms within their community, as seen in *L'Aventure ambiguë* when Samba Diallo first exhibits his exceptional skill for singing prayers. These practices can financially and materially support their Islamic education but also teach the important tenet of humility. Additionally, the practice provides opportunity for the community to fulfill the religious responsibility of alms-giving (Ware 2014).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> In *Daaras et talibés*, Oana Marina Panait (2021) explores the difficulty in pinpointing how many children attend *daaras* in Senegal today, noting the discrepancies between state-offered statistics and those of UNICEF, USAID, and World Bank reports. The question is further complicated by the fact that a *talibé*, or disciple, in many of these contemporary reports specifically references a child who participates in the act of begging, when this requirement varies between *daaras*. Comparing against schooling rates is not feasible either, since some children who go to formal school also attend lessons at a *daara* before or after the school day. This trend echoes in *L'Aventure ambiguë* when Demba adjusts the Foyer Ardent's hours so the masses can attend French school. Furthermore, Muslim children in Senegal attain an Islamic education through different means, whether private lessons, Franco-Arabic schools, and even the integration of Islamic lessons into the public school curriculum. Notably, methods of Islamic education have formed and transformed despite but also because of the prevalence of the Western-style school.

<sup>78</sup> Many of the essays in the edited volume *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards* (Launay 2016a) discuss the epistemological and pedagogical differences between Islamic education and colonial education across sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Tamari (2016) points out that classic Islamic education uses local language in oral exchange and relies more on individualized instruction. These methods contrast with the French-only

This first look into the Foyer Ardent in *L'Aventure ambiguë* shows that physical discipline is also central to classic Quranic, aligning with what Rudolph T. Ware III shows in *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* as the values of “suffering and hardship in pursuit of knowledge” (2014, 42). The novel’s episode conveys vivid descriptions of the corporal punishment Samba Diallo receives after stumbling over his recitation. “Il [Thierno] avait saisi Samba Diallo au gras de la cuisse, l’avait pincé du pouce et de l’index, longuement” (15).<sup>79</sup> The punishment is all the more striking because Thierno’s inner thoughts reveal his deep love and admiration for the boy. “Quelle pureté et quel miracle! Cet enfant, véritablement, était un don de Dieu” (17).<sup>80</sup> This lesson depicts the Foyer Ardent’s ideology of transcending bodily weight and pain to achieve the lightness of faith (Tidjani-Serpos 1977, 190) and how administering physical suffering is inherent to the learning process, its end objectives, and even the care of the educator.

The religious education portrayed in *L'Aventure ambiguë* aims to transcend physical pain and the body, yet its pedagogies and epistemologies engage the corporeal form in significant ways. Ware (2014) and others (Fortier 2016; Umar 2016) illustrate how important the body, more specifically embodiment, is to Quranic education. Ware’s study explores how “Islamic learning is brought into the world through concrete practices of corporal discipline, corporeal knowledge transmission, and the deeds of embodied agents” (2014, 8). Because the body holds such importance in Quranic learning, it cannot be completely removed from the education

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language rules and choral organization of the classroom in the Western-model French colonial school. Ware (2014) addresses the negative viewpoints on *daaras* in Senegal in contemporary (and largely Western development) contexts. However, Ware elucidates how this perspective ignores the pedagogical approaches and deeper religious objectives of the *daara*’s practices and even traces oppositions back to anti-Islamic education sentiments of the French colonial administration working in the framework of the *mission civilisatrice* (41).

<sup>79</sup> “He had seized Samba Diallo by the fleshy part of his thigh and, between his thumb and index finger, had given him a long hard pinch” (3).

<sup>80</sup> “What purity! What a miracle! Truly, this child was a gift from God” (5).

question in *L'Aventure ambiguë*. This pedagogy throws into question, then, the categorical materiality/immateriality binary that has previously been read into *L'Aventure ambiguë*.

Ware differentiates the embodied knowledge of Islam from the epistemologies of Western school and its mind-body divide. “The educational approach in most secular schools and many modern Islamic educational institutions posits a wholly different role for the body. The approach in most modern education rests on a Cartesian divide between the mind and the body. A teacher acts primarily on the intellect...” (Ware 2014, 67). To the contrary, I would argue that, as seen in *L'Enfant noir*, the teacher acts just as importantly on the bodies of students in the Western-model school. In fact, there are similarities between pedagogies used in the Western-style classroom and those of the *daara*. Both Laye and Samba Diallo suffer painful penalties for mistakes committed in their learning in French school and Quranic school respectively. Both educations involve the learner’s body beyond corporal punishment as well. For example, the practices of handwriting, appropriate posture, and movement of students around set time tables—all inherent aspects of the Western-model school as demonstrated by Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*—engage the body in the act of learning. In Quranic school, the body is implicated in other ways. For example, disciples often imbibe the ink and water used to wash off their writing boards, in a way “drinking the Qur’an” (Ware 2014, 57). Learners also rock rhythmically as they practice reciting the holy text. In short, both systems of corporeal pedagogy are corrective and formative, meant to penalize transgressions and also to generate certain dispositions within the student. What Ware’s arguments rightly illuminate is how we must be wary of the binary easily arrived at in *L'Aventure ambiguë*, that of associating Islamic education with (complete) immateriality and Western education with materiality.

These pedagogies both center corporeality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that their ends are quite different, especially in considering the colonial origins of the Western-style school in these regions of Africa. First, Quranic education readily acknowledges hardship as a central tenet. “Hunger, thirst, fatigue, physical pain: all constituted bodily means for producing moral, emotional, and spiritual results, for reshaping possibilities. One used the body to transcend the body” (Ware 2014, 49). Thierno strives for this transcendence in the Foyer Ardent, because ultimately Islamic education intends to “reshap[e] one’s bodily deportment to resemble a living carrier of the Qur’an” (Ware 2014, 54). The desired result of Quranic education is the physical embodiment of sacred knowledge, a living text in human form. On the other hand, Western educational discipline aims for manipulability, to create “docile bodies”: “Est docile un corps qui peut être soumis, qui peut être utilisé, qui peut être transformé et perfectionné” (Foucault 2006, 160).<sup>81</sup> The Western-model school tames the body in the name of order, not in the name of transcendence. As we saw in *L’Enfant noir*, the Western-model school engages the body in acts of coercion to establish obedience, to minimize the “distraction” of the body (Todd and Robert 2018, 63). Ultimately, as Foucault’s central argument posits, the colonial school envisions “[les] corps comme objet et cible de pouvoir” (160)<sup>82</sup> and molds them thus to carry out the colonial project of political control and resource extraction. Therefore, the Western-model school and its corporeal pedagogies bear those traces of coloniality in the way it seeks to control masses in (neo)colonial contexts.

This reading of the body in *L’Enfant noir* and *L’Aventure ambiguë* demonstrates that pedagogies manifest at narrative levels in more complex ways that beg more nuanced readings than binary frameworks provide. Despite the important differences in how these two models of

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<sup>81</sup> “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136).

<sup>82</sup> “...the body as object and target of power” (136).

education engage the corporeal form, acknowledging the body as a central learning tool avoids reducing *L'Aventure ambiguë* to materiality/immateriality or corporeality/spirituality divides. These educations may not be inherently mutually exclusive or antithetical.<sup>83</sup> Samba Diallo may not be able to reconcile the hybrid state and relocates his spirituality only in death. However, the Diallobé people follow a path in answer to the education question—orchestrated in large part by La Grande Royale—that accounts for their material survival, a path that the status quo mindsets and polarizing binaries would not leave room to consider.

### *La Grande Royale's defensive modernization*

While certain characters become more convinced of the inextricability of the education debate, La Grande Royale's strategies offer a path forward for the Diallobé. This section will explore how La Grande Royale's schemes, as well as her very person, elude the binaries of Islamic faith versus Western education, immateriality versus materiality.<sup>84</sup> By analyzing her rhetorical approaches throughout the novel and the conclusions of her master plan, we see that her actions center Diallobé survival. She also draws community members into the education debate, involving women and non-ruling classes to finally generate action. In fact, La Grande

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<sup>83</sup> In fact, Kane's own remarkable success in the French school has been attributed to his strong base in Quranic education: "Sa mémoire et son intelligence était entraînées à une telle gymnastique – grâce à la recitation des versets..." [His memory and intelligence were trained in such gymnastics – thanks to reciting verses] (Mercier, Battestini, and Battestini 1965, 3).

<sup>84</sup> Other studies have also configured the power struggle in *L'Aventure ambiguë* beyond binaries. Both Harrow (1987) and Steemers (2013, 140) explain social forces in *L'Aventure ambiguë* in the form of a triangle. As Harrow envisions it, "One corner of the struggle is occupied by the French, standing for the modern, technological, ostensibly secular, material values of the West. On the other corner, is La Grande Royale, embodying traditional power and authority, occupying the position of what Coulon dubs the Prince (Coulon, 1981). Traditionally the ruling authority struggled against either the masses or a noble elite so as to maintain its position. The Sufi brotherhoods challenged the basis of the princes' authority and won favor with the masses... Thus, completing the triangle, we find the Maître..." (70-71). Harrow's concept of a more complex system of forces in *L'Aventure ambiguë* is more representative than the binary structure, yet I disagree with the force he places on the people's side. He states that Thierno represents the masses and La Grande Royale the ruling authority, but the novel's denouement will show that La Grande Royale is working more with the masses than the other incapacitated characters in the novel.



Royale—in using strategic rhetoric, attending to gender and class, and challenging the status quo—anticipates some of the shifts that appear in the contemporary novels explored in the following chapters of this dissertation. This prominent, yet often misunderstood, character foretells the approaches that (women) authors and characters take to navigating, confronting, and harnessing the school in *Le Baobab fou*, *Notre-Dame du Nil*, and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*.

La Grande Royale is no doubt an enigmatic figure, and many studies on *L'Aventure ambiguë* have tried to examine her true intentions in swaying the Diallobé people on the schooling question. Caplan (2005) calls her intervention “her revenge” for the sake of pre-Islamic Africa (947). Tidjani-Serpos (1977, 193) writes that her ambitions are based on a need to keep the nobility in power. Likewise, Steemers (2013, 142) argues she is acting out of “self-preservation.” I argue that these perspectives misunderstand her motivations. If La Grande Royale’s main goal is indeed preservation, it is because she recognizes that colonization has forever changed her society and that entering into the new world is the only option for survival, or what Caplan terms ““defensive modernization”” (947). Her adaptability shows that she values preparedness over surrender.

One reason other studies understand her intentions as self-serving is because of her ruling style. She does not claim an official title like her younger brother, the chief, but she does have significant influence in the region. “On racontait que, plus que son frère, c’est elle que le pays craignait. [...] Là où il préférerait en appeler à la compréhension, sa sœur tranchait par voie d’autorité” (33).<sup>85</sup> Her methods are authoritarian, or according to Steemers (2013, 142), “despotic.” This introduction also highlights how she differs from the chief. She is decisive, suggested in verb “trancher,” which becomes her greatest asset in the schooling question.

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<sup>85</sup> “It was said that it was she, more than her brother, whom the countryside feared [...] Where he preferred to appeal to understanding, his sister would cut through on the path or authority” (21).

Indeed, La Grande Royale is arguably the most pivotal character when it comes to responding to the school dilemma. Her actions move the plot forward, and those actions invite other perspectives to the education debate and therefore shape a more complex vision of school in this work. She is a type character, symbolizing pre-Islamic Diallobé tradition and loosely based on a family member of Kane (Cailler 1982, 744; Little 2002, 79-80; Ba-Curry 2008, 112). She is Muslim, but her identity and loyalties lie in the Diallobé people, whom she sees wasting away due to the indecision of her brother (the chief) and the Quranic school teacher. She outwardly expresses her disapproval of Samba Diallo's extreme Quranic education, telling Thierno, ““Je crois que le temps est venu d'apprendre à nos fils à vivre. Je pressens qu'ils auront affaire à un monde de vivants où les valeurs de mort seront bafouées et faillies”” (39).<sup>86</sup> Above all, she is a realist. Moreover, contrary to the Quran teacher, she is a figure of significant substance. “La Grande Royale, qui pouvait bien avoir un mètre quatre-vingts, n'avait rien perdu de sa prestance malgré son âge” (32).<sup>87</sup> Samba Diallo describes her face as “comme une page vivant de l'histoire du pays des Diallobé” (32).<sup>88</sup> This imposing and impressive character shows that substance is not anti-Diallobé; substance *is* Diallobé. In many instances, Islamic tradition, represented by the Foyer Ardent and Thierno, are construed as the defining essence of the Diallobé. Nevertheless, the character of La Grande Royale shows that Islamic immateriality does not comprehensively define the Diallobé people. Furthermore, La Grande Royale prioritizes the masses' material survival. She acknowledges, albeit not without regret, that school is necessary “pour vivre—c'est-a-dire pour être libre, pour se nourrir, pour s'habiller” (61),<sup>89</sup> all which the

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<sup>86</sup> ““I believe that the time has come to teach our sons to live. I foresee that they will have to do with a world of the living, in which the values of death will be scoffed at and bankrupt”” (27).

<sup>87</sup> “The Most Royal Lady, who could have been six feet tall, had lost none of her impressive bearing, in spite of her age” (20).

<sup>88</sup> “...like a living page from the history of the Diallobé country” (20).

<sup>89</sup> “...that is, be free, feed and clothe [one]self” (50).

Diallobé find increasingly elusive in the face of colonization. In other words, the Islamic immateriality/Western materiality polarization does not accurately summarize the stakes of Diallobé survival nor the education question in this novel.

In this West African society steeped in Islamic and traditional patriarchy, La Grande Royale's gender is not coincidental. As Harrow puts it, "While it may appear unusual [sic] to cloak temporal authority in the person of a woman in Senegalese society, Kane uses La Grande Royale all the more effectively to heighten the values of the life force in its opposition to the Sufi guide" (1987, 73). I posit that her gender, or gendering, help unsettle the binary established in the education debate. After some ineffectual discussions with the chief and the Quran teacher, who sees the two paths as are "parallèles" and "inflexibles" (46), La Grande Royale summons the community, who are largely absent from the deliberations in the novel. I suggest that La Grande Royale's actions and influence in the decision on the school dilemma are more equalizing, even democratizing, and not a "défense des intérêts de classe" (Tidjani-Serpos 1977, 198).<sup>90</sup>

Her oration during the community meeting evokes materiality metaphors, harnessing them as a heuristic to ultimately benefit the masses. She expressly involves women as well. She begins by addressing this unconventional choice saying, "Nous autres Diallobé, nous détestons cela, et à juste titre, car nous pensons que la femme doit rester au foyer" (56). With "nous autres," she separates herself from her fellow Diallobé women. Her royal status allows her to make this unique distinction and even surpass gender labels. Furthermore, in highlighting the abnormality of her action and the displeasure it causes, she positions herself as an empathetic party and gains the trust of her listeners. In a culture that highly values orality (Tidjani-Serpos

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<sup>90</sup> "defense of class interests." Little (2000, 76) as well as Ba-Curry (2008, 113) point out that the social dynamics in the *L'Aventure ambiguë* echo the caste-based society of the Toucouleur of Northern Senegal. These class relations inform La Grande Royale's plan and speak to the surprising disruption of the status quo when, in the end, her plan proves equalizing.

1977, Caplan 2005, Ba-Curry 2008), she exhibits rhetorical dexterity in this brief introduction as well as an anchor in Diallobé values.

Displeasure acts as a segue into the topic of school and the challenging plan she proposes: “Je viens vous dire ceci: moi, La Grande Royale, je n’aime pas l’école étrangère. Je la déteste. Mon avis est qu’il faut y envoyer nos enfants cependant” (57).<sup>91</sup> In her reasoning that follows, she compares her uncertain steps into the future to a baby learning to walk, referring to a specific woman and child present at the meeting. She calls on the people to accept that their children will lose a part of who they are, perhaps even the memory of the Diallobé that they have tried to preserve. To justify this contradictory position, she uses a metaphor of new life. “... souvenez-vous de nos champs quand approche la saison des pluies. Nous aimons bien nos champs, mais que faisons-nous alors? Nous y mettons le fer et le feu, nous les tuons” (58).<sup>92</sup> Her metaphor is effective, or at least thought-provoking, because not long after, she asks for others to intervene and receives only silence. She concludes the meeting having been the only one to speak.

La Grande Royale also evokes local agricultural practices, “life-giving, procreative actions” (Harrow 1987, 72), to connect the school once again with matters of material survival and reinforce the metaphorical thread of school-as-substance. Knowing the Diallobé lack these fundamental resources, she weaves sustenance into the collective understanding of the foreign school. La Grande Royale centers life and rebirth over the values of death taught in Thierno’s Quranic school. She also engages members of the popular class, even those lowest on the social

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<sup>91</sup> “I come here to say this to you: I, the Most Royal Lady, do not like the foreign school. I detest it. My opinion, nevertheless, is that we should send our children there” (45).

<sup>92</sup> “remember our fields when the rainy season is approaching. We love our fields very much, but what do we do then? We plough them up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way, recall this: what do we do with our reserves of seed when the rain has fallen? We would like to eat them, but we bury them in the earth” (47).

ladder (the woman and her child), to advance her argument. Her stance and her reasonings attend to gender too, particularly in this scene where she invited the women, evokes a baby, and employs metaphors of new life (Nyatetū-Waigwa 1996, 22). La Grande Royale invites a social identity in the discussion that is not customarily prioritized yet is essential to the survival and longevity of the Diallobé people. Despite her authoritarian leadership style, her actions and reasoning throughout the novel advocate for the Diallobé who do not belong to the noble and religious classes.

We finally witness the culmination of La Grande Royale's intricate plan when the dying Quran teacher passes his title to Demba. This episode finally settles the question of school attendance for the Diallobé people in *L'Aventure ambiguë*. Immediately following his initiation, Demba declares that the Quranic school schedule will change so that all parents who want to send their sons to school are free to do so. This is La Grande Royale's final appearance, signifying she has accomplished her mission. She is happy with Demba's induction as the new Islamic leader in the region, and she congratulates herself for it. As she witnesses the initiation of the new Quran teacher, her reflections betray mixed emotions over the changes in their world order. ““Il n'a pas, il n'aura jamais ce goût du vieil homme qui préfère les valeurs traditionnelles, même condamnées et mourantes, aux valeurs triomphantes qui nous assaillent. Ce jeune homme est téméraire. Le sens du sacré ne le paralyse pas. C'est un cuistre. Mieux que tout autre, il saura accueillir le monde nouveau”” (133).<sup>93</sup> La Grande Royale believes the impediment holding back the Diallobé people has been eliminated, and she orchestrated it. Her attitudes toward old ways

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<sup>93</sup> ““He has not, he never will have, that preference of the old man for traditional values, even those that are condemned and moribund, over the triumphant values that are assailing us. The young man is bold. He is not paralysed by the sense of what is sacred. He has no feeling for background. He will know better than anyone else how to welcome the new world”” (121).

are not objectively negative; she simply acknowledges that they no longer provide for the needs of the people in contemporary times, especially in the face of colonialism, “le monde nouveau.”

In their reflections, both Demba and La Grande Royale point out the ways Demba differs from Thierno and, for that matter, Samba Diallo. Demba’s differing values and youthful confidence will move the Diallobé out of stagnation. Demba thinks, ““Ma jeunesse se permettra plus de témérité; elle est plus obtuse, et c’est bien ainsi. Il hésite, je trancherai. Mais s’agit-il bien d’âge? Samba Diallo, à mon âge, lui aussi, hésiterait, c’est sûr”” (133).<sup>94</sup> It is noteworthy that both La Grande Royale and Demba himself mention Demba’s less nuanced intellect. Demba calls himself “obtus” and La Grande Royale calls him “un cuistre.” However, being unrefined and inexperienced seems to add to Demba’s suitability for the position and his ability to see the equalizing power of the school. Demba’s humble background makes him the right candidate for the role. Because of his origins, he is uninitiated into the stagnancy of the nobility and moribund values of Thierno’s and the chief’s generations and he can therefore fulfill the role of leader that the Diallobé need. Demba implies that the school could be a vehicle for social and political advancement. Whereas the Quranic school and the nobility system kept those in power in power, the colonial school presents a different pathway for social change. La Grande Royale, a strong Diallobé figure, wants to usher in a new world in which obsolete systems of authority no longer impede the survival of her people.

According to my reading of *L’Aventure ambiguë*, this was La Grande Royale’s plan all along. In stating that Demba can usher in the new world better than anyone else, she approves his decision to allow Diallobé children to go to school in great numbers. Thus, her plan was always meant to equalize and not uphold traditional power structures. If earlier she argued that the elite

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<sup>94</sup> ““My youth will allow of more temerity. It is more obtuse, and it is well that it should be so. He hesitates, I will make short work of problems”” (121).

should be the first to reap the potential benefits of schooling, in this scene she is visibly pleased that a non-elite has opened the door for masses to go to school. Her earlier arguments were a rhetorical ploy to appeal to her elite counterparts and enact her true, democratizing plan.

Nevertheless, she does betray regret. ““Mais auparavant, le maître aura vécu, ainsi que mon frère. Ainsi que mon jeune cousin... oui Samba Diallo aussi aura vécu, spirituellement. Pauvre enfant, qui eût dû naître contemporain de ses ancêtres. Je crois qu’il en eût été le guide. Aujourd’hui... Aujourd’hui...” (133).<sup>95</sup> The ellipses at the end of her reflection suggest her remorse over the sacrifice Samba Diallo to the school. Although she congratulates herself, the accomplishment is bitter sweet. Her incomplete thought also implies the work yet to be done. She arranged to put Demba in power but mourns still the present state of colonization. With her thought and the future of the Diallobé still hanging in the balance, La Grande Royale leaves the narrative space for good. Her exit on ellipsis indicates a continuation, that her work to save the Diallobé goes on.

Samba Diallo’s death (ambiguously) signifies the end of a certain pre-colonial era in Senegal but also a hope to reconnect with essential faith on other planes of existence. While the force of the West and the force of Islam are often oppositional, binary frameworks can be limiting, even colonial themselves. Fanon wrote about the Manichean form of the colonial city in *Wretched of the Earth*, a binary system put in place by the colonial project. In his introduction to *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, Launay also urges us to avoid classifying educational forms as such. “It is important to insist that the categorization and dichotomization of educational systems as traditional or modern is a feature of an ideology of

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<sup>95</sup> “[But before, the teacher will have lived, as well as my brother.] As for my young cousin—Samba Diallo also will have lived his life, spiritually. Poor child, he should have been born as the contemporary of his ancestors. I believe that he would have been the spiritual guide for them Today—today—” (121).

modernity intrinsically tied to the kind of education that colonizers of whatever stripe tried to impose on their subjects” (Launay 2016b, 3). Therefore, considering the schooling question and its solution in a more complex framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of education, religion, and their literary portrayals.

## Conclusion

These classic works are linked in their ambiguous denouements. Like Laye’s unsatisfiable yearning for traditional knowledge and Medza’s aimless wandering, the schooled child in *L’Aventure ambiguë* also meets a regrettable, ambivalent end. Nyatetũ-Waigwa (1996) attributes these final states of ambiguity to the “liminal” nature of these students’ intellectual journeys, a sign that the coming of age story of these three young men cannot fulfill the traditional bildungsroman conclusion. However, Nyatetũ-Waigwa also suggests that liminality leaves room for hope. In fact, Kane himself has claimed that the ending of *L’Aventure ambiguë* is not fatalistic. Although the conclusions of these classic works do not espouse a happy ending for the schooled children therein, perhaps the hope that remains is meant for future students and authors to face the schooling experience with different outcomes. In subsequent chapters, we will determine if more contemporary portrayals of school allow students to harness their schooling for more self-determining ends.

These three classic works certainly treat the oft cited issues of cultural alienation, inner conflict, and community pressure brought about by extended exposure to a foreign education. My readings have shown that the students depicted in these texts struggle with losses of agency and identity confusion. Despite the painful and confounding impacts of French instruction on the student, these novels lack an explicit renunciation of the school. Any critiques of this colonial



epistemic institution are hidden under layers of positive language, narrative satire, and ambiguity. In *L'Enfant noir*, representation of the school is infused with positive language. The school's subtle, yet powerful system of control is veiled, however thinly, by an alleged passion for learning. But by masking the stringent discipline regime of the school with the front of intrinsically motivated student engagement, the narrator distracts from the classroom dynamic that forces students into their roles of passive vessels for knowledge. In *Mission terminée*, the target of Mongo Beti's criticism evades detection due to his satirical register and layered narration. Medza's critiques of schooling, especially those in final chapter, are refracted by his own untrustworthiness as a poor student. Beti's judgement rests more on the African communities he portrays. Finally, *L'Aventure ambiguë* presents the strongest hesitations and resistance in the face of the colonial school, yet La Grande Royale's defensive modernization does include ceding to it. The novel ends before the reader can learn the long-term consequences of this defensive strategy for the Diallobé people. Therefore, it is left to future generations to determine and depict the outcomes of La Grande Royale's plan.

Notably, critiques of the school are far more pronounced in the novels studied in the following chapters, and this explicit critique marks one important shift in contemporary portrayals of the school. As sub-Saharan African authors continue to represent school in their literary works, questions of cultural alienation, memory, and agency persist, but along with them, factors of gender, trauma, and transatlantic identity intensify in shaping collective understandings and narratives of this enduring educational institution. Ultimately, the subsequent analyses of contemporary works will help form an updated and more comprehensive portrait of the school that these classic works have long upheld. However, it remains to be seen if the more

recent depictions will point to a decolonial turn in the treatment of the schooling experience in sub-Saharan African francophone literature.

## CHAPTER 2

### School as Identity (De)Former in Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*

Drawing from studies of identity and migration in feminist and postcolonial studies, this chapter examines how Ken Bugul's autobiographical novel *Le Baobab fou* (1982) narrates the ways school can form and deform student identity. After the protagonist, Ken, migrates to Europe to pursue her studies, she is confronted with dissonances between her school-informed understanding of self and the identity thrust upon her in Belgium. The novel demonstrates pained processes of un-learning and re-learning in Ken's quest for origins and belonging. Ken's crises compel her to dredge up her school-days memories in order to reckon with her misleading indoctrination and incoherent, discontented sense of self. Her "return" to schooling indicates a consciencization of how her education plays into her errancy and uprootedness. Primarily, *Le Baobab fou* portrays the particular identity-forming and identity-falsifying power of the school and its consequences for the uprooted student through the physical, psychological, and narrative splitting of the first-person subject woven throughout the work. Engaging with postcolonial concepts such as ambivalence and racialization found in the writings of Bhabha and Fanon respectively, this chapter implicates schooling in Ken's downward spiral in the European metropole. By highlighting the physical and psychological stakes of the inconsistencies between her education and her experience, *Le Baobab fou* critiques Ken's education and sheds light on the futile and misleading frameworks she was provided in French school.

The origins of Ken's crises are nonetheless ambiguous. The novel uses a non-linear narrative, symbolic registers, and a web of resurging memories to reveal layers of trauma in Ken's childhood. The narrating Ken most often returns to the departure of her mother when Ken

was five years old to explain her stunted identity formation. While this abandonment is a formative traumatic moment in young Ken's life, the text itself reveals that her exposure to and participation in school feed into Ken's distancing from her family and (de)formation of identity. In fact, the ways in which the text portrays the school—incoherent frameworks; irrepressible memories; and physical, mental, and emotional violence—point to important linkages between the separation with the mother and the introduction of the school. In other words, Ken's distance from her culture of origin is concurrently caused, exacerbated, and symbolized by the introduction of a foreign epistemology. This chapter shows how Ken's feelings of childhood abandonment and alienation as they relate to her mother act to symbolize the broader plight of the schooled African child, more specifically, the girl student. The moment of separation from the mother represents the distancing from one's origins *because* of the colonial school.

*Le Baobab fou* offers a good point of departure to observe the shift in representations of the schooling experience across time in sub-Saharan African literature. The novel possesses certain affinities with the “classic” works examined in the previous chapter, specifically its emphasis on points of rupture and alienation caused by schooling. Laye in *L'Enfant noir*, Medza in *Mission terminée*, Samba Diallo in *L'Aventure ambiguë*, and Ken in *Le Baobab fou* experience a distancing from their families that is caused by their participation in school and the adoption of foreign (French) epistemologies. Like *L'Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée*, *Le Baobab fou* uses a first-person narrative which offers intimate portrayals of the memories and psyches of the main characters. Moreover, Ken's narrative thread begins with her plane ride to Europe, picking up at the precise moment where Laye's account ends in *L'Enfant noir*. Her story presents a more detailed account of the migrant experience, with, however, a particularly gendered lens. As such, Ken Bugul's portrayal of schooling and its impacts on the main character also differ from those

in the classic works. Laye, Medza, and Samba Diallo all experience the psychological effects of discordant educations that extend into adulthood, yet the following analyses of *Le Baobab fou* illustrate how Ken suffers the cognitive dissonance much more explicitly and severely, invoking therefore a more explicit and severe critique of the (neo)colonial French school. One reason for this shift in experience and elevated distress is that Ken's schooling, learning, un-learning, and re-learning are much more embodied. I will show how physical and affective circumstances are particularly tied to Ken's gendered experience both in school and in Europe in the 1970s. For example, pressures of normative (white) feminine beauty, exoticization, sex, and patriarchal values limit Ken from assuming her own, true identity. Furthermore, the text takes on a more bitter tone in comparison to the classic works, evoking a critical lens. Indeed, the novel presents categorical critiques of the school, condemning irrelevant content, assimilative tendencies, competition between students, and, ultimately, the alienation of generations of African students.

In a move toward the decolonial turn, Ken Bugul's novel exposes this epistemic institution for its inherent coloniality and "illuminat[es] the work of the rhetoric of modernity" (Mignolo 2020, 1). This is a vital piece of the decolonial paradigmatic shift. Nevertheless, as we will see in Ken's journey to (re)forming her identity, navigating the incoherencies of her schooling, and confronting the trauma of her childhood, she is less successful in escaping the school's cycle of coloniality. *Le Baobab fou* thus represents merely a beginning of the turn toward the decolonial in representations of the school in sub-Saharan Francophone novels. However, as we will see in following chapters, it sparks a shift that even more contemporary works like *Notre-Dame du Nil* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* advance.

### **Ken Bugul and the *prise d'écriture* of women authors in Francophone West Africa**

Mariétou Mbaye, more widely known by her penname Ken Bugul, was born in Louga, Senegal in 1948. Like *Le Baobab fou* depicts, she was one of the youngest children of a polygamous family, her father aged around 80 years when she was born. In 1955, a French school opened in her village and she began attending (Bugul, Bourget, and d'Almeida 2003). She continued in the schooling cycle until she received a scholarship to go to Belgium, an experience portrayed in *Le Baobab fou*. Bugul also spent time in France but eventually moved back to Senegal and married a polygamous marabout, becoming his twenty-eighth wife. She details this part of her life in her second and third autobiographical works *Cendres et braises* (1994) and *Riwan ou le Chemin de sable* (1999). Advanced in age, her husband dies not long after their marriage. Mbaye worked in family planning and the arts across Africa, eventually settling in Benin with her second husband. She has continued to author books such as *La Folie et la mort* (2000), *De l'autre côté du regard* (2002), *Rue Félix-Faure* (2004), *La pièce d'or* (2005), *Mes hommes à moi* (2008), *Aller et retour* (2013), *Cacophonie* (2014), and *Le Trio bleu* (2022).

*Le Baobab fou*—Ken Bugul's first published text and first of three autobiographical novels—is about the Senegalese woman's quest for identity, as she says, “la recherche de mon moi véritable” (92).<sup>1</sup> Ken yearns for a sense of belonging based on some sort of shared point of reference with anyone: her family, her village, her home country of Senegal, her fellow students, and then eventually Westerners. Ken goes to extreme lengths to find this belonging, deforming herself or letting others deform her both physically and mentally in her pursuit.

The text is split into two parts labeled “Pré-histoire de Ken” (Ken's Prehistory) and “Histoire de Ken” (Ken's History). First, the “Pré-histoire de Ken” describes the origins of

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<sup>1</sup> “...finding the true me” (62). All English translations of this novel come from Jager, Marjolijn de, trans. 1991. *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese woman*. Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books.

Gouye and Ndoucoumane, Ken's place of birth. It recounts the series of random circumstances that occur so that the eponymous baobab is planted, watered, and grown from a seed into a full tree. In this section, families move out of and into the area, grow their communities, and carry on traditions in a harmonious cycle, though they are not completely isolated from foreign entities. The narration and tone of this section is unique from the rest of the novel. It is marked by a myth-like quality, heavy symbolism, third-person narration, and an inconstant passing of time. The section ends with a young child playing in the sand beneath the baobab tree. There the child finds a stray amber bead and pushes the bead into its own ear. A piercing scream disrupts the harmony of the village and the "Pré-histoire" ends.

The second part introduces Ken, a Senegalese woman in her twenties who is migrating to Brussels to continue her studies. It is here, during her search for belonging, that she makes friends, enters into romantic relationships, and discovers the Europe that had "rien à voir avec tout ce que j'avais appris dans les manuels scolaires" (84).<sup>2</sup> Yet her experience is formed by her gender and her race as she is exoticized, tokenized, and objectified by those around her in Brussels. She gets pregnant, seeks an abortion, experiments with drugs. She is introduced to sex work in degrading situations. After a particularly unsettling encounter with a client, while sitting alone in a hotel room contemplating suicide, she reflects on her youth. Thus launches a sort of third section of the novel. This penultimate chapter of the work switches registers and jumps back in time to recount significant moments in Ken's identity formation and her schooling.

Ken hints about her past and narrates moments of her childhood in brief flashbacks throughout the novel's second section. These moments are associated with strong, negative emotion, for example her mother abandoning her when she was five. However, the third section

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<sup>2</sup> "...nothing to do with anything I'd learned from my school texts" (56).

is where she systematically recalls and recounts her school days. Her schooling requires her to move away from Ndoucoumane and live with different family or community members, yet nowhere does she feel the warmth of home. Ken remembers being a strong student, but she is constantly plagued by feelings of abandonment, rootlessness, unbelonging. She tries to “comblé le vide,” to fill the void with school, assimilation, and Occidentalization, wearing short skirts, flaunting high heel shoes, and straightening her hair. This extended flashback concludes with her departure to Belgium from which the “Histoire de Ken” began, and the final chapter brings readers back to Ken contemplating in the hotel room. After one more terrible encounter with a “john” in Brussels and some encouragement from her friends, she returns to Senegal. The work ends with her standing before the baobab tree, which has long since died, in mourning.

When the autobiographical work was first published, many readers were skeptical of the veracity of the events in Ken Bugul’s text. Despite these doubts, literary scholars have explored and lauded *Le Baobab fou* for its reconceptualization of the autobiographical genre. For example, Irène Assiba d’Almeida, author of *Francophone African Women Writers: destroying the emptiness of silence* (1994), speaks definitively on the debate by highlighting the inherently subjective construction of self through writing. “The autobiography thus becomes an auto-fiction in which the subject ‘I’ is the object of a narrative discourse that allows at once a means of distancing, but also a means of selection of the particles that will form the ‘I.’ In this way the narrator has with the ‘self’ a relationship that is at once very close and very distant, and a relationship of complicity in a process of covering and un-covering” (35). As we will see, Ken Bugul’s text mirrors this simultaneous closeness and distance as the narrative relates very personal life events but also, I argue, stands for the experience of schooled African children more broadly. Other scholars claim Ken Bugul’s text as subversive because of how it portrays a



particularly gendered experience and exemplifies a gendered take on the subject-forming and subject-presenting genre itself.<sup>3</sup> The choices involved in committing the self to text, in writing an auto-fiction, are important for *Le Baobab fou* especially in its portrayal of the school. What d’Almeida calls “covering and un-covering” in Ken Bugul’s text can also be considered as a process of un-learning and re-learning. The author chooses to place her schooling days at the end of the work, implying that the majority of her childhood, schooling, and identity (de)forming moments are repressed memories that only come forth at adult Ken’s lowest moments. These “particles,” tragic as they are, form Ken’s self through her autofiction. Resurgent memories throughout the work, and as explored below, speak to the trauma that Ken experienced as a child, both because of her mother’s departure and her experiences in school.

In 1982, Ken Bugul’s representation of her tumultuous life was certainly unprecedented, particularly for portraying subjects considered taboo in West Africa like abortion, homosexuality, drug use, and sex work. Nevertheless, Ken Bugul published during a time marked by a steady incline of African women writers. She was preceded on the publishing scene by authors like Nafissatou Niang Diallo (*De Tilène au Plateau, une enfance dakaroise*, 1975), Aoua Kéita (*Femme d’Afrique: La vie d’Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même*, 1975), and Mariama Bâ (*Une si longue lettre*, 1979). The autobiographical mode proved central to these pioneering West African francophone women writers where, contrarily, “...written narrative [was] not a widespread means of organizing subjectivity” (Watson 1997, 146). Indeed, according to Madeline Borgomano, author of *Voix et visages des femmes, dans les livres écrit par des femmes en Afrique francophone* (1989), the autobiographical is a particularly and conspicuously

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Borgomano (1989), Hitchcott (1997), Kalisa (2009), and Coly (2010). D’Almeida (1994) also continues on this subject, stating, “Many of the events and situations that deeply affect her life are lived through her very body, the female body literally and figuratively bruised, marked physically and emotionally. Thus, it becomes impossible to dissociate Ken Bugul’s self-consciousness from her female consciousness” (47).

non-traditional choice. “Elles sembleraient, au premier abord, se démarquer totalement de la tradition africaine et adopter un modèle entièrement importé” (13).<sup>4</sup> As we know, *L’Enfant noir* is an exception to this notion. While *Mission terminée* and *L’Aventure ambiguë* contain autobiographical elements, the majority of their texts do not adhere as strictly to autobiography as Ken Bugul’s does. For example, the narrating “Je” does not align with the author and hero per Lejeune’s formula (1994).

This wave of women writers represented what d’Almeida calls a *prise d’écriture* or a seizing or wielding of writing in “a necessary battle for liberation” (1994, 6). In other words, the influx of women writers and their *prise d’écriture* granted them freedom in the field of letters and publishing but also liberated them to portray themselves, to exert themselves as actors, agents, and subjects in the colonial and postcolonial experience. Moreover, literary scholar Djoher Sadoun (2021) underscores the importance of women being able to write about their childhood, particularly the traumas of youth in (re)claiming literary voice and representation. “Dire l’enfance équivalait à dire la misère émotionnelle et intellectuelle des femmes dans leur société. Cette misère se développant ainsi dès l’origine, elle ne fera que s’amplifier tout au long du parcours de celles que la société aura muselées dès la naissance et qui, pour se venger de ces années de silence imposé, prendront la plume pour crier leurs souffrances” (39).<sup>5</sup> *Le Baobab fou* thus takes part in a paradigm shift in publishing by Francophone African authors and therefore also serves as a useful turning point from which to witness evolutions of the portrayal of school.

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<sup>4</sup> “They would seem, at first glance, to completely distinguish themselves from African tradition and adopt an altogether imported model.”

<sup>5</sup> “Speaking childhood was equivalent to speaking the emotional and intellectual misery of women in their society. Forming as such from the beginning, this misery will only escalate throughout the journey of those whom society will have muzzled from birth and who, to take revenge for these years of imposed silence, will take up the pen to cry out their suffering.”

As we will see in the works of Scholastique Mukasonga and Fatou Diome in proceeding chapters, the autobiographical continues its importance in contemporary times.

The fact that Ken Bugul's narrative straddles the pre- and post- independence eras also makes it an important pivot point and provides a new perspective in the larger literary representation of the school. Broadly speaking, the 1970s and 1980s mark a time of general disenchantment toward the neocolonial state. The promises of independence did not manifest in newly independent nations, and authors and filmmakers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Mongo Beti, Ousmane Sembène, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o portrayed their disappointment with African leaders and persistent neocolonial structures in their works and political engagement. This disillusionment echoes in *Le Baobab fou* as Ken experiences independence and its letdowns. "Mais l'indépendance m'avait déçue. Je croyais que l'indépendance allait me sauver. Je ne constatais aucune acquisition d'identité propre, aucun souffle. L'indépendance était comme la reconnaissance et l'officialisation de la dépendance" (176).<sup>6</sup> The school does not escape the post-independence disillusionment in *Le Baobab fou*. Despite her complete immersion in the French school as a child, the narrating Ken weaves a critique of the education system and the extent of its impact throughout the novel, referring to it as "L'école française qui allait bouleverser mille mondes et mille croyances" (140).<sup>7</sup> The representations of school in the classic works were more neutral, even promising, albeit still regretful. Laye is enchanted by what he learns in school and steadfastly pursues more education. Mongo Beti does not disparage school itself, only uncritical students like Medza and manipulative African communities. In *L'Aventure ambiguë*, school is a necessary evil that gives the Diallobé a fighting chance to exist in the colonial world. On the

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<sup>6</sup> "But independence disappointed me. I had thought independence would save me. It was not an acquiring of my own identity at all, not a breath of it. Independence was rather a recognizing of dependence and making it official" (125).

<sup>7</sup> "The French school that was to upset a thousand worlds and a thousand beliefs" (98).

other hand, Ken Bugul's account of school very explicitly spells out its faults: spreading a misleading curriculum, colonial hypocrisy, inferiority complexes, and physical and psychological violence on students and teachers.

Ken Bugul's novel also stands out in comparison to her fellow writers of the era. Firstly, Ken Bugul's text distinguishes itself through its style (Borgomano 1989, 60). Most texts penned by women during this era employ a mode of social realism. Ken Bugul's text is decidedly more poetic, incorporating a variety of registers, mixed narrative perspectives, and a non-linear plot. Furthermore, while the works previously cited took place within Senegal (in the case of Diallo and Bâ) or Mali (in the case of Kéïta), Ken Bugul is the first to write as migrant woman. Although we do witness Samba Diallo in Paris, *L'Aventure ambiguë* conspicuously skips over his first moments of acclimation and adaptation in France. When we find him in Paris, Samba Diallo has already adjusted to the quotidian of the city (even though he still struggles with clashes of culture and being). In *L'Enfant noir*, Laye does recount his memories while away from home, presumably in France, but his narrative does not treat the migrant experience explicitly. Therefore, *Le Baobab fou* not only distinguishes itself from other works by women authors of the 70s and 80s due to its focus on the migrant, exilic experience, but it also distinguishes itself from the classic works in this study for the same reason. The differences are not limited to content and style, however. The novel's posture toward and depiction of school also demonstrate important shifts in the overall representation of the institution, which have important implications in the larger decolonial turn.

### School frameworks, false ancestors, and other cognitive dissonances

Although the third section of *Le Baobab fou* most directly narrates Ken's schooling experience, the school and its instruction are salient presences across the "Histoire de Ken." Nearly as much as Ken references her premature and traumatic separation with her mother does she bring up something she learned in *l'école française*. In fact, many of the flashbacks and intrusive thoughts about her mother are paired with lessons from school, an association explored further below. This section will show how Ken's encounter with Europe is formed and informed by her schooling.

The first chapter of the "Histoire de Ken" starts with her departure from Senegal to Belgium by way of Paris. Launching her story with the voyage to Europe to continue her studies is in part an optimistic, hopeful gesture of rebirth. At the narrative level, Ken's life *begins* with her departure to Europe. Moreover, the narration switches into first-person voice in the "Histoire de Ken," further signaling a coming-into-subjectivity, a sort of birth into the diegesis. Like a birth, Ken's departure in the airplane is depicted as a noisy affair: an anonymous voice makes announcements from the speakers, the noise of the jet engines thunders around her, and a mysterious distant bleating of a sheep fills her ears. This departure is full of physical sensations, but the aural is a central and significant reference in this episode. Preceding Chapter One in the "Histoire de Ken" is a short prologue in which we learn that Ken was in fact the child who put the amber bead in her ear under the baobab tree in the "Pré-histoire." The prologue includes a retelling of the event through Ken's first-person voice.<sup>8</sup> "*À deux ans je ne marchais pas encore. Je pouvais ramper dehors. Une fois, c'est ce que je fis. Je jouais dans le sable, sous un immense*

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<sup>8</sup> In the original edition printed in 1982, this entire prologue is represented in italics. This choice contributes to the interstitial nature of this floating prologue and to the idea of Ken's coming into being with her departure to Europe, as if Ken were speaking from the womb, voice muffled.

*baobab, face à la maison familiale. J'avais trouvé une perle d'ambre. Un enfant qui joue avec le sable ne fait que chercher quelque chose*" (36).<sup>9</sup> Examined in more detail below, Ken's "search" in the sand represents her life-long search for belonging which begins, narratively, with her departure to Europe.

Jumping forward more than twenty years in these few pages, the ear and its discomfort build a bridge between the "Pré-histoire de Ken," the prologue, and Ken's departure to Europe in Chapter One. In the airplane, just as eardrums uncomfortably adjust to the change in altitude, Ken's eardrums adjust to the departure from home. "C'est à ce moment que mes tympans furent crevés par le vrai départ. S'arracher [...] J'avais l'impression d'être arrachée à moi-même" (41-42).<sup>10</sup> As the plane leaves the ground and rises into the air, Ken's eardrums pop at the same time that she is rent from herself. Again, this noisy, rupturing moment recalls a birth. However, it also recalls the moment when Ken pushes the amber bead in her ear—the initial moment of rupture in Ken's life that would dictate a whole series of life-altering, tumultuous, rupturing events.<sup>11</sup>

As scholar Rangira Béatrice Gallimore (2000) points out in this episode, the bleating of the sheep—strangely, but significantly disembodied—is even more indicative of the idea of (re)birth because it is an animal sacrificed during baptisms in many West African customary practices. Nevertheless, death is also present in the symbol of the sacrificed sheep. Furthermore, on her first morning in Brussels, Ken compares herself to a sacrificial virgin as she dons a white

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<sup>9</sup> "At two years old, I still wasn't walking. I could crawl around outside. One time that is what I did. I was playing in the sand, underneath an immense baobab tree, across from the family house. I found an amber bead. A child who plays with sand is bound to find things" (21-22).

<sup>10</sup> "It was then, at that very moment, that my eardrums were punctured by the actual departure. Tearing yourself away. (...) It felt as if I were being torn away from myself" (25).

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that, at the very end of *L'Enfant noir*, Laye departs on his airplane and finds comfort in the map of the Paris metro that sits in his pocket (221). For Laye, the physical object of the map as well as the information on it symbolize an important point of reassurance and reference. While his migrant experience no doubt comes with its dissonances, at the very least he has a helpful tool to navigate the new life he will meet in Paris. Ken, on the other hand, leaves for Europe with no such material or symbolic comfort, only her school knowledge which will be mostly destructive.

dress. “J’étais vêtue de blanc, immaculée comme un sourire du pays socé ou comme une vierge en offrande” (51).<sup>12</sup> In these initial migration episodes, the hopeful rebirth of Ken starting a new life in Europe clashes with chaos, rupture, and risk of death. In her reading of these same episodes, Julie C. Nack Ngue (2009, 62) observes, “Indeed, the reader is aware of an ever-present precipice upon which Ken (the witness) balances.”<sup>13</sup>

This notion of sacrifice and ultimate death recalls the plight of Samba Diallo in *L’Aventure ambiguë* explored in Chapter One. Samba Diallo, as the son of a royal line of the Diallobé, is chosen as the first of his generation to attend the French school. La Grande Royale, a commanding figure in the region as well as Samba Diallo’s cousin, convinces the community that Samba Diallo should be the first to go to school all while inwardly aware of the risks schooling presents to the young boy. However, Samba Diallo was chosen to go to school in order to pave the way for his community, open up opportunities to resist the colonial machine, and ensure the survival of his people. Ken’s sacrifice, on the other hand, is portrayed as decidedly less heroic. The gendered connotations of a sacrificial virgin present Ken more so as an ingénue. Whereas in his sacrifice and death, Samba Diallo’s is represented as a martyr for his people, Ken—a woman whose family shows apathy if not disgust towards her participation in school—is presented as a naïve, ripe for corruption. These two sacrificed students both represent a paradigmatic shift in their respective generations’ experience of education. However, their important gendered differences signal a larger change in the overall representation of the education question in school’s literary representation.

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<sup>12</sup> “I was dressed in white, immaculate as a smile from the Socé region or as a virgin about to be consecrated” (32).

<sup>13</sup> Francophone literary scholar Nicki Hitchcott (1997) goes further to relate the impending death suggested by this latent, yet repeated notion of sacrifice with the death of the baobab discovered at the end of the novel. “The impending death connoted by the figure of the sacrificial virgin predicts the metaphysical death of Ken’s self as she embraces the inauthentic image of the African woman created by the West. Throughout *Le baobab fou*, the eponymous tree serves as a polysemic signifier of Ken Bugul’s authentic self” (28-29).

Initially, school informs how Ken encounters Europe. In fact, she uses her school knowledge as a framework through which to understand and navigate “Le Nord.” (Later on, her propensity for assimilation, also honed in school, will shape her actions as she tries to fit into different communities in Brussels and reform her identity.) Arrived in Brussels, Ken is both nervous and eager about facing her first day in the new European city. At the Catholic boarding house for women where she initially stays, she readies herself to go to sleep, unsettled by the newness around her and anxious for the coming day. The narrating Ken states, “Et pourtant, j’avais hâte de me réveiller pour aller vérifier tout ce que, pendant vingt ans, j’avais appris, assimilé, compris, exécuté” (51).<sup>14</sup> It would seem that Ken is on the cusp of something she has been preparing for nearly her whole life (“pendant vingt ans”).<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the verbs used here reinforce that it is Ken’s schooling that has supposedly prepared her for this moment. She is thrilled to experience in person what she learned in school. The verbs—an interesting combination of more passive (appris, compris) and active (assimilé, exécuté)—point to a veritable labor of learning, a high-effort process of living and breathing school material, actively integrating it into herself (assimilé), and carefully counting accomplishments and fulfillments (exécuté). Ken goes beyond just learning and understanding to show the extent to which she consumed and assumed school, which is later corroborated in the third section of the novel when she recounts her efforts to Westernize herself. On this first night in Brussels, however, she indicates first and foremost that she plans to take on the city using the points of reference schooling gave her.

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<sup>14</sup> “And yet I was in a hurry to wake up, so that I could verify everything I had learned, assimilated, understood, and completed for twenty years” (32).

<sup>15</sup> Ken Bugul uses the formula “pendant vingt ans” [for twenty years] or something similar throughout the novel to refer to her time spent in the French school in Senegal. In this instance, the expression suggests her pride in her years of work, emphasizing the persistence and effort put into her schooling. Over time, the use of the expression becomes more of a lament, as if all the time and effort was wasted.



Nevertheless, Ken's schooling frameworks are only misaligned, surface-level tropes, far from the sociocultural literacies needed to thrive in 1970s Europe as a young Black woman. For example, upon landing in Paris for a layover, Ken delights, "Enfin l'Europe, l'Occident, le pays des Blancs, le pays des Gaulois, le pays des sapins, de la neige, le pays de mes 'ancêtres'" (46).<sup>16</sup> Ken's knowledge of Europe is built on a series of catchphrases, a trite and uncritical school-taught understanding of her destination. In another instance, Ken demonstrates how her memory of school lessons is far clearer than her understanding of her current situation. As soon as she steps off the bus in front of the boarding house, her recall of schooling kicks in. She evokes with vivid detail a vocabulary word and its context from a high school English lesson.

Bien longtemps avant de venir en Occident, je savais qu'en période de froid, les maisons étaient chauffées. C'était à ma première année au lycée, à un cours d'anglais où la leçon était sur les saisons en Europe—*central heating*—, je ne l'avais pas oublié. Cette maison où je devais passer la nuit était un centre pour jeunes filles catholiques, quelque chose comme cela. (48)<sup>17</sup>

This direct recitation of a school lesson encapsulates a few important factors of *Le Baobab fou*'s portrayal of school. First, it represents the notorious inapplicability of the colonial curriculum to the context of West African students who inherited Eurocentric content, focusing on European seasons and infrastructure. Second, this citation reinforces the endurance of school knowledge ("c'était à ma première année au lycée... je ne l'avais pas oublié"), despite its irrelevance. Finally, Ken demonstrates here that she can confidently name the building's climate control apparatus—and in English at that—, but she has little understanding of her living arrangement itself ("quelque chose comme cela"). Juxtaposed against this vague comment, the vivid detail of

<sup>16</sup> "Europe at last, the West, the land of the white people, the land of the Gauls, the land of pine trees, of snow, the land of my 'ancestors'" (28).

<sup>17</sup> "Long before I came to the West, I knew that the houses were heated during the cold season. It was in my first year of high school, in an English class, that the lesson had dealt with the seasons in Europe—*central heating*—I wouldn't forget. This house where I was to spend the night was a center for young Catholic girls, or something like that" (30).

the school memory stands out even more. School knowledge is scattered throughout these first moments in Europe and act to (erroneously) ground Ken's experience.

In these initial pages of the "Histoire de Ken," the reader learns that it is in Europe where Ken hopes to find a sense of belonging among others. Recounting her first morning, Ken declares, "Je suis en Terre promise. Ça y est. À moi la vie! Adieu la solitude!" (53).<sup>18</sup> With these triumphant exclamations, Ken considers her arrival in Europe as a definitive and immediate solution to her feelings of loneliness and unbelonging, and her frame of reference stepping out into the European city will be her twenty years of schooling that formed her for these moments. Nevertheless, the school-learned frameworks she uses to navigate Brussels ultimately let her down, and the incoherencies she faces when her expectations misalign with reality trouble her. Certain dissonances are more benign. For example, during her layover in Paris, she boards a bus that takes peripheral routes around the city. The Paris she sees falls short of expectations. "Ce fut un bien triste trajet. Ce n'était pas ainsi que je voyais Paris, ce n'était pas ainsi que je pensais Paris" (47).<sup>19</sup> Her romanticized visions of Europe are quickly and repeatedly thrown into question. This pattern of dissonances, or what Mudimbe-Boyi (1993, 207) calls "uncomfortable discrepancies," continues, and the incoherencies between school knowledge and reality grow from disappointing to debilitating.

Ken's turn to Europe to end her solitude is largely driven by a search for her "ancestors," whom she references often throughout the first half of the novel. The term recalls the infamous expression "nos ancêtres les Gaulois" (our ancestors the Gauls), which represents a widely promulgated nationalist campaign in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century France. A notion of common heritage

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<sup>18</sup> "I am in the Promised Land. It's happened. Life is mine! Farewell loneliness!" (33).

<sup>19</sup> "It was a very sad trip. This was not at all how I'd expected Paris to look, this was not how I had thought Paris would be" (29).

meant to unify a divided and war-weary country, “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” was most widely promoted in schools in France, at the same time that free, public, secular education was developing in the French Troisième République. The proliferation of the expression is most commonly attributed to Ernest Lavisse, a French historian known for writing and publishing school textbooks called the *Petits Lavisse* that feature the purported Gallic ancestry of French populations. Some *Petits Lavisse* were even translated into other languages (Bourdon 2017). Critics of the French colonial school have also wielded the expression, emphasizing its absurd inapplicability to students in French colonies. However, historians have revealed that “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” was most likely not (explicitly) taught to West African or Indonesian students.<sup>20</sup> According to these historians, it is unlikely that Ken learned about Gallic ancestry in school. Nevertheless, her use of the term and reference to the expression throughout *Le Baobab fou* signal the notion’s importance in the larger narrative of (post)colonial school and colonized collective memory.

The assimilationist tactics of the *mission civilisatrice* in French West Africa were abandoned early, no longer aiming to make Senegalese into Frenchmen (Conklin 1997). Notwithstanding, French schooling—through hidden curriculum in language, geography, and history—still passed on to students a tendency to identify themselves with Europeans. Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” speaks to this colonial desire and strategy to generate “a reformed, recognizable Other,” a population of colonized who were “almost the same but not

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Reynaud Paligot (2020) writes, “L’application du principe de l’adaptation dans les écoles de l’AOF dément la légende qui voudrait qu’on ait enseigné ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’ aux écoliers africains. Les manuels scolaires métropolitains n’ont été utilisés que dans les écoles urbaines des Quatre communes qui appliquaient les programmes métropolitains” (227). See also Conklin (1997), Ha (2003), and Bourdon (2017). Despite early change in policy of the civilizing mission from assimilation to adaptation, “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” rings out as a constant presence in fiction and nonfiction alike. We can recall Henri Lopes’s collection of texts *Ma grand-mère bantoue et mes ancêtres les Gaulois* (2003). There is also Kwame Anthony Appiah’s reference to the expression in *In My Father’s House* (1992, 9): “It is a tale that is worth the frequent retelling it has borne that African children in the French Empire read textbooks that spoke of the Gauls as ‘nos ancêtres.’”

quite” (1984, 126). The colonial school was a major instrument of mimicry, whether it was explicitly lined out in assimilationist curriculum or baked into the pedagogy and epistemology that the French school imparted on students. While the expression “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” itself may not have been present throughout French colonial school curriculum and textbooks, the myth and its effects persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its prevalence in *Le Baobab fou* reinforces the novel’s portrayal of the school as an identity (de)forming force.

The fact that Ken Bugul borrows and references the expression “nos ancêtres les Gaulois,” despite (perhaps) not learning it in school herself, adds to the idea of discrepancy and incoherence in the narrative. The instability, indeed falsity, of the term “ancêtres” in Ken’s case is further emphasized by her use of quotation marks around the word. This conspicuous punctuation could indicate direct discourse, as in this is something Ken was told (like the use of italics for the English lessons she recalls, e.g. “*central heating*” and “*home*”). However, the quotation marks also communicate a hint of irony, as if the narrating Ken intercedes in the experience of newly arrived Ken, foretelling the difficult realization that her ancestors are in reality not European. Furthermore, the fact that Ken is looking for Gallic ancestors in Belgium and not in France speaks to first, the surface-level, catch phrase application of school knowledge and second, Ken’s desperation to find belonging.<sup>21</sup> The scare quotes signal a faulty framework, demarcating this word—deeply associated with French school learning—within the text. The diegetic Ken believes she will find more belonging in Europe than in her own country and even within her own family, indicating the extent to which the colonial school plants and fosters ideas

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<sup>21</sup> Scholar Lee-Ferrand (2017) also notes this discrepancy. “L’association entre les Gaulois et la Belgique, et non entre les Gaulois et la France, illustre parfaitement sa candeur et son raisonnement fautif qui repose sur une compréhension douteuse de l’histoire et de la géographie, directement héritée de l’enseignement colonial qu’elle a reçu” [The association between the Gauls and Belgium, and not between the Gauls and France, perfectly illustrates her naivety and her faulty reasoning which is based on a dubious understanding of history and geography, directly inherited from the colonial education that she received] (179).

of identification in students. Applying hindsight as she inscribes her story, the narrating and authoring Kens use quotation marks to further point out the absurdity of the notion.

Ken's search for ancestors and belonging in Brussels, whether ignorant, ironic, or just desperate, is immediately destabilized on her first day in the city. As Ken walks to the exchange office (O.C.D., Office de la coopération au développement), she is dumfounded that no one she passes on the sidewalk greets her, here in the region of her purported ancestors. After being overlooked multiple times, she internally exclaims, “‘Vous ne m’avez pas vue? Vous ne m’avez pas reconnue? Mais c’est moi’” (55).<sup>22</sup> While the outskirts of Paris were disappointing, the dissonance of not being greeted by her own kin destabilizes her very mission in Belgium to find belonging and identity. Literary scholar Karen Brown (2009, 114) aptly reads Ken's predicament of identification thus:

...Bugul single-handedly and pointedly takes on the challenge posed by effacing Western belief systems (or discourses) not only to demonstrate that individual identities are formed from and through collective consciousnesses, but also to illustrate how collective identities can be constructed externally and then inflicted upon the disempowered, that is, how negative self-images can be inscribed into a collective consciousness and then lead to self-*mis*recognition.

Because of Ken's detached relationship with her family, exemplified by her mother's departure, Ken feels she lacks a collective consciousness upon which to base her identity, what Hogarth (2010, 111) names as a perceived “vacuum in her consciousness.” As we see in Chapter Nine of *Le Baobab fou*, her relationships with kin and community in Senegal do not improve as she grows older, but the school is there to inform or *deform* her developing identity, to impart a self-misrecognition as Brown describes above. School provides a new group through which Ken will seek recognition, belonging, and therefore identity: her “ancêtres les Gaulois.” Nevertheless, on Ken's first trip out of the boarding house, she is unable to identify herself in the crowds around

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<sup>22</sup> “Didn’t you see me? Didn’t you recognize me? This is *me*” (35).

her and the ensuing cognitive dissonance shakes her. Indeed, Ken's self mis-identification and cognitive dissonance established by school has destabilizing effects and future confrontations have rupturing consequences.

### **Fracturing racialization and splitting of self**

On the sidewalks of Brussels, Ken feels invisible to passersby and must confront the dissonance between her school knowledge and reality. Her expectations for recognition and the end of her solitude are troubled. Paradoxically, it is Ken's hypervisibility as a Black woman in the city that re-forms her understanding of herself. This begins with an experience of racialization, or being designated racial character by external people, structures or forces, on this first day in Brussels. After some jarring (lack of) interactions with locals, she does successfully make her way to the O.C.D. and gets by well. Bolstered by the positive experience, Ken decides to go shopping, enticed by the alluring shop window displays. Her purchasing power helps her feel less *dépaysée*. "En achetant, j'étais assez à l'aise. Je ne me sentais ni étrangère ni nouvelle venue, j'étais une consommatrice comme une autre. Je payais, on me rendait ma monnaie indifféremment" (57-58).<sup>23</sup> For lack of recognition from the people of Brussels, Ken recourses to a secondary comfort, that of blending in, homogenizing and anonymizing herself as to not feel other or different than those around her. Through participating in empty materialism, she gains a sense of belonging. "J'avais commencé par m'acheter n'importe quoi. Toutes ces vitrines alléchantes incitaient à acheter du papier, du savon, des bonbons, des foulards, des pulls, des

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<sup>23</sup> "I felt quite at home as I was shopping. I felt like neither a foreigner nor a newcomer; I was just a consumer like anyone else. I'd pay, and I'd get change handed to me indifferently" (36).

robes, des bijoux, des pyjamas même si on ne s'en servait pas" (57).<sup>24</sup> She even begins walking as quickly as the Belgians around her.

Her ability to blend in is short lived. In a wig store, Ken experiences a Fanonian moment of racialization that upends the foundation upon which she has formed her identity. She faces another incoherency with her learned expectations, one that requires her to restart the process of finding belonging. In the store, a shopkeeper brings her a wig to try on. Looking in the mirror, they both immediately perceive an incongruity of the European-style wig with Ken's physical characteristics. When Ken declines the wig, the saleswoman responds, "'Oui, vous avez raison; pour vous, il faut des perruques afro. C'est votre genre. Ces perruques ici, c'est pour les Blanches qui en portent et vous, vous êtes noire; enfin vous n'avez pas une tête à ça. Je suis désolée, je ne peux rien pour vous'" (59),<sup>25</sup> and Ken leaves the store. In a moment when Ken is desperately trying to fit in, the shopkeeper voices her racial difference in blunt, othering terms. The shopkeeper emphasizes the separation, the *nous/vous* split, though standing in front of the mirror, Ken also realizes the fault line in her mimicry.

On fleeing the shop, Ken feels the devastating effects of her racialization. In front of a shop window, another reflective surface, she considers her image: "Je n'en crus pas mes yeux. Je me dis rapidement que ce visage ne m'appartenait pas: j'avais les yeux hors de moi, la peau brillante et noire, le visage terrifiant. J'étouffais à nouveau parce que ce regard-là, c'était mon regard" (59).<sup>26</sup> She notices the whiteness of passersby and then turns back to the reflective window. "Comment ce visage pouvait-il m'appartenir? Je comprenais pourquoi la vendeuse

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<sup>24</sup> "I began by buying myself almost anything at all. All these seductive store windows were egging me on to buy paper, soap, candy, scarves, sweaters, dresses, jewelry, pajamas, even if I didn't wear them" (36).

<sup>25</sup> "'Yes, you're right; you should have an Afro wig. That's your style. These wigs are for white women. You're Black; you don't have the face for this sort of thing. I'm very sorry, but I can't help you.'" (37).

<sup>26</sup> "I couldn't believe my eyes. That face couldn't belong to me, I quickly told myself: my eyes were bulging, my skin was shiny and black, the face terrifying. I almost choked; that look there was my look" (37).

m'avait dit qu'elle ne pouvait rien faire pour moi. Oui, j'étais une Noire, une étrangère. Je me touchais le menton, la joue pour mieux me rendre compte que cette couleur était à moi" (60).<sup>27</sup>

Her suffocating, terrified reaction is not only due to recognizing her own race and racialization, but recognizing race in general. She is different than the Belgians on the street and therefore cannot identify with them because Ken's understanding of belonging is based on sameness. Furthermore, she is not only ascribed as Black but as a stranger and thus once again denied kinship.

This episode of racialization in *Le Baobab fou* echoes Fanon's as he describes in *Peau noire, masques blancs* ([1952] 2015).<sup>28</sup> Fanon's racialization happens when he is riding the train in France and a young white boy flagrantly and unabashedly exclaims his shock, fear, amazement at seeing a Black man to his mother. Fanon likens this moment to the Black experience under the white gaze more largely, characterized by an oppressive, surprising weight. "Dans le monde blanc, l'homme de couleur rencontre des difficultés dans l'élaboration de son schéma corporel. La connaissance du corps est une activité uniquement négatrice. C'est une connaissance en troisième personne" (108).<sup>29</sup> Like Fanon, Ken is forced into recognizing her Blackness through and because of the "regard du Blanc." Not only is this racialization objectifying (as Fanon says, a "crushing objecthood"), but Ken's quest is severely shaken because she was expecting to find likeness and belonging among Europeans. Her experience is also particularly gendered, different than Fanon's, because she is further split into distinct, feminized signs of the body and of beauty: hair, style, skin, features, eyes, chin, cheek, etc.

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<sup>27</sup> "How could this face belong to me? I understood why the saleswoman had said she couldn't help me. Yes, I was a Black, a Black woman, a foreigner. I touched my chin, my cheek, to better help me realize that this was my color" (38).

<sup>28</sup> Nack Ngué (2009) and Kalisa (2009) also explore this Fanonian episode of racialization in their studies of *Le Baobab fou*.

<sup>29</sup> "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness" (110).



In this same vein, Ken's racialization recalls a similar splitting to that which Fanon describes. He writes,

Dans le train, il ne s'agissait plus d'une connaissance de mon corps en troisième personne, mais en triple personne. Dans le train, au lieu d'une, on me laissait deux, trois places. Déjà je ne m'amusais plus. Je ne découvrais point de coordonnées fébriles du monde. J'existais en triple : j'occupais de la place. J'allais à l'autre... et l'autre évanescent, hostile mais non opaque, transparent, absent, disparaissait. La nausée... (110)<sup>30</sup>

Both Ken and Fanon exhibit physical reactions to being fixed in their corporeal schema: suffocation, nausea. And as Fanon lacks reference points ("coordonnées fébriles"), Ken too is thrown off her own geographic and epistemic frameworks. Still, standing before the mirror in the shop and then the reflective window in the street where she cannot believe her own reflection, Ken is fractured, doubled even quadrupled, in the face of her *own* gaze. It is a gaze that has been (falsely) instructed for identification with the West. This episode of racialization and splitting begins a pattern of Ken's splitting throughout the work. Whether of her own volition or forced upon her by others, Ken's splitting becomes a means and a consequence of Ken's reforming and deforming herself and her identity. This initial split can be traced back to Ken's schooling, where she learned to expect identification with Westerners. It is a turning point for Ken who up until then believed herself to belong to Europe.<sup>31</sup> "Oui, j'étais une étrangère et c'était la première fois que je m'en rendais compte" (60).<sup>32</sup> Even while she is staying in a boarding house full of women from around the world, she does not see herself in her immigrant housemates. She does not

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<sup>30</sup> "In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea..." (112). All English translations of this text come from Markmann, Charles Lam, trans. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

<sup>31</sup> The experience in the wig shop "underlines the un-stated exclusiveness of racial identity with a subtle, yet emphatic, 'you-are-not-like-us,' instantly ridding the protagonist of any unwitting delusions about her ancestry and instigating a rather brutal self-awakening" (Brown 2009, 118).

<sup>32</sup> "Yes, I was a foreigner, a stranger, and this was the first time I realized it" (38).

realize that the framework she is working from is faulty until her race is voiced to her by the wig shopkeeper.

Ken's schooling and upbringing in Senegal did not provide the necessary literacies of race in a European context or "in relation to the white man" (Fanon 2015, 108). Ken demonstrates the uncritical understanding and the desire to "be European," but, to return to Bhabha's (1984) formulation, she is "almost the same but not quite" or more accurately "almost the same but not white." Disillusioned, deluded by her schooling, lacking points of reference, Ken must resort to other means to find belonging.

The splitting that Ken experiences so acutely at the wig shop repeats throughout the novel, on both psychological and narrative levels, as Ken attempts to find recognition and belonging in Belgium. The result is that Ken forms and performs different identities, personas, and roles, fragmenting herself while trying to fit the molds that others prescribe her. As Watson (1997) puts it, "...Ken assumes a dizzying repertoire of subject positions at various points in the narrative" (146). Ken uses this defense mechanism to fill the void she feels having no "repères," or points of reference, and in doing so continues to split herself. Indeed, other fracturing moments in Ken's quest for acceptance contribute to deforming her identity and self.

Despite Ken's initial desire to belong by blending in, those she encounters in Belgium define her through the epidermic sign. For instance, Ken's first boyfriend, a white student name Louis, is attracted to her Africanness, reducing Ken to that one aspect of her identity. Furthermore, Jean Wermer, an artist and eccentric whom Ken moves in with, takes nude portraits of Ken that she then posts around her apartment among posters of African scenery and tropical sunsets. The portraits are visual and narrative representations of her complex identity but also her fragmented self. They additionally speak to Ken's growing consciousness of the connection

between corporality and identity. After posing for the photos, she states, “J’avais découvert le corps en dehors de la sensation et de la réflexion. Désormais, je regardais les êtres humains en les enveloppant de leurs corps” (102).<sup>33</sup> Ken’s encounter with Jean Wermer marks a shift in her strategy to gain affirmation from the Europeans around her. Like her portraits hanging on the walls among cliché images of exotic locales, Ken begins to lean into the tropes thrust upon her by the circles she now runs in with Jean Wermer. While her friends and acquaintances urge her to claim her Africanness and Blackness, in reality they are trapping her in a “schéma corporel” for their own social benefit.

Like the nude portraits hanging from her walls, Ken’s new strategy for gaining belonging is not liberating or empowering but confining and fragmenting. For example, on an evening when she receives guests in her home, her proliferation of selves does not bring her comfort or belonging. The more Ken splits herself, the closer she gets to madness. “L’ami américain était là, Souleymane était là, mes photos nues accrochées aux murs muettes comme les sous-verre qui les contenaient, et moi-même, allongée sur ce lit, jetant des regards de démente devant ce spectacle dont j’étais le seul spectateur. L’appréhension de finir mes jours dans un asile m’étreignait le cœur: asile d’aliénés ou asile de solitude. C’était pareil” (113).<sup>34</sup> Not only are the Kens hanging on the walls voice-less, but they are also contained behind glass, literally objects on display. A soirée of camaraderie cannot fill the void she feels from lack of essence or identity, and the photos on the walls are all at once her attempt to fill the void, a manifestation of her fracturing self, and a representation of the brink of madness.

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<sup>33</sup> “I had discovered the body itself, removed from feeling and thought. From now on, I would look at human beings by enclosing them in their bodies” (70).

<sup>34</sup> “The American friend was there, Souleymane was there, my nude photos on the wall, mute as the glass underneath which they were held captive, and I myself, stretched out on the bed, glancing around like a madwoman at this spectacle whose only audience was I. The fear of ending my days in an insane asylum gripped my heart: an asylum for the alienated, an asylum of loneliness. It was the same thing” (78).

At these moments of fracture, Ken oftentimes disassociates, and memories of her past surge forward to replay her mother's abandonment and her schooling experience. The flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, in addition to the non-linear plot line, contribute to a "splintered narrative framework" (Francis 2009, 30), a splintering that is mirrored in Ken's own material identity, performance, and psyche. In sum, Ken, textualized by her autobiography, is fractured on narrative, mental, and physical planes.

Ken's flashbacks consistently point to an original moment of rupture: when Ken puts the amber bead in her ear. Although her mother moves away when Ken is five, the bead incident resurges as the initial instance of abandonment, and the mother's neglect of the two-year-old Ken under the baobab tree foretells the more permanent separation of mother and daughter. Narrative elements of this episode also indicate a splitting of self. For example, as mentioned above, immediately after the unnamed child puts the bead in its ear in the "Pré-histoire," the narrative switches to first person voice, indicating a demarcation from the original myth and collective perspective of the "Pré-histoire."<sup>35</sup> In order to fully understand the meaning of this initial split in Ken's life as well as its link to Ken's participation in school, let us turn to this first section of *Le Baobab fou*.

### **The "Pré-histoire de Ken": An original myth for an entire generation of schooled children**

Ken Bugul begins her text with a "Pré-histoire" that contains elements of myth and cosmogonic tales. Besides the figure of the baobab tree and baby playing in the sand at the very

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<sup>35</sup> In their studies of Ken Bugul's novel, both Julia Watson (1997) and Michelle Mielly (2002) also explore the necessary splitting of self in the act of writing autobiography. Watson writes, "Ken's narrative reframes the terms of autobiography by imaging the birth of individual consciousness as a rupturing moment within collective life, a kind of cultural death even as it gives birth to individuated subjectivity" (149). Mielly argues that "By donning the role of subjective authority, the writer of an autobiographical narrative 'effects' or 'performs' him or herself by imposing a certain self-observational distance between author and character... The enunciative splitting of the subject between written self and the self within the space and time of the utterance" is yet another split in *Le Baobab fou* (46).

end of this section, there is little consistency—narrative or stylistic—between the “Pré-histoire de Ken” and the “Histoire de Ken.” For example, the former is narrated in third-person omniscient voice and the latter in first person. Nevertheless, this initial section indirectly foretells many of the events and conflicts of the “Histoire.” The “Pré-histoire” does not feature school, yet it provides important insights into Ken’s identity formation which is heavily influenced by the memory and mentally colonizing power of school systems and instruction. I will first summarize the “Pré-histoire” as it narrates minor events that have significant consequences, underlining the importance of causality in this work. Then, I identify narrative elements reminiscent of foundational tale and myth in the “Pré-histoire”; I explore the ambiguous, yet formative role of the mother that persists throughout the novel; and finally I demonstrate how by putting the bead in its ear, the young toddler enacts the novel’s inaugural instance of mimicry and self-splitting. Ultimately, I propose a reading of the “Pré-histoire” that interprets the amber bead in the ear as a symbol of foreign epistemology and as representative of an entire generation of African children going to school.

The “Pré-histoire” begins with a young boy, Fodé Ndao, and his sister, Codou, plotting to prepare “ndiambâme,” a milky concoction made from the fruit of the baobab tree sweetened with sugar. While their mother, tired of their childhood antics, tries to get them to do chores, Fodé Ndao manages to steal some sugar and enjoys his treat. Walking back to his compound he spits out a seed that will grow to become the eponymous baobab tree. One day while the children’s mother is fetching water, a stranger rides up on a horse. He startles the woman so she drops her water jug, which she interprets as a serious omen. “Quelque chose allait se passer. Elle ne savait pas quoi, mais depuis presque trente ans qu’elle allait chercher l’eau au puits, c’était la première

fois que cela lui arrivait” (19).<sup>36</sup> The spilled jug happens to water the baobab seed and, symbolically, germinates “une génération nouvelle qui allait bouleverser les temps” (20).<sup>37</sup>

Years pass. Fodé Ndao and Codou are now fully immersed in gendered roles and responsibilities. The baobab grows, and the village is suspended in the harmony of routine. One day, however, as Codou is preparing a meal, her oil catches fire, setting ablaze one structure, then a whole compound, then the whole village. After the devastation, most of the community moves away, but “[l]e baobab avait été épargné encore une fois” (23),<sup>38</sup> miraculously untouched by the fire.

The stranger on the horse returns with his wife and children to establish his home in the area. He is surprised at the emptiness but hopeful for the future. ““Voilà, devant ce baobab, symbole d’une vie antérieure, nous allons bâtir une maison qui sera “la” demeure...”” (25).<sup>39</sup> While sitting in the shade of said baobab tree, the young son breaks his mother’s necklace and amber beads go scattering. Soon after, the only remaining local, whom the narration refers to as an “ageless creature” and whom the man on the horse calls a madman, approaches the newly arrived family. The being also invokes the singularity of the baobab tree, saying it is ““lié à un événement qui va bouleverser une génération entière”” (26).<sup>40</sup> The individual departs, and we do not meet him again in the novel. Over time the family grows, more people move to the area, trading and infrastructure expand, and the man on the horse marries a second wife. One day when the young wife is daydreaming, her toddler finds a bead under the baobab and puts it in its ear. A piercing cry breaks the days’ harmony and the “Pré-histoire de Ken” concludes.

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<sup>36</sup> “Something was going to happen. She did not know what, but in the almost thirty years that she had been fetching water from the well, this was the first time that such a thing had happened to her” (9).

<sup>37</sup> “a new generation that was to convulse the times” (10).

<sup>38</sup> “Once again, the baobab tree had been spared” (11).

<sup>39</sup> ““Here, in front of this baobab tree, the symbol of a previous life, here we’ll build a house that will be *the* dwelling...”” (13).

<sup>40</sup> ““this baobab is linked to an event that will shake an entire generation”” (14).

Several aspects of this “Pré-histoire” signal aspects of myth. First, notions of time do not proceed in a realistic rhythm. The narration slows down and speeds up, sometimes focusing on small, daily details like Fodé Ndao’s baobab fruit only to skip years ahead in the next paragraph (18). This irregularity of time in the narrative echoes the fluidity of time experienced in the village as well. For example, life passes in a cyclical, unending manner. “Dans ce village, les gens étaient ensemble. Les vieux vieillissaient et les naissances étaient accueillies comme l’immortalité. Le nouveau-né était toujours une réincarnation” (22).<sup>41</sup> The routine is so harmoniously repetitive that time dissolves into the cycle. Additionally, the local being who stays in the area after the fire and greets the new family is “ageless” and claims that he would never die. Even the baobab tree seems to grow at a different pace than the standard passage of time. “Le baobab poussait avec une rapidité déroutante” (27).<sup>42</sup> These inconstant notions of time echo how the real and the unreal overlap and intersection in African *contes* (Boro, Takao, and Tchao 2023). This signals another rapprochement between the “Pré-histoire” and myth or traditional lore.

A register of the fantastical in the “Pré-histoire,” especially that which engages the natural world, also contributes to its tale-like feel. Descriptions of nature and climate highlight the almost surreal brightness of the setting: the heat “embaumait cet univers fantastique qu’était la savane, le pays du soleil et de la lumière” (24).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, nature is seamlessly personified by both the narrative and the diegetic characters. “Le baobab aussi, on se demandait à quoi il pensait. Car, parfois, il se mettait à rire, parfois à pleurer et, cela arrivait aussi, il s’endormait

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<sup>41</sup> “In this village people were together as one. The old grew older and births were welcomed as if they brought immortality. The newborn was always a reincarnation” (11).

<sup>42</sup> “The baobab tree was growing with baffling speed” (15).

<sup>43</sup> “embalmed the fantastic universe that was the savanna, the land of the sun and of light” (12).

pour rêver” (31).<sup>44</sup> As Boro et al. (2023, 169) state, vegetal characters are commonplace in West African tales. “Le rêve” is also a consistent motif in the “Pré-histoire,” which adds to the fantastic, dream-like quality of the text but also foreshadows the mother’s neglect of the child when she is lost in daydreaming. Finally, fate and causality are conspicuous elements of the “Pré-histoire”: the spit seed, the broken water jug, and the fire that misses the young baobab all occurring by mere happenstance. This initial section of *Le Baobab fou* literally and figuratively plants the seeds for the story that is to come, emphasizing the conditionality of the events that would end up forming Ken’s life and therefore highlighting the role of fate as a fantastic force in life.

The presence of the “créature sans âge” also invokes the prophetic nature of the “Pré-Histoire.” This being, seemingly taking the form of an old man, possesses supernatural powers. He claims to have foreseen the arrival of the family and to know everything about the area and its history. “Je suis le plus ancien, le plus savant de tous. Je connais tout. Je détiens tous les secrets de ce village; j’avais une famille ici, il y a plus de cinq siècles” (25).<sup>45</sup> This immortal being, an ancestor, demonstrates how the “Pré-Histoire” is open to other planes of existence, aligning with traditions of African cosmology. It recalls Richard Priebe’s formulation in *Myth, Realism, and the West African Writer* (1988) that a (literary) mythical consciousness shapes characters to be “liminal figures who appear to be partly in this world and partly in another” (5). This otherworldly being also draws attention to the baobab tree and indicates its cosmologic and symbolic importance in the text. “Une chose me préoccupe, c’est ce jeune baobab: il est sorti un matin de terre comme planté par des dieux d’autres mondes. Je fais des recherches et un jour j’en

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<sup>44</sup> “For sometimes it would begin to laugh, sometimes to weep, and it would happen as well that it would fall asleep so that it could dream” (17).

<sup>45</sup> “I am the oldest, the wisest of all. I know everything. I possess all the secrets of this village; I had a family here more than five centuries ago” (13).



percerai le secret, ce baobab est lié à un événement qui va bouleverser une génération entière”

(26).<sup>46</sup> By alluding to an entire generation in his ominous prediction, this being that travels between planes of existence implicates more than just Ken in the traumatic event that happens at its roots. In fact, his prophetic language is linked precisely to the arrival of the school because the figure uses the same language of disruption (“bouleverser”) that Ken later uses to describe the school: “L’école française qui allait bouleverser mille mondes et mille croyances...” (140).<sup>47</sup> In sum, because of fantastical narrative elements and prophetic nature established in the “Pré-histoire,” this section reads like a cosmogonic myth or tale of origin. As Gallimore (2000) asserts, an original myth “...rend compte d’un événement qui a eu lieu aux temps immémoriaux et qui raconte comment une réalité est venue à l’existence” (243). Accordingly, the “Pré-histoire” uses symbolism and myth as well as an omniscient perspective to convey that the fateful event occurs not only for Ken but for an “génération entière” of schooled children.

The “Pré-histoire” establishes a pattern of transgression and disruption that drives the tale forward: the plucked baobab fruit, the stolen sugar, the shattered water jug, the fire, the broken necklace, the mother’s neglect, the bead in the ear.<sup>48</sup> These peripeteias trigger and comprise a whole series of events that mold Ken’s experience. The entire “Pré-histoire” leads to the bead in the ear which Ken repeatedly insinuates is the ultimate moment of causality in her life. Even as an adult, she considers, “Là-bas, si j’y étais restée, comme avant la perle d’ambre dans l’oreille,

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<sup>46</sup> “One thing only is on my mind, and that is this young baobab tree: one morning it came out of the soil as if it had been planted by gods of another world. I am doing research and one day I will pierce its secret; this baobab is linked to an event that will shake an entire generation” (14).

<sup>47</sup> “...the French school that was to upset a thousand world and a thousand beliefs...” (98).

<sup>48</sup> The tale of the forbidden fruit exists outside of West African cosmogony and customary religion, but Adam plucking the apple in the paradisiacal Garden it is a foundational tale in Islam, a religion with which Ken Bugul has identified. I note its affinity with Fodé Ndao’s treasured baobab fruit, especially as both instances represent original transgressions within their larger narratives.

je n'aurais jamais eu à subir un avortement" (77).<sup>49</sup> Here, Ken insinuates that the amber bead set off her life trajectory and longs for a moment *before* introducing the foreign element.

The figure of the mother earns an important introduction in the "Pré-histoire," and reading the mother in this first section nuances the more negative portrayal of Ken's mother in the "Histoire." While Ken continually questions her mother and her abandonment, the "Pré-histoire" takes a more forgiving, even respectful stance toward matriarchs. Fodé Ndao and Codou's mother is indeed portrayed as cold and unforgiving, complaining about her children and calling them evil. Nevertheless, the narration gives the mother due credit. "Elle était fatiguée, la mère [...] Elle était la dernière à se coucher tous les soirs après s'être assurée que tout était rentré, rangé" (14).<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the wife of the man on the horse is reverently described as "l'éternelle mère, source jamais tarie, l'indispensable femme sans qui la vie ne serait pas" (23).<sup>51</sup> In the "Pré-histoire," mothers can also be inscrutable. As Fodé Ndao and Codou's mother goes about her work, she becomes lost in her thoughts. "...elle ne sentait rien. C'était chaque fois ainsi; son regard était posé devant elle, mais elle ne regardait rien, elle ne voyait rien. Ce calme, cette sérénité règne dans tous les villages, sur tous les visages. Était-ce résignation ou paix?" (18-19)<sup>52</sup> In the "Pré-histoire," mothers are indispensable and inexhaustible but also lonely and underappreciated. The women resort to interior monologues and to speaking themselves which leads to day dreaming and the fateful neglect of the young child under the tree. The novel represents mothers sometimes with sympathy and respect and other times with apathy or

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<sup>49</sup> "Had I stayed down there, remained as I was before the amber bead in my ear, I never would have had to submit to an abortion" (51).

<sup>50</sup> "She was tired, the mother [...] Every night, she was the last one to go to bed, after she had assured herself that everything was in its place and neat" (6).

<sup>51</sup> "...eternal mother, the spring that never dries, the indispensable woman without whom life would not be" (12).

<sup>52</sup> "...she wouldn't notice anything. It was always like this; though she was looking straight ahead, she wouldn't be looking at anything, she wouldn't see anything. That calm, that serenity, reigns in every village, on every face. Is it resignation or inner peace?" (8-9).

contempt, which echoes Ken's oscillation between disdain and longing for her mother. In sum, the "Pré-histoire" portrays the complexity of motherhood, even while Ken herself cannot reconcile with her mother's abandonment.

Ken consistently faults her mother's departure as the reason for her disconnect from her original culture. This feeling of disconnect, of lacking "repères" then speaks to the mother's role in passing knowledge and identity to her child. In other words, the "Pré-histoire" demonstrates the proximity necessary for this type of education. The pedagogy of proximity recalls *L'Enfant noir* and Laye's traditional education explored in Chapter One. Laye's story begins similarly to Ken's: as a young child playing near the family compound. As Laye remembers it, "J'étais enfant et je jouais près de la case de mon père. [...] Ma mère était dans l'atelier, près de mon père, et leurs voix me parvenaient, rassurantes, tranquilles, mêlées à celles des clients de la forge et au bruit de l'enclume" (9).<sup>53</sup> While the physical and aural proximity of Laye's family saves him from danger as he toys with a poisonous snake, Ken is not saved from putting the bead in her ear. Laye benefits from his family being close by, not only because he is saved from the snake but also because he learns some of his father's craft and participates in a number of customary initiations that ground him more in his original culture. Throughout her life, Ken lacks this educative proximity to her family and especially her mother, which is succinctly summarized with the bead in the ear episode. At her birth, at her baptism, while playing under the baobab tree, and after her mother's departure, Ken lacks the presence from her family which causes her life-long strife. When speaking of her birth, she says "Peut-être, si tout le monde avait été

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<sup>53</sup> "I was a little boy playing around my father's hut. How old would I have been at the time? I can not remember exactly. I must still have been very young: five, maybe six years old. My mother was in the workshop with my father, and I could just hear their familiar voices above the noise of the anvil and the conversation of the customers" (17). All English translations of this novel come from Kirkup, James & Ernest Jones, trans. 1954. *The Dark Child*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous.

présent, les choses auraient pris une autre tournure, les événements se seraient déroulés d'une autre façon" (35).<sup>54</sup> Because of the disconnect with her family and mother, Ken goes searching for the relational elsewhere. During her experiences in Belgium, Ken seeks the relational and she builds her sense of self and identity through others. Much earlier than her departure to Belgium, however, Ken seeks identification even as a toddler. As Sadoun (2021) puts it,

...la thématique de la quête semble s'associer à l'enfance et est représentée, métaphoriquement, par ce jeu de l'enfant qui fouille les entrailles de sa terre nourricière à la recherche de quelque chose d'inconnu. Nous avons ainsi dès cet instant une mise en place de la poursuite d'un objectif qui prend ses racines dans ce chemin de sable que parcourra sans cesse la protagoniste à la recherche de la mère et de soi... (109)<sup>55</sup>

In the mother's absence, the baby looks for belonging elsewhere. In fact, in the second iteration of the episode, Ken describes how her two-year-old self puts the bead to her ear in imitation of the amber earrings she had seen women in her community wearing. This initial instinct for imitation persists throughout Ken's life as she constantly attempts to find belonging through mimicry, first with the bead, then with Western dress, then as an "authentic," exotic African woman in Belgium. She seeks to adopt an identity through outward, visual signs as a link to identification with others.

As seen earlier, mimicry through external signs of belonging causes Ken's splitting. In fact, the bead in the ear is the first moment of splitting in the work, as the narration changes from third person to first person. Yet the cry mentioned in both iterations of this episode also indicates a sonic split. Mielly (2002) states, "Ken's cry infringes on the collective wholeness and begins her cycle of estrangement and self-affirmation: the initiation of her distinct, discordant

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<sup>54</sup> "Perhaps if everyone had been there, things would have taken another turn, events would have developed in another fashion" (21).

<sup>55</sup> "The theme of the quest seems to be associated with childhood and is represented, metaphorically, through this play of the child searching for something unknown in the womb of her maternal earth. Thus from this moment is established the pursuit of an objective which takes root in this sandy path which the protagonist will constantly travel in search of the mother and herself."

subjectivity-in-breach” (54). Expanding that notion even further, Ken’s cry is significantly *disembodied*. In both iterations of the episode, the sound is described as “un cri,” “le cri,” or “ce cri,” and it is never directly attributed to Ken or the young toddler. Paradoxically, the cry rings out as the child pushes the bead deeper into her ear. Therefore, it could be the mother or even the baobab tree screaming as they notice the baby harming itself. Whatever the origin of the scream, it is removed from its source within the narration, an acousmatic sound that reinforces a splitting of self.

Ken repeatedly links the bead incident with her mother’s departure even though the two events take place three years apart. More than a concrete causation, I interpret the bead as a symbolic moment of rupture, of individuation, or even the implanting of a foreign episteme. The lack of proximity (i.e., the mother daydreaming, the family’s disinterest in Ken’s birth, her status as the last child) allows for foreign entities (i.e., the bead, the school) to introduce harm.<sup>56</sup> Much like a seed, this initial traumatic experience of distance and neglect plants within Ken a growing, stalwart idea and sets her on a path moving further away from her mother and toward colonial school. Moreover, the myth-like qualities of the “Pré-histoire” imply that this original tale is applicable to or symbolic of a whole host of experiences, recalling Priebe’s (1988) assertion that “a mythic consciousness feels the rhythm of recurrence” (13). Ultimately, because of this symbolic value embedded in the cosmogonic and collective tale of the “Pré-histoire,” we can interpret the child, the bead, and the distance from the grounding and educative source of the mother as symbolizing an entire generation of schooled children.

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<sup>56</sup> As mentioned earlier, the prologue to the first chapter in the “Histoire” gives readers more insight into how the bead event forms Ken’s experience. Interestingly there are slight inconsistencies between the episode in the “Pré-histoire” and the one in the “Histoire de Ken.” For example, the mother in the “Pré-histoire” is young, and it is insinuated that this is her first child. Later we learn that Ken is the last child born to older parents. The inconsistency or discrepancy only supports the idea of a general myth of origin that is stitched to the “Histoire” by the prologue in italics before recounting Ken’s voyage to Europe. This is yet another reason to consider the bead more symbolically.

## Resurging memories of layered traumas

The bead and the mother's departure precede Ken's participation in colonial school, yet in moments of remembrance, she links these episodes together as a constellation of connected events. "La vraie solitude c'était le départ de la mère, l'école française, la mort du père et toujours la solitude" (118).<sup>57</sup> In this way, her traumas resurge as a set of layered or parallel experiences, what Nack Ngue (2009, 59) calls "a sort of palimpsest of traumas." Indeed, *Le Baobab fou* portrays school as a traumatic experience. This section explores how resurging memories of school are layered within others, blending the traumas of the bead, the mother's departure, and schooling. Importantly, Ken's identity and positioning in her family contribute to the traumatic experiences she faces in childhood. Reprisals of parallel memories in similar moments of distress link the traumas together, further indicating the symbolic value of the bead and the representation of school in this work.

Although we can interpret putting the bead in the ear as a more generalizable representation of separation and epistemological imposition, certain elements of Ken's individual identity do exacerbate the process for her. As seen in other instances, boys benefit from a great proximity to their mothers, for example Laye (his mother's first son) in *L'Enfant noir* and the boy child in the "Pré-histoire de Ken" who clings to his mother and breaks her necklace. Ken's position as female, as last child, and as first schooled girl in her family render her more vulnerable to marginalization and to colonial school's draw.<sup>58</sup> Identity, specifically those

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<sup>57</sup> "True loneliness was the mother's departure, the French school, the father's death, and then again loneliness" (82).

<sup>58</sup> Coly (2010) draws connections between Ken's identity-based disadvantages, the bead, and school. "...the marginal positioning of the daughter of the house becomes a vulnerable subject positioning that mitigates resistance to colonial interpellation. The medical condition of disequilibrium, the result of the perforation of the eardrum by a foreign element, prefigures the destabilizing effect the colonial encounter has on the narrator: she cannot develop a sense of place and home in the wake of her exposure to the colonial curriculum" (10). The bead in the ear may predict or "prefigure" Ken's exposure to the colonial school, but read within its symbolic, cosmogonic prelude, these traumas begin to align to take on a more widely applicable nature.

disadvantaged characteristics, also play into Salie's draw to school in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, wherein Diome represents the community's dubiety toward attending school and a lack of support. This change in community attitudes towards schooling is one important shift we see between the classic and contemporary works. Unlike Salie whose grandmother becomes her biggest supporter in her instruction, Ken's grandmother flagrantly detests her granddaughter's involvement in school and therefore the child herself. As such, besides the separation from her mother, school also distances Ken from her grandmother, "la grand-mère qui m'en voulait parce que j'avais été inscrite à l'école française. Elle me haïssait et elle me regardait comme une souillure, je la dégoûtais" (70).<sup>59</sup> The familial rejection, even repugnance toward children attending school is a significant shift in these representations. For Laye, Medza, and even Samba Diallo, attending school is a source of pride for their families and communities, even if emotions of loss, fear, and separation are also present. Significantly, Ken's grandmother's distaste for the granddaughter's enrollment stems from the fact that Ken is the first girl in her family to attend. Therefore, the shift in support from family and community across these portrayals is linked to gender. Boy students receive more support and encouragement while girls attending school are met with disdain, or at the very least indifference. Ken laments, "J'avais les meilleures notes dans presque toutes les disciplines, mais personne ne s'y intéressait et ces succès scolaires ne m'arrangeaient pas dans la solitude qui s'empare de l'être quand l'enfance lui est ravie" (158).<sup>60</sup> Differently than Laye, Medza, and Samba Diallo, Ken's enrollment is no longer a novelty since her older brothers attended school. Thus, she does not receive the same ceremony that Laye, Medza, and Samba Diallo do.

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<sup>59</sup> "...who was angry with me because I was registered at the French school. Afterward she hated me, regarded me as a blemish; I disgusted her" (46).

<sup>60</sup> "I had the best grades in almost every subject, but nobody cared and these academic accomplishments didn't please me in the loneliness that overtakes a human being when its childhood has been stolen" (112).

Ken consciously acknowledges why school was a traumatic experience for her at certain moments during the “Histoire de Ken.” At one point, she references the symbolic violence—to use a notion made widely known by Bourdieu—of the school textbooks and inferiority complex they taught students. She remembers that in all her textbooks, “...le Noir était ridiculisé, avili, écrasé : *Toto a bu du dolo, Toto est malade, Toto a la diarrhée, Toto pleure* ou bien les Noirs étaient mis les uns contre les autres: *Toto tape Pathé, Pathé tape Toto*. On les représentait à l’encre de Chine la plus opaque et ils étaient laids et sans lumières. À eux les bêtises, les sottises, les maladresses...” (129).<sup>61</sup> Such moments of lucidity—when Ken calls out the coloniality of instruction, its materials, and its hidden (or explicit) curriculum—differentiate *Le Baobab fou* from earlier novels that do not pinpoint these subtle yet powerful scholastic influences. As Chapter Three will explore, Scholastique Mukasonga’s *Notre-Dame du Nil* also demonstrates a critical consciousness of the coloniality of instruction objects and content, albeit through more biting irony. Finally, Ken pairs this critique of schoolbooks with her own questions of identity, again indicating the role that schooling plays in identity formation.

Nevertheless, many memories of school narrated before the ninth chapter are less lucid and intentional. In the “Histoire de Ken,” when repressed memories surge forth in triggering moments, school crops up alongside the mother’s departure. Because of how these experiences blend together within the narrative, Ken’s crises of identity and unbelonging cannot be traced to a single event.<sup>62</sup> In once such instance, Ken’s memories surface at the sound of a champagne

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<sup>61</sup> “...the Black person was ridiculed, vilified, crushed: ‘Toto drank “dolo,” Toto is sick, Toto has diarrhea, Toto is crying.’ Or the Blacks were set up against each other: ‘Toto is hitting Pathé, Pathé hits Toto.’ They’d be represented in the darkest of India inks, ugly and lightless. All stupidity, all foolishness, all awkwardness was theirs...” (90).

<sup>62</sup> Hogarth’s (2010) argument supports the notion of the grander relevance of Ken’s schooling experience in *Le Baobab fou*. “Even the root cause of Ken’s rootlessness is presented as something ambiguous, something plural. The very basis of her trauma is an unsettling mixture of elements. The significance of the mother’s physical departure is undoubtedly important for the narrator-protagonist. Yet I mention the text’s hint that she may have already established an emotional distance from Ken in order to suggest the role of the figure of the mother in this text as a symbol for the uncorrupted source of an authentic Africa...” (109-110).



bottle uncorking. “La dextérité avec laquelle le bouchon avait sauté et le bruit qu’il fit me ramenèrent brusquement au départ de la mère, à l’école française, à ces années de rêve de l’Occident, à tout ce désordre dans la recherche de l’indéfinissable promis depuis vingt ans” (112-113).<sup>63</sup> Ken’s uncontrolled reaction to the sudden noise matches that of a post-traumatic stress response, and the thoughts triggered by the sound indicate the layered nature of those traumas, including her schooling and the supposed superiority of the West that she learned there.

Similar moments of resurging memories (the entire ninth chapter being the longest) occur throughout the “Histoire de Ken.” These traumatic resurgences are also a type of splitting, often uncontrolled despite Ken’s efforts to carefully mold her behavior and appearance to fit in and gain acceptance.<sup>64</sup> Another moment of resurging memory happens at the doctor’s office as Ken seeks a consultation to terminate her pregnancy. The situation is upsetting, the white doctor commenting on her body, asking her the race of the father (who is Louis), then disparaging the mixing of races. Throughout the episode, memories of Ken’s mother cut into the narration. Finally, as the racist doctor delivers his pseudoscientific lecture, Ken totally disassociates and gives into the memories.

Je ne l’écoutais plus.

*Tout revint. Le baobab. Le soleil. La natte du Soudan. Le cri perçant. La perle d’ambre. Le bêlement désespéré du mouton égaré. Les réacteurs. La petite place. Descartes. i, u, o, a, e, é, è, t-o, to. Le coq gaulois. L’athlétisme. Le capitalisme. La guerre de Troie aura lieu. Charlemagne. Les pas vers les bâtiments, le seul, l’unique dans la brousse aux senteurs de l’infini et aux buissons de Nguer. L’école française. La chute des nuages. Les étoiles qui s’arrachaient du ciel saignant. (72)*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “The dexterity with which she popped the cork and the noise it made suddenly brought me back to the mother’s departure, to the French school, to those years of dreaming about the West, to all that disorder within the search for the indefinable promise of twenty years” (78).

<sup>64</sup> Francis’s (2009) interpretation of these sorts of memories evokes Ken’s fracturing of self as well as the collective nature of traumas. These resurgent memories create a sort of “interplay and polyphony of competing voices and emerging selves, the plurality and deep resonance of narrative voice(s) enabling for the breadth and complexity of de-colonization’s problems to be expressed, as well as that of female postcolonial identity hybridization” (31).

<sup>65</sup> “I was no longer listening. *Everything came back. The baobab. The sun. The Sudanese mat. The piercing scream. The amber bead. The desperate bleating of the lost sheep. The jet engines. The small square. Descartes. i, u, o, a, e, é, è, t-o, to. The French rooster. Sports. Capitalism. Tiger at the Gates. Charlemagne. Steps towards the buildings,*

This chain of events and memories tied together consistently includes and even concludes with school. The verb “revenir” leading the punctuated list of mental images signals an involuntary deluge of memories. The reader recognizes objects from the bead incident, followed by overwhelming sounds, and then school-related lessons and concepts as well as the psychical building itself. The list ends on a different cosmic plane with a violent fall and separation. The concepts learned in school occur in random flashes and order with little or no logical association, which recall Ken’s retention of impractical knowledge in her first days in Europe and nod to the irrelevance of the colonial education to colonized children. Memories of the mother are conspicuously absent, yet the sensation of separation recalls that event as well. The italic print indicates an almost trance-like state brought on by the severe distress of the present situation, a signal of Ken’s dissociation from the present moment yet flooded by equally unsettling memories.

The reason for Ken’s mother’s departure is never explicitly stated, but the text does insinuate that school had a part to play in the separation. While Ken is experiencing a bad trip after taking drugs in Brussels, her weakened state brings forth another strong memory of her mother and school. “Je reprochais à la mère de ne pas m’avoir emmenée avec elle ou de n’être pas restée avec moi comme elle avait fait avec le père et les autres depuis plusieurs dizaines d’années. Je ne savais toujours pas pourquoi la mère avait dû partir. ‘Mais tu allais à l’école, c’est pour cela que je ne t’ai pas emmenée avec moi’” (139).<sup>66</sup> In this formulation, the school is no longer a recourse because of the separation from her mother but the reason for it.

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*the only one, the single one in the brush with its odors of infinity and its shrubs of Nguer. The French school. The fall of the clouds. The stars that rip away from the bleeding sky” (47).*

<sup>66</sup> ““But you were going to school, that’s why I didn’t take you with me”” (97).

After she reveals that her schooling is the reason for the separation, the memory of Ken's first experiences at school surges forth, and the episode conspicuously mirrors the episode with the bead. In the memory, Ken recounts her commute to the French school newly established in Ndoucoumane. The school is at once separate from town, "détachée, de l'autre côté de la voie ferrée" (139),<sup>67</sup> but also blending into its surroundings, "en plein brousse: un bâtiment au milieu des *ratt* et des *nguer*" (139).<sup>68</sup> Ken's path to school begins at the base of the titular baobab tree, and the rest of the trees lining the path to school "étaient les témoins de l'entrée de l'école française. Témoins silencieux qui eurent à raconter plus tard" (139).<sup>69</sup> Like we saw in the "Pré-histoire," the novel uses personification and prophetic language in connection with the baobabs themselves. In this episode, Ken attributes the trees with both silence and voice, in addition to nearly sentient observational skills. These trees consistently convey the major upheaval brought about by the introduction of school.

At first young Ken takes a flippant stance toward school. "Au début j'avais pris les choses comme un jeu pouvant faire partie des mille jeux que m'offrait la brousse qui couvrait mon village" (140).<sup>70</sup> But the ludic experience ends "...avec le son de la première lettre française que l'instituteur prononça et écrivit sur le tableau noir : 'i'" (140).<sup>71</sup> Ken relays this memory as the moment when school changed her forever, and the similarities between this episode and the bead incident are striking. In talking about the letter "i," Ken remembers, "Ce son bref et aussi

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<sup>67</sup> "...by itself, on the other side of the railroad tracks" (97).

<sup>68</sup> "...in the heart of the bush: a building in the middle of the *ratt* and *nguer* shrubbery" (97). A footnote in the French imprint explains that these are medicinal plants. There are other instances of explanatory footnotes, mostly to explain terms that are not French. Providing these explanations is a conscious choice on the part of the author and/or editors and suggest a non-Senegalese or Western readership. In this way, indigenous knowledge and epistemology does come through in the text, but through a filter made for external readers.

<sup>69</sup> "...were witnesses to the introduction of the French school, silent witnesses who would have much to tell later" (97).

<sup>70</sup> "At the beginning I took it as another one of the thousands of games with which the bush, which protected my village, provided me" (98).

<sup>71</sup> "...with the sound of the first French letter the teacher pronounced and wrote on the blackboard: *i*" (98).

soudain, quand je le prononçai, je le hurlai presque les joues fendues. Je sentis le sang couler dans tout mon corps et remonter à ma tête. Le son du ‘i’ avait effrayé les oiseaux qui chantaient toute la journée dans les feuillages. Les termites choisirent de faire leurs termitières ailleurs” (140).<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint young Ken’s emotional state during this turbulent episode as her corporeal response could be attributed to different feelings: excitement, terror, pain, surprise. However, the intensity of the situation is evident and suggests important connections to the ear episode. First, the experience starts out as a game. As the baby was playing in the sand to occupy herself, Ken approaches school as mere entertainment at first. Then, an introduction through the ear—the physical bead or the sound of the vowel—draws these scenes together. Next, as Ken pronounces the vowel in turn, she establishes an assonance between “i” and the discordant, disembodied “cri” that rings throughout the village as the child pushes the bead into its ear. The sound of the vowel affects even the creatures in the surrounding area. In the second telling of the bead episode, Ken relates that “L’âne avait dressé les oreilles, le coq s’était arqué...” (37).<sup>73</sup> In this school episode, when Ken and her classmates pronounce the letter, they scare off the birds and termites. The school lesson of “i” also insinuates a splitting of self, with her “joues fendues.”<sup>74</sup> Finally, the conclusion of this memory evokes the collective nature of the schooling experience and its expansive impact. “La classe entière avait répété après l’instituteur cette première lettre de l’école française dans ce village du Ndoucoumane. L’école française qui allait bouleverser mille mondes et mille croyances qui se cachaient derrière les baobabs médusés en

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<sup>72</sup> “That brief and also very abrupt sound cracked my cheeks when I pronounced it, almost screaming. I felt the blood circulate through my body and go to my head. The sound of the *i* scared the birds who used to sign all day long among the leaves. The termites chose to build their hills elsewhere” (98).

<sup>73</sup> “The donkey pointed its ears, the rooster asserted himself...” (22).

<sup>74</sup> As Francis (2009) states, “The discordant sounding letter echoes the initial splitting of the self caused by diminishing family ties, signals the first of a chain of psychic mutations leading the protagonist ultimately to her downfall” (34).

prenant des formes humaines” (140).<sup>75</sup> As usual, the baobabs are there surveying, present and sentient yet silent, still, and helpless. I argue that we can consider the school episode as yet another recasting of the bead in the ear episode, a traumatic event in its own right yet borne of similar circumstances relating to the distance of the mother, the planting of a foreign object/episteme, and an irreversible alteration in young Ken’s mind.

This episode, among others, creates a sort of *mise en abîme* of splitting. Ken is fracturing in her drug-induced stupor—asking her friend Laure to literally “m’arracher la peau; je ne voulais plus avoir la peau noire” (138)<sup>76</sup>—and fracturing again in this memory of the school lesson that resurges. Ultimately, Ken’s involuntary resurging memories indicate a layering or even blending of traumas that link the bead, the mother’s departure, and the school and also inform her adult psyche. Furthermore, these blurred lines could suggest a similar blurring between Ken’s personal experience and the broader, collective experience of school planted in the “Pré-Histoire,” implying again the shared nature of Ken’s story.

Memories of school days resurge throughout the “Histoire de Ken,” indicating the weight of Ken’s schooling in the full montage of her childhood experiences that lead her to seek belonging in Europe. However, the dissonances and incoherencies she faces after arriving in Brussels cause her to become disillusioned with her schooling, which initially served as the framework from which she was set to experience Europe. As such, Ken’s quest for belonging evolves as she continuously adjusts the frameworks of her schooling in a process of unlearning and relearning. As Mudimbe-Boyi (1993, 202) states, the novel itself is set up along “a dialectic of rejection and belonging.” Ken must try multiple personae to find belonging, informed by

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<sup>75</sup> “The entire class repeated it after the teacher, that first letter of the French school in the region of Ndoucoumane, the French school that was to upset a thousand worlds and a thousand beliefs hidden behind the baobab trees, paralyzed into taking human forms” (98).

<sup>76</sup> “...rip my skin off; I didn’t want to have black skin any longer” (96).

colonial and orientalist trends and mindsets of 1970s Europe. Ultimately the evolution of her quest shows that Ken has a faulty understanding of belonging and identity—built mostly on external validation, mimicry, and “mêmeté” (sameness)<sup>77</sup>—which leaves her all the more vulnerable to the colonality of the time and the epistemological, aesthetic, and gendered values espoused by the French school.

Ken’s obsession with school—and by proxy with Europe, whiteness, and leaving Senegal—is (at least in part) caused by her mother’s departure. She reflects on this fact shortly after her father dies while she is living in Brussels. “La mort du père confirmait les répercussions du départ de la mère, l’enfance non vécue, le rêve bafoué, l’école française dans laquelle je fouillais en vain, la nécessité de racines pareilles à toutes ces veines qui reliaient l’enfant à la mère, ce cordon ombilical sûrement important” (116).<sup>78</sup> This reflection highlights once again the importance of the mother in passing on feelings of origin and belonging. Ken tries to replace the biological link of the mother—using language of organic matter like veins and umbilical cord—with the French school.<sup>79</sup>

The French school does provide temporary relief. More than a distraction from her solitude, the school offered belonging, the “indéfinissable *promis* depuis vingt ans” (113, emphasis added).<sup>80</sup> By seducing a vulnerable young girl like Ken with belonging, the school evolves beyond a recourse to become a surrogate mother, crossing the line between public

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<sup>77</sup> In her analysis of Ken Bugul’s novel, literary scholar Sechele-Nthapelelang (2009) describes Ken’s (limited and limiting) understanding of belonging in this way: “L’identité dans le sens de ‘mêmeté’, le sens d’appartenir à un groupe se forge à travers la communication jusqu’à parler le même langage, la même langue” [Identity in the sense of ‘sameness’, the sense of belonging to a group is forged through communication to the point of speaking in the same terms, in the same language] (280).

<sup>78</sup> “The father’s death strengthened the repercussions of the mother’s departure, the childhood not lived, the dream held up to ridicule, the French school where I was searching vainly for something, the need for roots similar to all those veins that bound child to mother, that umbilical cord that surely had to be important” (80).

<sup>79</sup> “The mother’s departure thus appears as a metaphoric rendition of the flight of any idea of origins and belonging” (Hogarth 2010, 110).

<sup>80</sup> “...the indefinable *promise* of twenty years” (78).

institution to private space and especially mental-emotion influence. Nevertheless, the gratification is intentionally temporary and vague, as seen in Ken's first days searching for belonging in Brussels.

Shortly after arriving in Belgium, Ken abandons school, disenchanted by the incoherencies. "L'école devenait un fantôme. Je n'avais rien à y apprendre" (118).<sup>81</sup> Yet admitting the failure of her schooling to grant her belonging comes at a cost. The unlearning process is a painful one. Ken mourns, "Cette solitude que j'avais retrouvée durement, avec le choc d'avoir perdu, ici, mes ancêtres les Gaulois" (133).<sup>82</sup> With her new acquaintances, she relearns what a contemporary woman supposedly acts like and is swept up in it. "Je devenais mondaine. Être invitée, recevoir, les vernissages, les rencontres avec des personnages surgis d'un autre univers. Rien à voir avec tout ce que j'avais appris dans les manuels scolaires" (84).<sup>83</sup> While being "irresistibly attracted" to the arty, worldly Brussels around her, she remains cognizant of her acquaintances' own incoherencies. "Leur décadence, je ne pouvais me l'imaginer car, depuis vingt ans, on ne m'avait appris rien d'autre d'eux que leur supériorité. Pourquoi alors, consciente de tout cela, insistais-je dans le jeu?" (90).<sup>84</sup> Even while she is aware of the lie she was taught, Ken cannot resist the draw of acceptance and validation from her European friends and strangers—a trace of schooling in her psyche.

Because she continues to seek external affirmation in Europe, she loses agency and dignity in her interactions, recognizing herself as a pawn in the Europeans complexes of colonial guilt (89). Through this text, Ken Bugul details the everyday effects of orientalism and exoticism

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<sup>81</sup> "School was becoming a ghost. I had nothing to learn there" (81).

<sup>82</sup> "To this loneliness, so harshly found again, now was added the shock of having lost my ancestors, the Gauls" (93).

<sup>83</sup> "I was becoming worldly. Invited out, entertaining, gallery openings, meeting people who emerged from another universe. It had nothing to do with anything I'd learned from my school texts" (56).

<sup>84</sup> "I couldn't have imagined their decadence, since all I'd been taught about them, for twenty years running, was their superiority. Why then, aware of this, did I insist on playing the game?" (60).

in 1970s Europe and the post-independence era. “L’Occident s’intéressait à l’Afrique. [...] L’Occidental voulait composer avec l’homme noir, mais il tenait à savoir qui il était pour pouvoir justifier le rapport. C’était à la mode de connaître un Tutsi, un Peul, authentiques” (91).<sup>85</sup> While navigating the attention, Ken experiences the othering effects of comments and gestures toward her, for example, Louis’s obsession with Africa and her, Jean Wermer showing her off to friends, and Western men’s attraction to her skin color. Ken learns to lean into these forced identities in her search for belonging, but never finds her authentic self.<sup>86</sup>

While her European acquaintances see her as exotic, Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry helps us see how Ken’s likeness and knowledge of Western ways in combination with her “exotic” appearance and origin make her attractive to Europeans. “J’étais partout en même temps et je ne passais pas inaperçue, parce que j’étais une Noire, provocante, sophistiquée, qui connaissait leurs cultures, leurs civilisations. Ils en étaient surpris” (89-90).<sup>87</sup> The school plays a direct role in the concept of mimicry. As Bhabha (1984) describes it, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (126). While we have already established how assimilationist education in West African French colonies was abandoned early, the continued French-based school still resulted in unrequited identification that would never be fulfilled or allowed. Ken begins spending most of her time with white people, with whom she feels an ease of communication. “Pendant vingt ans je n’avais

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<sup>85</sup> “The West was interested in Africa. [...] The Westerner wanted to come to terms with the Black man, but he insisted on knowing who that person was in order to justify the relationship. It was very stylish to know an authentic Tutsi or a Peul” (61).

<sup>86</sup> Hogarth (2006, 58) invokes the necessity of Ken’s assumption of these identities, calling them “modes of mimicry as strategies for survival.”

<sup>87</sup> “I was everywhere at once and I didn’t go unnoticed because I was Black, provocative, sophisticated, and quite knowledgeable about their cultures, their civilizations. This took them by surprise” (60).



appris que leurs pensées et leurs émotions” (80).<sup>88</sup> The same phrase that Ken uses to describe the depth and duration of her schooling (“pendant vingt ans”) arises here again, pointing to the influence of school in her quest for identification. However, Ken recognizes that “je m’identifiais en eux, ils ne s’identifiaient pas en moi” (80),<sup>89</sup> and becomes frustrated by the one-way identification.

Despite their initial interest in Ken due to her Africanness, her knowledge of European ways, trends, and epistemology render her all the more fascinating to her European acquaintances. As Bhabha stated, she is “recognizable” but objectively not the same. Ken uses her schooling knowledge in new ways in order to gain friends and therefore a sense of belonging. “Culture occidentale et un éventail de connaissances mémorisées sans méthode et projetées tous azimuts me faisaient apprécier par ces mécènes et philanthropes des temps nouveaux” (122-123).<sup>90</sup> However, as she describes it here, she merely becomes a parrot of school knowledge, taken in haphazardly and regurgitated at random. Parroting, however, is not enough for her and she tries to connect with others via her knowledge and higher-level thinking. For example, when she is working at a club as an “entertainer,” she states, “Je cherchais la satisfaction d’un besoin. Je voulais rencontrer des êtres humains, communiquer avec eux. Je leur parlais de la lune, du vent, de l’art, de l’architecture dogon et de Le Corbusier” (144).<sup>91</sup> Her boss, however, takes that possibility away from her, emphasizing the “same but not quite” aspect of mimicry. He says, “Une femme ne peut être rien d’autre que de la consommation. Les gens n’arrêtent pas de nous demander où nous t’avons déniché; tu allies la féminité à l’intelligence et *tu es noire*. Alors, si

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<sup>88</sup> “For twenty years, all I had learned were their thoughts and their feelings” (53).

<sup>89</sup> “I identified myself in them, they did not identify themselves in me” (53).

<sup>90</sup> “Western culture and a whole range of bits of knowledge, memorized without any order, projected in a helter-skelter fashion, made these Maecenases and modern-day philanthropists appreciate me enormously” (85).

<sup>91</sup> “I was looking to satisfy a need. I wanted to meet human beings, communicate with them. I’d talk to them of the moon, of the wind, of art, of Dogon architecture and of Le Corbusier” (101).

tu veux gagner de l'argent, cesse de discuter avec les clients de métaphysique, de Sumer et de poésie. Nous ne sommes pas des poètes, nous'" (145).<sup>92</sup> Despite her success at mimicry and the acceptance it grants her, like in the wig shop she can be reduced to her gender and her race, thus the hazard of ambivalence.

Having been denied identification and sameness, Ken goes to the extreme opposite direction, relying on her acquaintances' exotic tastes to entertain. Ken throws a dinner party at her home for a host of friends met through her former lover Jean Wermer. She prepares a Senegalese dish, for which her guests, "parlaient, gloussaient, soupiraient, en mangeant un plat exotique servie sur place par l'étranger" (132).<sup>93</sup> The sensational reactions of the guests suggest that they are putting on a show just as much as Ken is. Ken adds to the theatricality of the evening by donning every piece of Senegalese clothing she owns, changing costume throughout the dinner party, down to her most revealing underclothes, performing both Africanness and exotic femininity for her guests. She is attempting to fulfill the stereotypes assigned to her. "Les hommes me happaient du regard, les femmes louchaient sur le petit pagne. Le mythe de l'érotisme du Noir se confirmait" (132).<sup>94</sup> In a way, her changing costumes also represents of splitting of self, because despite her efforts and positive reactions from guests, she finishes the evening alone among the empty closet, empty dishes, and empty apartment with no feelings of fulfillment to show for it. "Je me ridiculise dans une tentative de renaissance. La soirée s'était terminée tard. J'avais joué pour fuir la solitude, car elle me ramenait toujours au départ de la mère, celle dont on m'avait arrachée sans me laisser le loisir de sécher le sang qui coulait à flot

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<sup>92</sup> "'A woman can be nothing other than a consumption. People haven't stopped asking us where we discovered you; you make a bond of femininity and intelligence and *you are Black*. So if you want to make money, stop discussing metaphysics, Sumer, and poetry with the customers. We aren't poets here'" (101-102).

<sup>93</sup> "...talk, cluck, sigh, and carry on as they eat their exotic food, served right there by the foreigner herself" (92).

<sup>94</sup> "The men were devouring me with their eyes, the women were ogling the little wrap. The myth of Black eroticism was confirmed" (92).

de mes entrailles” (133).<sup>95</sup> After this dinner party during which she performs the role of exotic African woman, exactly to her guests wishes, she tears down her nude photographed portraits, realizing that the fracturing and splitting and multiplying will not grant her the belonging she yearns for. She tries identification and kinship. She tries blending in. She tries finding romance. She tries learning a new, liberal way of life. She tries playing the role of exotic other, first for her friends and then for the sexual fantasies of white, male strangers. However, all of these attempts still leave her in a state of solitude, which in turn bring up memories of her past. In the penultimate chapter of the work, when Ken is at her lowest mental state, she lets the memories come flooding back. It is here that we see her most in-depth interaction with school.

### **Back to school: The generative nature of memory**

While memories constantly resurge in Ken’s narration of adulthood, it is not until the last third of the novel that she deliberately returns and recounts her childhood. Francis (2009) argues that initially skipping over Ken’s childhood “displays the protagonist’s total assimilation of Western values and emphasizes the intensity of her desire to pull away from her ethnic *maternal* culture...” (35), again highlighting the simultaneous distancing from the mother and rapprochement to Western ways. I would expand that notion by arguing that the return to childhood, especially to school days, in the penultimate chapter of the novel further emphasizes the importance of these repressed memories in Ken’s identity formation. This section will analyze certain childhood recollections and school-related discourse that appear in the ninth chapter and consider the elements of coloniality embedded therein. Of particular interest is how

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<sup>95</sup> “I was making a fool of myself while attempting a rebirth. The evening ended late. I’d been playing in order to flee from loneliness, for it always took me back to the mother’s departure, the woman from whom they’d torn me away without leaving me time to dry the blood that flowed from my entrails” (92-93).

Ken uses school to fill the void left by previous traumatic events but concurrently how school contributes to her alienation.

The nonlinear structure of the novel reflects Ken's own processing of trauma. Mudimbe-Boyi (1993) dubs the jumps in time that occur throughout the novel as a "progressive-regressive movement of the narrative" and that "the wandering back and forth in time here translates a destabilization of time that goes hand in hand with a destabilization of the character's identity" (203). While memories interspersed throughout the majority of the "Histoire de Ken" point to her psychological instability (e.g., at the doctor's office), one could consider this final "regression" in the third section (i.e., when she combs through her childhood and portrays her different traumatic and formative experiences) as a stabilizing move. The return in time grounds Ken's situation in a past that is indeed traumatic, and it helps establish a premise for her struggle for belonging. In this vein, Zucker (1997) interprets this section for the "generative nature of memory" (132). Moreover, Kalisa (2009) explores memory as a form of defense: "Memory therefore becomes a weapon used not only to revisit the initial trauma but also to change the course of destiny" (49).<sup>96</sup> I interpret the nonlinear timeline as a movement of unlearning and relearning. As Ken must reconfigure her misleading school-gained knowledge in the first days of life in Brussels, she also has to reconcile with a childhood and education that has deformed her sense of self. Therefore, the nonlinear structure of the novel becomes an essential facet to the processing that Ken must undergo to ground her quest for identity in her childhood, her schooling, and her initial abandonment.

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<sup>96</sup> We could also consider Ken's delay in narrating her childhood as a certain type of amnesia, as Kalisa (2009) posits. "This amnesia has numerous causes, the primary one being the epistemological violence that forced Africans and people of African descent to adopt the belief system of the colonizer while simultaneously pushing their own culture into oblivion" (48). In this case, there is a direct connection between Ken's amnesia and her schooling, since the education apparatus is largely where the epistemological violence takes place.

Ken's unlearning and relearning also appear in her growing understanding of her own situation. We see throughout the "Histoire de Ken" that she is haunted by what she initially calls her "soucis" or "mal." The nature of the problem becomes clearer as the novel progresses until she also names it a "vide" or "vide dans l'absence du familier," a "chez moi," the need to "être reconnue," and her "angoisses d'identité." She steadily solidifies and eventually explicitly states what her "mal" is, and the gradual revelation indicates that she herself is still tracing the source of her pain. Sechele-Nthapelelang (2009) has pointed to the "ambition génésiaque" of Francophone African women writers, or the larger trend of trying to define the origins of issues of exile and identity by reflecting back to one's childhood. More specifically, Hitchcott (1997) highlights the role of school in the larger goal of Ken's processing. "*Le baobab fou* is not a linear narrative, and the fact that the narrator's description of her childhood is reserved for the penultimate chapter of the book underlines what eventually emerges as a kind of tragic flaw, that is, Ken's attempt to escape her sense of alienation from her roots by alienating herself still further in her identification with the West" (30). Paradoxically, the school generates, widens, and fills Ken's void, and in the ninth chapter, she must recall those childhood efforts and deformations in order to unlearn their hold on her.

The hold, however, does not only apply to Ken. From the very beginning of the ninth chapter, the reflective Ken acknowledges the role that school played in creating this new generation of alienated, "educated" colonized people. "L'école française, nos ancêtres les Gaulois, la coopération, les échanges, l'amitié entre les peuples avaient créé une nouvelle dimension: l'étranger. Ne plus pouvoir reconnaître chez les siens les liens vrais qui façonnaient et pouvaient guider les destins. Cette aura de sérénité et d'acceptation était sûrement nécessaire"

(157).<sup>97</sup> In this passage, Ken recognizes the positive rhetoric of school (cooperation, exchanges, friendship) that had other, more nefarious dimensions (inferiority complexes, cultural alienation, and unbalanced, neocolonial relationships). As Mignolo (2011a; 2018) explains about the positive rhetoric of modernity—which echoes strongly the same semantic field of progress and development we see in this passage of *Le Baobab fou*—it hides darker designs, i.e., coloniality. Along this framework, then, the alienation and lack of connection caused by the school is not simply an unfortunate circumstance, but an integral part of the mechanism of power instituted and upheld by the colonial school, masked by an “aura de sérénité et d’acceptation.” Ken’s recourse to school is therefore not solely the result of her vulnerability as an unloved child looking to fill a void, but a consequence of the school’s active attempt to draw children in with its positive rhetoric hiding darker designs.

Throughout the rest of the ninth chapter, Ken explains that after her mother’s departure, she drifts, literally and figuratively, looking for those points of reference and deeper connection. She recounts how she is reunited with her mother after a year, but how her mother “replaced” her by taking care of a newborn grandchild, born to Ken’s older sister. “Ce fut ainsi que quand je suis arrivée, *ma* mère n’était plus. Il ne me restait plus que la mère. Ce fut le silence” (158).<sup>98</sup> As her schooling progresses, Ken moves to different towns, into the houses of various family members and acquaintances and throws herself even more into her studies, though with little cathartic outcome. She eventually moves to Dakar to live with a brother whom she barely knows and faces another level of Westernization as her brother and his family also strive to adopt French ways of living. The narrating Ken offers reflections and comments on larger trends of the

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<sup>97</sup> “The French school, our ancestors the Gauls, cooperation, foreign exchanges, friendship between peoples had all created a new dimension: the foreigner, no longer able to recognize among one’s own people the true bonds that used to shape and could guide destinies” (111).

<sup>98</sup> “That is why, when I arrived, *my* mother was no longer. All that was left was the mother. All was silence” (112).

era, for example, the disappointing outcomes of independence, the evolving expectations of the modern Black woman in Senegal, and the shortcomings of the Negritude movement. Ken narrates a few encounters with teachers and fellow students. At one point she bluntly states, “J’essayais de tomber amoureuse, comme on disait. D’une de mes professeurs de lycée” (196).<sup>99</sup> She succeeds in being courted by this teacher but gives up after feeling none of the connection that she seeks. Nevertheless, school is a steady companion for the errant Ken. Chapter Nine ends with Ken being awarded a scholarship to study in Europe.

Chapter Nine demonstrates how the colonial school system drives cleavages between schooled individuals and their homes and families. For example, like Laye, Medza, and Samba Diallo, Ken is forced to move around and live with various family members and even strangers in order to be near a school where she can continue her instruction.<sup>100</sup> This is yet another structural aspect of the education network that contributes to its coloniality and the unstable identity formation of students; moving around further destabilizes these foundations. Furthermore, unlike the male protagonists in the classic works, Ken, as a girl and young woman, is more vulnerable to abuse and predatory adults than the male students are. For example, at one point she is suddenly cast out of her living situation by the wife of the household because, unbeknownst to Ken, the husband declares his intentions to take her as another wife. Ken is twelve years old at the time. Frida and Veronica in *Notre-Dame du Nil* as well as Salie in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* also suffer maltreatment and sexual assault in their housing situations, living away from home in order to attend school. In sum, the physical distancing from home

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<sup>99</sup> “I tried to fall in love, as they said, with one of the teachers in high school” (139).

<sup>100</sup> “Ken’s life trajectory as a youth illustrates the devastating effects of family dispersion and cultural upheavals brought on by emigration toward urban centres. In order to maintain continuity in her studies, she is often forced to relocate, is obliged to live with different members of her large polygamous family and constantly feels: ‘*sans l’affection des miens, sans repères émotionnels*’ (143)...” (Francis 2009, 37).

required of the schooling systems represented in this corpus present more harm to female students.

Despite the distances it forms, the school offers a recourse for students feeling alienated from their families. Experiencing rejection and solitude everywhere she goes, young Ken fills her void with her instruction. “J’étais seule et m’adonnais entièrement aux études. J’avais les meilleures notes dans presque toutes les disciplines, mais personne ne s’y intéressait et ces succès scolaires ne m’arrangeaient pas...” (158).<sup>101</sup> No matter Ken’s potential, the school’s measures of success do not translate to the attention or affirmation she longs for. However, Ken does not give up on school as a means to identification. As Ken delves deeper into school, she begins to adopt ways of speaking and dress that draw her nearer to Western assimilation. Like her experiences in Belgium indicate, Ken transforms if not with ease at least with eagerness to achieve the grounding she desires. The link Ken draws between school learning and assimilation is an important one. “Tous ce qui m’intéressait à l’époque, c’était l’école française. Je m’étais rendu compte que j’avais une facilité d’assimilation qui me permettait d’apprendre...” (160).<sup>102</sup> In connecting assimilation to learning, Ken reveals that there is a link between content, pedagogy, and identity (de)formation. The ability and willingness to take on Western ways (assimilation) makes Ken a better, more agile student. She succeeds *because of* the distance created between her, her mother, family, and, by proxy, traditions and local ways.

Recognizing the futility of her successes to gain the kinship connection she desires, Ken shifts from studying to garner attention to studying to block others out. As such, Ken’s journey to find belonging enters a new phase. While she is living at her aunt’s house where she is

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<sup>101</sup> “I had the best grades in almost every subject, but nobody cared and these academic accomplishments didn’t please me...” (112).

<sup>102</sup> “The only thing I was interested in at that time was the French school. I realized that I was very quick to absorb things...” (114).



surrounded by boarders, forced to do chores, and harassed by others in the house, she uses studying to escape. “Me voulant sourde à tous ces bruits, j’étudiais avec rage. Quand malgré moi je me couchais, je continuais à analyser dans ma tête le *Discours de la méthode*, la tragédie de *Cinna*, à imaginer l’intrônisation à la cathédrale de Reims de tel roi wisigoth ou occitan, enfin français” (164).<sup>103</sup> This passage harkens back to the bead episode as Ken deafens herself with a foreign epistemology, in this case Frenchness. Ken uses distinctive French literature and history to build a defensive barrier around her.

Another way school isolates students is by generating competition amongst the group. When Ken is remembering the absurd number of prizes and honors she receives at the end of a school year, she asks, “Pourquoi donner des prix à certains et pas à d’autres? [...] Pourquoi creuser un fossé entre les élèves de même âge, de mêmes aspirations, pourquoi déjà créer les différences qui accoucheront de complexes brisant une vie entière?” (166).<sup>104</sup> With this reflection, made by the narrating Ken, she touches on a staple pedagogy of the school: student ranking and competition and external measures of success and motivation.

Finding success in school learning (assimilation), Ken tries to associate with the West by speaking only French with other schooled children, even when she is in her mother’s village. Furthermore, she relies on outward signs of “Westernization” to reground her identity.

Je croyais avoir trouvé un moyen de me rassurer en me faisant ‘toubab.’ Toujours les revues de mode de Paris qu’on pouvait acheter de seconde main au marché, toujours bonsoir à tort et à travers, toujours faire un tour dans le village pour me montrer, chaussant des chaussures à talons aiguille qui me donnaient si chaud et m’empêchaient de marcher gracieusement, le jupon que je faisais dépasser exprès pour le montrer. Les décrépages permanent des cheveux, l’imitation des coiffures occidentales qui donnaient

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<sup>103</sup> “Wanting to remain deaf to all the noises around me, I studied furiously. When I’d go to bed, against my will, I would continue to analyze the *Discourse on Method* in my head, or the tragedy of *Cinna*, or I’d imagine the enthronement of some Visigoth or Provençal king, always French, in the cathedral of Reims” (116).

<sup>104</sup> “Why these prizes to some and not to others? [...] Why create a gulf between students of the same age with the same aspirations, why create differences that would give birth to complexes ruining an entire life?” (117-118).

des visages déstructurés, le vernis rouge comme du sang qui me coulait des doigts. Ah, Dieu ! Que j'étais épuisée de vouloir plus que 'ressembler', me déformer! (169)<sup>105</sup>

For lack of self-assurance elsewhere, Ken resorts to extreme, yet one-dimensional (to use Francis's (2009) term) forms of assimilation, appearances and performances upon which she would eventually frame her life in Belgium. Nevertheless, metamorphizing herself into a *toubab*, a white person, is both physically and mentally injurious—from painful shoes to symbolic bloody hands to the fatigue of deforming body and mind, brought about and facilitated by her exposure to school. While language and dress inform colonial mimicry across genders, Ken's experience speaks to a specific gendering of mimicry, especially as it pertains to standards of beauty. As Coly (2010) puts it, "The narrator's cooptation by the institutions of colonialism uncovers the gendered modalities of colonial interpellation" (9-10). As in the wig shop and the soirée à l'Africaine, Ken's assimilation centers notions of femininity in ways that Laye, Medza, and Samba Diallo do not directly grapple with masculinity.

In Chapter Nine, Ken also recounts an episode in her schooling that highlights the immense violence that can occur in a classroom because of imbalances of power. As she tells it, one day Ken's teacher asks for a volunteer to sharpen his knife with which, he says, "il l'égorgerait ensuite" (189).<sup>106</sup> The proposition understandably stupefies the students, but eventually Ken raises her hand. "J'avais peut-être appris déjà que le plus important ce n'était pas de naître, de vivre dans le cycle humain, mais de mourir" (189).<sup>107</sup> As she sharpens the knife in

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<sup>105</sup> "I thought I'd found a way to feel self-confident by acting white: always with Paris fashion magazines I bought secondhand at the market, always 'Bonsoir' left and right, always taking walks around the village to be seen, with high-heeled shoes that made me hot and kept me from walking gracefully, the slip that I purposely let show, the straightened hair, the imitation of Western hairdos that brought the face into disarray, the blood-red lacquer that dripped off my fingers. Oh, God! I became so exhausted from wanted more than to 'look like,' from deforming myself" (120).

<sup>106</sup> "...he could cut that child's throat..." (134).

<sup>107</sup> "Perhaps I had already learned that the most important thing wasn't to be born, or to live the human cycle, but to die" (134).

the hallway, the school director comes by and slaps her before even asking what she is doing. Ken explains exactly what her teacher prompted her to do, and the director gives his approbation before moving on. As Ken reflects on the violence of the school, she recognizes the colonial origins of the unprovoked explosive encounter. “Pour le directeur de l’école, une insatisfaction l’avait rendu violent et méchant. C’était la première génération des enseignants nous ayant fait la guerre sous un drapeau étranger, déçus” (190).<sup>108</sup> Ken is referencing the First World War in which Senegalese tirailleurs fought for France and received few to none of the promised returns (e.g., payment, French citizenship). Within the scholastic context, however, one could read the “war” as a reference to these teacher’s own schooling, which they accomplished under colonial rule, “un drapeau étranger.” Nevertheless, independence brought them little of the returns promised in their schooling and mimicry, and the violence of coloniality carries through independence and manifests in the school.<sup>109</sup> In fact, Ken makes a direct connection. “Le maître allait et venait de long en large, les mains derrière le dos, dans cette même attitude où le colon dominait” (190).<sup>110</sup>

When Ken returns to the classroom with the sharpened knife, she also receives a slap from her teacher. “Pourquoi? Parce que je n’avais pas peur de me faire égorger? Je le bravais

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<sup>108</sup> “As for the principal, some deep dissatisfaction had made him violent and mean. He was of the first generation of Black teachers who had been soldiers under a foreign flag and was deeply disappointed” (135).

<sup>109</sup> The reference to war also recalls the metamorphosis of the colonial machine from battlefield to classroom in Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë*. “Ainsi, derrière les canonnières, le clair regard de la Grande Royale des Diallobé avait vu l’école nouvelle. L’école nouvelle participait de la nature du canon et de l’aimant à la fois. Du canon, elle tient son efficacité d’arme combattante. Mieux que le canon, elle pérennise la conquête. Le canon contraint les corps, l’école fascine les âmes” (60) [Thus, behind the gunboats, the clear gaze of the Most Royal Lady of the Diallobé had seen the new school. The new school shares at the same time the characteristics of cannon and of magnet. From the cannon it draws its efficacy as an arm of combat. Better than the cannon, it makes conquest permanent. The cannon compels the body, the school bewitches the soul (49)]. All English translations of this novel come from Woods, Katherine, trans. 1963. *Ambiguous Adventure*. New York: Walker and Company.

<sup>110</sup> “The teacher was pacing up and down, his hands behind his back, in the same position that the colonizer used to show his domination” (135).

donc! Ou bien étais-je l'exutoire de sa rage sourde?" (190).<sup>111</sup> He then orders the rest of the students to undress and begins to beat them all with a rubber strip while sparing Ken. Ken reflects on the traumatic experience and once again invokes its roots in coloniality.

Comment le maître oserait-il toucher à un millimètre de ces peaux frêles? Il les frappa tous à sang, pour assouvir sa soif de faire souffrir. Quel enseignant! Il faisait partie de cette génération d'instituteurs de l'époque coloniale, imbus de leur puissance. Instituteur était le premier métier de l'homme noir colonisé: enseigner la langue coloniale, la poésie coloniale, le rêve colonial. Avec quelle ardeur l'exerçait-il! (191)<sup>112</sup>

This episode again points out the generational trauma of the unfulfilled promises of the colonial school as well as the violence bred in the institution that relies on unequal power dynamics to form young minds. The pedagogy of fear is also present in *L'Enfant noir*, when Laye describes how students fear being sent to the blackboard: "Mais je l'ai dit: l'idée de dissipation ne nous effleurait même pas; c'est aussi que nous cherchions à attirer le moins possible l'attention du maître: nous vivions dans la crainte perpétuelle d'être envoyés au tableau" (84).<sup>113</sup> Both of these episodes illustrate how fear and violence are built into the classroom management practices of the school, exacerbated by the colonial vestiges of the institution. Nevertheless, the violence and fear are much more explicit in Ken's experience, which could indicate the exacerbation of the issue in post-independence era and/or a stronger critique by this more contemporary author.

Throughout school, as throughout the novel, Ken oscillates between desperately seeking connection with her family and country and pushing them away to embrace the West. She attributes her lack of "repère" or "lien" with her mother, father, and siblings to an essential and

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<sup>111</sup> "Why? Because I hadn't been afraid to have my throat cut? Because I stood up to him? Or was I perhaps the outlet for his silent rage?" (135).

<sup>112</sup> "How dare the teacher touch one millimeter of these frail skins? He whipped them all until they bled, just to quench his thirst for causing pain. What an instructor! He was part of that generation of instructors of the colonial period, imbued with its own power. The first profession of the colonized Black man was to be a teacher: to teach the colonial language, the colonial dream. How fervently he practiced it!" (136).

<sup>113</sup> "Interruption was out of the question; the idea didn't even occur to us. We wanted to be noticed as little as possible, for we lived in continual dread of being sent to the blackboard" (79-80).

undefinable rift between them, sparked by her family's general apathy toward her and represented by her mother's abandonment when Ken was five years old. On the other hand, the school is not simply a recourse for Ken.<sup>114</sup> I argue that the school, its content, and its pedagogy actively work to draw students into assimilation. Ken sums up this mechanism of the school and highlights its effect on identity formation thus: "J'aimais de l'Occident l'identification qu'il m'imposait et la justification que je devais en donner allait jusqu'au renoncement total à mes réalités profondes" (173).<sup>115</sup> The West, through what decolonial thinkers have explained as superiority complexes, development rhetoric, and epistemological violence, forces an identification that ultimately causes rupture with true identity, as Ken's example demonstrates.

Ken is fractured between two realities for a very long time. "L'identification était difficile. Je consommait deux réalités d'une façon contradictoire. Parce qu'au fond de moi, la nostalgie du lien me hantait. Déchirée!" (174).<sup>116</sup> *Le Baobab fou* then sets up African tradition and Western modernity not only as two distinct options, but two realities that run in opposition. Herein lies the impasse in Ken's understanding of identity. She sees the realities as mutually exclusive, as well as a mere collection of outward signs and symbols and more of a fixed state than an ever-evolving combination of past, present, and future self. According to Ken, in order to assume an identity, one would have to totally reject others. "L'Afrique me rappelait à elle par ses élans, ses instants de poésie et ses rites. Mais je tenais bon lien avec les valeurs apportées par la

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<sup>114</sup> "...the narrator is an unsheltered body whose eagerness to find a home constitutes a liability and shapes her response to colonial education. Her tight embrace of the institution of colonialism in *Le Baobab fou* is on par with her isolation and estrangement at home. She throws herself completely into the world of her Western textbooks to the point of closing off her senses to her environment. Her internal self-exile anticipates her geographical relocation away from this environment. The colonial curriculum becomes her sole interlocutor, and this situation fosters a mental and emotional disengagement from her African surroundings" (Coly 2010, 10).

<sup>115</sup> "What I liked from the West was the identification that it imposed on me, and my justification went so far as to renounce my deepest realities" (122).

<sup>116</sup> "Identification was difficult. I was working to achieve two realities in a contradictory fashion: in my innermost self, the yearning for a bond haunted me. Torn in two!" (123).

colonisation. Je ne pouvais plus retourner sur mes pas, ni même jeter un coup d’œil en arrière” (175).<sup>117</sup> The entire work then is Ken’s attempt to fix (both in the sense of repair and solidify) an identity, which means rejecting the one that supposedly rejected her. “Plongée dans mes fantasmes, je rejetais la mère par mes références occidentales” (175).<sup>118</sup> In this way, we could consider Ken’s mother beyond the literal maternal figure but as the incarnation of African customs, identity, and origin. Their separation symbolizes a more general distancing from African identity that applies to schooled Africans across the era. “Le grand fossé se creusa. L’éducation traditionnelle s’empêtra. La génération façonnée par l’école française entra dans la solitude, face à la famille traditionnelle” (179).<sup>119</sup> Ken’s experience, therefore, could represent an entire generation’s alienation from their families because of the school, the fixed concepts of identity it teaches, and the identification with the West it imposes.

The ninth chapter ends with Ken deciding to leave for Europe. Finding no “sure points of reference” in Senegal, she thinks, “Je voulais découvrir quelque part ou en quelqu’un le lien sacré qui me manquait. Pourquoi ne pas aller à la recherche de ‘mes ancêtres les Gaulois’?” (208).<sup>120</sup> Her last words of this elongated flashback are an entreaty in the imperative: “Laissez, laissez les enfants vivre l’enfance. Aimez-les et mettez-les au chaud dans vos cœurs” (208).<sup>121</sup> This is an ominous (non-linear) foreshadowing of her crises in Belgium, which the reader

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<sup>117</sup> “Africa called me back with her life force, her moments of poetry, and her rituals. But I held on tight to the bond I’d made with the values that colonialism had brought. I couldn’t go back anymore, I couldn’t even glance backward” (124).

<sup>118</sup> “Mired in my fantasies, I rejected the mother through my Western references” (124).

<sup>119</sup> “The gap widened. Traditional education became entangled. The generation trained in the French schools entered into loneliness as it confronted the traditional family” (127).

<sup>120</sup> “I wanted to discover the sacred bond I lacked in some place or some person. Why not go searching ‘for my ancestors the Gauls’?” (148).

<sup>121</sup> “Let them, let the children live their childhood. Love them and keep them nice and warm inside your hearts” (148).

already knows will be a futile effort. The plea rings with Ken's realization that her failure to find belonging in Europe is very much tied to her "enfance perdue."

Ken's return to her childhood memories present an explanation for her identity (de)formation and unlearning. Still, do they set Ken on a path forward that will provide her with solace? We can search for traces of closure and hope in the dénouement of the novel by connecting it to the "Pré-Histoire." In the final pages of the novel, Ken's friends in Brussels convince her to return to Senegal. Ken has just had another terrible experience with a man who wants to pay her for sex and "possess" her. Amidst the transaction, when Ken is feeling utterly desolate, the client passes out drunk. In a moment of panic, Ken drags his unconscious body into the stairwell and out the front door of her building. She retreats to her apartment and does not come out for days. Huddled in her apartment, she is transported back to the initial rupture. "À ce moment, le cri jaillit. Un cri perçant qui venait briser l'harmonie, sous le baobab dénudé, dans le village désert" (220).<sup>122</sup> A nearly identical recall to the bead in the ear episode described in the prologue to the "Histoire de Ken," this trauma of the bead (and by proxy the separation from the mother and exposure to school) resurges at Ken's lowest points.

Ken finally goes to see her former lover, Jean Wermer. He along with her friend Leonora suggest that Ken return to Senegal and she cedes. "La décision était prise. Je retournais dans mon pays" (221).<sup>123</sup> Seen in her use of passive language, Ken's return can hardly be described as a personal realization of needing her roots. Ken doubts the efficacy of her return home even as she boards the plane. "Le rétablissement était devenu impossible. Rétablissement de l'enfance

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<sup>122</sup> "At that moment, the cry rang out. A piercing scream that broke the harmony, *under the denuded baobab tree, in the deserted village*" (157).

<sup>123</sup> "The decision had been made. I was going back home" (158).

perdue, envolée un après-midi, la première fois que j'avais vu un Blanc" (221).<sup>124</sup> Still in these final pages, the crucial moment when Ken's life takes the irreversible turn is confused or layered with other traumas. Nowhere else in the novel is a first encounter with a white person blamed for her twist of fate. Eventually, when Ken does return to Ndoucoumane, she visits the baobab, long since dead. "Sans parole, je prononçais l'oraison funèbre de ce baobab témoin et complice du départ de la mère, le premier matin d'une aube sans crépuscule. Longtemps, je restai là devant ce tronc mort, sans pensée" (222).<sup>125</sup> The encounter is mournful but devoid of relief.

The baobab, its madness, and its death can be interpreted in many ways. The baobab tree, a national symbol of Senegal, could symbolize Ken's African identity, lost because of her rejection and the foreign epistemology and identity she assumed through school. We can read its death as apt metaphor for Ken's crumbling metaphorical roots. Moreover, the tree could symbolize Ken herself. Like Ken, the baobab develops through a series of random events: transgression, fate, neglect, resiliency, change, bad luck, and foreign influence. The tree's madness also relates to Ken's own psychological crises and fracturing born from an initial abandonment. But the importance of the baobab extends beyond Ken as an individual. As the prophetic creature in the "Pré-Histoire de Ken" foretold, "ce baobab est lié à un événement qui va bouleverser une génération entière" (26).<sup>126</sup> Ken's return, then, also indicates a collective return or a collective loss of cultural roots.

The baobab's death, although mourned at the end of the novel, presents the possibility of rebirth, and its commemoration in the text itself may indicate that rebirth. Ken's search for

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<sup>124</sup> "Recovery had become impossible. Recovery of a lost childhood that had flown away one afternoon, the first time I ever saw a white man" (158).

<sup>125</sup> "Wordlessly, I pronounced the eulogy of the baobab tree that had been witness to and accomplice in the mother's departure, the first morning of a dawn without dusk. I stayed there in front of the dead trunk for a long time, without a thought" (159).

<sup>126</sup> "...this baobab is linked to an even that will shake an entire generation" (14).



identity is not completed in the narrative. However, by inscribing the text, Ken Bugul, in a way, anchors her/self and declares the subjectivity that became so convoluted due to her traumatic childhood and experiences in Belgium. In a reflective, dreamy tangent during the “Pré-Histoire,” we see an important nod to creation which aptly summarizes Ken’s journey. “Les formules se choquent. Perdu, l’être cavale dans la réflexion, la méditation. Les notions initient, les idées foisonnent, les projections s’éparpillent, les comparaisons s’affrontent. Chacun essaie un chemin dans le vide, mais la fuite incite à la création et créer c’est combler le vide, le seul vrai adversaire de l’homme” (27).<sup>127</sup> Authoring this text is in a way an attempt to fill that void, which Ken senses and refers to throughout the novel.

The text acts as a means to fill the void of a motherless woman. Here we can turn to the name Ken Bugul. In Wolof Ken Bugul means “one whom nobody wants,” which on the surface reflects the main character’s sense of abandonment and rootlessness. However, as d’Almeida (1994) and others have explained, Ken Bugul is a name given to a child whose parents have lost previous children. The name signals an attempt to ward off malevolent forces that would come to harm or take the child. “The name, then resonates as a secret sign of the family’s desire, beneath apparent indifference, to protect and claim the child” (Watson 1997, 144). More than protecting herself as a new writer, Mariétou Mbaye is protecting the text itself, emblazoning its cover and its main character with a label that paradoxically connotes both rejection and love. Through authorship, Mbaye can give birth to herself and her text, protecting this new embodiment despite the many other lives she has lost before and providing the love Ken never felt from her real mother.

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<sup>127</sup> “Formulas collide. Lost, human beings roam around inside thoughts, meditations. Notions introduce themselves, ideas are born, plans grow profuse, comparisons compare. Each one tries a new path in emptiness, but flight inspires creation, and to create is to fill the void, humankind’s only true enemy” (15).

## Conclusion

Ken Bugul's text marks an important turning point in the larger portrait of the schooling experience in sub-Saharan African Francophone literature. Primarily, it demonstrates an explicitly dubious posture towards the harmful effects of (post)colonial schooling. Referencing yet again multiple "generations" and lost "points of reference," Ken states, "...surtout, le colonialisme, qui avait créé la distorsion des esprits pour engendrer la race des sans repères. Le colonialisme avait fait de la plupart de nous des illogiques" (104).<sup>128</sup> Of course, Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* also portrays trepidation toward how schooling will separate children from their home culture. However, Kane's text *foresees* the alienating consequences of the oncoming school while Bugul's novel lays them bare. *Le Baobab fou* portrays that next generation of colonial educated children, when—as Kane's character La Grande Royale accomplished—school became more widespread, accessible to other classes and genders. Ultimately, what Ken Bugul's text indicates, led in part by Kane, is a greater lucidity of the colonality of the school and an increased concern in its harmful consequences.

Bugul's manipulation of the autobiographical mode also presents a new means to portray the colonizing effects of a foreign epistemology. The author places her own story in symbolic, cosmogonic frames established in the "Pré-Histoire" and in relation to "une génération entière." As such, although it is heavily imbued with Ken's individual experiences of her mother's abandonment and her fracturing experiences in Brussels, the narrative can be read to symbolize the collective group of children schooled in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were alienated from home. The brief prologue that opens the novel corroborates the idea that the work

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<sup>128</sup> "...above all else, colonialism had created the distortion of the spirit necessary to enslave a race of people, leaving them no frame of reference. Colonialism had made inconsequential people of most of us" (71).

itself represents a larger collectivity. “*Les êtres écrasés se remémorent...*” (7).<sup>129</sup> As Hitchcott (1997) has also claimed, this pluralized dedication that launches the work evokes not only the memories but the voices of the collective. In reading Ken’s experience as a shared one, *Le Baobab fou* is both the intimate and personalized story of one woman grappling with her identity as well as the collective tale of an entire generation being separated from their home culture and attempting to navigate a post-independence, neocolonial world “sans repères.”

Nevertheless, Bugul’s novel suggests that creation and writing itself presents a means by which to heal traumatic wounds. By naming herself Ken Bugul, inscribed across the cover of the text itself, the novel becomes a protected incarnation of the author, character, and her story. After losing past selves (as parents who have lost children) to fragmenting, traumatic experiences and abandonments, Mariétou Mbaye shields this (textual) embodiment of her/self and story through the name Ken Bugul. The creation of this text, the inscription of traumatic memories, sordid encounters, and sharp critiques, represents Mbaye’s birth unto herself, a shielded, loved, wanted self that was denied to her by the separation from her mother and family. The necessity of writing to form and ground the self also arises in Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* where the main character, Salie, successfully assuages and assumes her transatlantic identity through literary creation. Still, Salie presents a different way to deal with the lack of “repère” that comes with migration (and schooling), a difference I will explore in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Finally, in the lineage of representations of the school, *Le Baobab fou* may be the first to expose severe traumas caused by a colonial education, particularly the violence (physical, psychological, and symbolic) enacted upon students. While acts of violence are perpetrated by Senegalese teachers and administrators, the novel explains how their acts stem from coloniality.

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<sup>129</sup> “The obliterated shall be remembered” (iii).

Harmful practices are either carried over from colonization (e.g., demeaning representation in textbooks) or evidence of “an entire life of frustrations” of the teachers who grew up and learned under colonization. Explored in the next chapter, Mukasonga’s *Notre-Dame du Nil* expands this notion, proving how the inherent coloniality of the school’s spaces and pedagogies lend themselves to violence. In sum, contemporary portrayals of school begin to reveal and critique more explicitly the violence facilitated by the school—the architectures and pedagogies of control that persist into the post-independence era. Although the character Ken does not escape the mental colonization and identity deformation that she undergoes because of school, the text does indicate a decolonial turn in its more critical treatment of the epistemological and psychological coloniality of the institution, paving the way for future generations of sub-Saharan African (women) writers to further explore their complicated relationship to education in fiction.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Building and Breaching the School in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil*

This chapter engages with more overt criticism of the school and its coloniality by examining narrative constructions of irony, myth, and space in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012). The œuvre of this Rwandan French author runs abundant with representations of the school, though her portrayals range from hypercritical to quite grateful. Mukasonga received her primary and secondary education in her country of origin, and therefore her literary representations of the schooling experience unfold against a historical and geopolitical backdrop distinct from the other works explored in this dissertation. To name one notable difference, Rwanda was never under French colonial rule as Guinea, Senegal, and Cameroon were. Thus, her works present a different ideological and scholastic model from which to witness the interplay between instruction, coloniality, and decolonial resistance. For example, *Notre-Dame du Nil* reveals how inheritances from Christian mission schools interact with coloniality well after independence, while the other representations studied here are situated in the more secular context of the civilizing mission in French West Africa. Equally interesting to this study is how Mukasonga engages with the infamous history of violence in Rwanda. Although she never directly writes about the 1994 genocide during which around one million Rwandans were killed by other Rwandan ethnic groups and militias, her writing effectively contributes to the representation of the country's past. Examining the school in light of Rwanda's history of ethnic tensions, which stem from myths planted and nurtured by European explorers and colonists, *Notre-Dame du Nil* introduces new de/colonial frames through which to understand the school in a postcolonial context.

Mukasonga's prizewinning novel *Notre-Dame du Nil* features an elite lycée for Rwandan girls. Despite its lofty locale, its high, sturdy walls, and its impressive reputation, the eponymous high school sits precariously among the hills of Rwanda. Its academic and social prestige mask the ethnic tension, gendered competition, and predatory leadership therein, but the biting observations of the narrative voice expose these corruptions. In this chapter, I show how the novel juxtaposes Notre-Dame-du-Nil's virtuous intentions with its mounting ethical degradation and structural instability, creating a foreboding atmosphere that remains conspicuously unresolved at the end of the novel. I analyze the ominous conditions that position the high school as a microcosm Rwandan society in the 1970s (and more particularly 1973) but also as a mechanism of the colonial and genocidal machine. The very protective functions of the school contribute to its oppressive practices. In other words, the carefully devised goals, systems, and physical space of the school meant to advance the position of women in Rwandan society generate, paradoxically, ideal conditions for abuse, temptation, and an eventual explosion of violence. Like Camara Laye's detailed construction of the classroom configuration in *L'Enfant noir*, Mukasonga's novel illustrates how the school spaces are built and protected and then how various forces breach its barriers. The contradiction of the high school's wholesome façade and its disastrous reality contribute to Mukasonga's ironic and critical appraisal of the school. Ultimately, Mukasonga's irony and spatial reconstruction help us reconsider the broader impact of this Western-model educational institution in addition to its involvement in Rwanda's violent history.

In the scope of this dissertation, Mukasonga's novel advances the larger literary portrayal of school further into contemporary eras. Appearing in 2012, *Notre-Dame du Nil* is the most recent publication in my corpus. Moreover, the novel's events take place in 1973, firmly in the

post-independence period. Nevertheless, modernity/coloniality endure as the text illustrates how the colonial Hamitic myth continues to sew hate among ethnicities in Rwanda. My reading shows that the choice of setting this novel at a school built near the source of the Nile River is not haphazard but signifies the role the school played in starting and sustaining that myth. Mukasonga's childhood realities differ significantly from the other authors featured in this project because of these distinct geographical, political, historical, and cultural contexts of Rwanda. Navigating some of the same separations, identity crises, and nostalgia that the other protagonists face, the students in *Notre-Dame du Nil* must also confront school-facilitated inter-ethnic conflict and violence. Linking each of these novels, however, are the same distorting pedagogies, exploitive power dynamics, and cycles of coloniality inherent to the school in (post)colonial contexts. Narratively, *Notre-Dame du Nil* relates to the other novels due to the centrality of the school in its plot but distinguishes itself by its more overtly critical take on this scholastic system. While we see remorse toward colonial education in *L'Aventure ambiguë* and the bitter consequences of discordant knowledge in *Le Baobab fou*, *Notre-Dame du Nil* actively asserts a critique of the school and many of its actors by controlling the narration's ironic register throughout. For that reason, Mukasonga's novel may present the clearest turn towards a decolonial appraisal of the school in this study.

Like the other authors studied in this dissertation, Mukasonga crafts a narrative that draws from her own lived experiences. The historical and personal truths she weaves into this fictional account lend credence to her critique of the school and its involvement in the history of the ethnic turmoil throughout the country. Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Rwanda in 1956 and raised in a family that valued formal education and practiced Catholicism. At the time of her birth, Mukasonga's home country had long been afflicted by tensions between its two major

ethnicities (the Hutus and the Tutsis) due to volatile political dynamics exacerbated by colonial powers. In 1960, Hutu-led Rwandan authorities forcibly removed Mukasonga and her Tutsi family from their home region of Butare to Nyamata. The latter was the far less ecologically and agronomically hospitable area of Rwanda where the government was concentrating Tutsi populations. In her autobiographical work *Inyenzi, ou les Cafards* (2006), Mukasonga recounts the different schooling configurations that the displaced Tutsi families erected to instruct their children. She also details other day-to-day routines and adaptations she and her family made in their new “home” while anti-Tutsi sentiment and violence increased throughout her childhood years. Through a combination of natural talent and luck, Mukasonga was able to continue her schooling into secondary education at Notre-Dame-des-Cîteaux in Kigali and after at L’École des assistantes sociales in Butare.<sup>1</sup>

The representation of the lycée in *Notre-Dame du Nil* draws from a combination of Mukasonga’s secondary schooling experiences. As a minority Tutsi, Mukasonga suffered prejudice and bullying at school. She narrowly escaped a raid on the school in Butare targeting Tutsi students and eventually resigned herself to leave the country. In 1973, the same year in which *Notre-Dame du Nil* takes place, Mukasonga fled to Burundi with her brother, who also had the “malheur d’aller à l’école” (Mukasonga 2006, 96).<sup>2</sup> Only at great danger to herself and her family was she able to make return trips to Rwanda. She visited her parents and siblings living there for the last time in 1986. She obtained a degree in social work in Burundi, moved to

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the quota that was established to limit the number of Tutsi students allowed to pursue higher education (around 10% of a class), those young Tutsis who showed too much promise were purposefully not passed on to the secondary level. “Il fallait être bon, mais pas trop. On avait depuis longtemps remarqué que les élèves les plus brillants n’étaient jamais admis. Mieux valait se tenir dans une honnête moyenne” (Mukasonga 2006, 74) [You had to be smart, but not too smart. Everyone had noticed long before that the best students never passed. Better to stick to an unremarkable average grade (76)]. This was especially true for male students. Mukasonga explains that she eked through because of a very precise high-but-not-too-high score on her national exam. All English translations of this novel come from Stump, Jordan, trans. 2016. *Cockroaches*. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books.

<sup>2</sup> “...were unlucky enough to be enrolled in school” (99).



Djibouti to work, and then relocated permanently to France in 1992 with her husband, a Frenchman, whom she met in Burundi. Mukasonga witnessed the 1994 Rwandan genocide from abroad. She lost 37 members of her family, and to grieve, commemorate, and remember them, she turned to writing.

Mukasonga's first two works *Inyenzi, ou les Cafards* (2006) and *La femme aux pieds nus* (2008) trace moments in Mukasonga's life, including her family's exile to Nyamata; lessons she learned from her father, mother, and schooling; her own flight from Rwanda in 1973; her life in exile; and her return to Rwanda in 2004. In both of these autobiographical works, Mukasonga alludes to her own process of mourning, remembering, and catharsis through the therapeutic act of writing. With her 2010 collection of short stories *L'Iguifou*, Mukasonga breaks away from the autobiographical, though these fictions are laced with echoes from her own childhood and the history of Rwanda. *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2012) is Mukasonga's first novel, and also clearly mirrors Mukasonga's own experiences as a student at Notre-Dame-des-Cîteaux in Kigali and L'École des assistantes sociales in Butare. The novel won the Prix Ahmadou Kourouma and the Prix Renaudot in 2012 and was adapted for the big screen by filmmaker Atiq Rahimi in 2019. Her 2014 collection *Ce que murmurent les collines: Nouvelles rwandaises* intersects the autobiographical, historiographical, and fictional, recounting for example the origins of racial myths in Rwanda, memorable moments from Mukasonga's school days, and elements of Rwandan folklore across a set of short stories. She returns to the novel with *Cœur tambour* (2016), depicting the elaborate life and perplexing death of a famous Rwandan singer known for her ability to entrance her audiences with her hypnotic, otherworldly songs. Mukasonga's work *Un si beau diplômé!* (2018) continues her autobiography, particularly her experiences after leaving Rwanda in 1973. Her most recent works *Kibogo est monté au ciel* (2020), *Sister*

*Deborah* (2022), and *Julienne* (2024) return yet again to the novel and continue to integrate historical, personal, legendary, and fictional elements into their narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Mukasonga's corpus spans themes and modes. She plays with genre, flowing easily between personal remembering, fictional narrative, historical document, and founding myth. In blending and blurring generic, biographical, and diegetic lines, she creates a symbiosis between her works. The echoing themes and experiences create coherence in her writing but also signify a means to process and portray atrocity. The repetitions in her corpus, sometimes down to the very sentence, arise like a persistent thought, a recurring nightmare, or a mental effort to gain understanding of an unfathomable concept. The processing is cyclical and demands repetition, and I posit that the recurring theme of school in her work reflects the trauma she experienced there. By consistently revisiting this subject, she underscores the enduring impact of educational experiences on individuals.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, her texts provide rich material from which to study the school because of the attention she pays it and all the textures, devices, and perspectives she uses to portray the schooling experience, from personal accounts in *Inyenzi* and *Un si beau diplôme!*, to student narrators in *L'Iguifou*, to textbook references in *Ce que murmurent les collines*. Again, the autobiographical nature of Mukasonga's writing imbues her representation of school life with a profound sense of authenticity as she draws directly from her personal experiences. This not only makes her critique of the educational system more compelling but also infuses it with a

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<sup>3</sup> While Mukasonga's readership is widely of the Global North, she has stated that Green Hills Academy in Kigali has incorporated *Notre-Dame du Nil* into its French curriculum (Hitchcott 2015, 32). She has also gained a significant literary and scholarly response in Brazil (Boizette 2020).

<sup>4</sup> In *Indigenous Vanguard: Education, National Liberation, and the Limits of Modernism*, Ben Conisbee Baer (2019) sums up the attention that politicians and writers like Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aimé Césaire to questions of schooling as a "fixation on education problems." I argue that Mukasonga exhibits a similar fixation, though like the more contemporary works studied in this dissertation, Mukasonga's appraisal of the school offers more critique and dubiety.

didactic purpose. Her fictionalization of these events, however, also importantly contribute to the larger narrative of Rwanda's history.

Of all her texts, *Notre-Dame du Nil* features the school most centrally, as it is the primary setting of the novel, all major characters play a role at the school, and the time span of the novel fits into one academic year. Furthermore, the work's central conflicts revolve around school's structures, power dynamics, and manipulability, as evidenced in the following summary.

*Notre-Dame du Nil* depicts the experiences of female students attending the prestigious Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school, perched among the Rwandan hills at the source of the Nile River. In the novel, the high school's rigorous coursework and elite feminine formation build the essential backdrop for the true nature of the institution, rife with ethnic tension, gendered competition, political injustice, and predatory leadership. For example, the novel depicts how the two final-year Tutsi students, Virginia and Veronica, bear the brunt of their classmates' ethnic prejudice and hate. Gloriosa, whom classmates call "le ministre," is their most unrelenting and hostile harasser. Through lying to and manipulating cowardly leadership, Gloriosa seizes complete control of the school towards the end of the novel. The leeway afforded by the complicit Père Herménégilde, the European teachers who turn a blind eye, and the ineffectual mère supérieure provides Gloriosa the power to stir hate within the school and eventually bring in militants to torture and kill Tutsi students.

The first quarter of the novel sets up the school setting, portrays its day-to-day routines, and introduces the nature of relationships among students and between students and teachers. While third-person narration controls this first section, the rest of the novel is comprised of more episodic accounts that focus on students and their exploits. For instance, Veronica is regularly lured away from school by an eccentric white European neighbor, Monsieur de Fontenaille, for

visits to his nearby defunct coffee plantation. There he drugs her, dresses her in costume, and enacts a sort of role play where she represents the Queen Isis. Veronica, aware of the older man's delusion, is nevertheless seduced by the attention and his promises to pay for her schooling in Europe. Veronica convinces Virginia to come with her occasionally, but it is ultimately Veronica, the most beautiful of the female students, who receives the full brunt of his fanaticism. Fontenaille's obsession with the Tutsi students is an unmistakable reference to the European explorers' and colonizers' obsession with and preference for the Tutsi people.

Veronica and Virginia's interactions with M. de Fontenaille form major narrative threads throughout the book, but other episodes feature different students navigating their own final year of high school. Immaculée sneaks away from school to consult a traditional "rainmaker" over the loyalty of her boyfriend. Modesta's shame and fear over the Tutsi blood she inherited from her mother intensifies with the shame and fear of menstruation. Her experience shows that the completed transformation into womanhood is a stigmatized state of guilt and misery that girls are taught to never speak about. Père Herménégilde preys on students, ordering them to change into donated clothing in his private office as he watches. When Frida's fiancée, a rich political ally of her father, moves into the school, she becomes pregnant, dies in childbirth, and is erased from the collective memory of her classmates and teachers. The queen of Belgium comes to visit the school, bringing any sort of serious learning screeching to a halt in order for students and teachers to prepare for her performative welcome. These episodes unfold to reveal realities of the school that contradict its public image, its wholesome outward appearance. In the final climax of the novel, the Jeunesse militante rwandaise (Militant Rwanda Youth), or JMR, invade the school at Gloriosa's command and begin terrorizing Tutsi students. Veronica is brutally murdered as she

tries to hide in M. de Fontenaille's home. With Immaculée's help, Virginia narrowly escapes and flees to Burundi.

Within one novel, Mukasonga treats the idealization of the modern school in a postcolonial context but also the fissures in its veneer and the forces that exploit them. *Notre-Dame du Nil*'s more blatant critique of scholastic and religious institutions corresponds with the decolonial project of revealing those imperial colonial designs that permeate constructs of modernity, those "peripherizing and subalternizing technologies of global imperial technologies underpinning and reproducing the current racialized, patriarchal, Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric and asymmetrical organized world order together with its anti-black behaviours" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b, 130). The salient elements of the school in this novel—namely its goals, its spatial arrangement, and eventually its breaches—point to its fallibility, despite the positive rhetoric of modernity that surrounds it.

### **Of Elevations, Archives, and Irony: Introducing Notre-Dame-du-Nil**

The novel's scholastic setting immediately takes center stage. Within its first pages, the text presents the school in glowing language, focusing reader attention to its heavenly location. However, the accolades cede to reminders of the country's violent past contained in the school's archives, representing its core essence and origin. This juxtaposition sets the stage for the novel to sew irony throughout its representation of Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school and uncover a history of Rwanda that the laudatory language cannot completely conceal.

The school is the first entity introduced in the novel, immersing the reader in the scholastic space. The description launches with the school's most prominent feature: its elevation. "Il n'y a pas de meilleur lycée que le lycée Notre-Dame-du-Nil. Il n'y en a pas de plus

haut non plus. 2 500 mètres, annoncent fièrement les professeurs blancs. 2 493, corrige sœur Lydwine, la professeur de géographie. ‘On est si près du ciel’, murmure la mère supérieure en joignant les mains” (9).<sup>5</sup> The series of superlatives in this incipit set Notre-Dame-du-Nil apart not only from other schools but from other, more lowly locations. The introduction declares the school to be the best, but it is the geographical location that takes precedence. The quality of the school is tied to its significantly high altitude, giving impressions of stature, renown, or even the sublime, but also superiority and haughtiness. As mentioned above, Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school is loosely based on Notre-Dame-des-Cîteaux, the high school that Mukasonga attended. The latter is located in the middle of Kigali, whereas the former is set in a remote location in the hills surrounding the capital city. By deviating geographical from the real model, this novel draws all the more attention to the placement of the fictional high school, specifically in its (failed) attempt to separate itself from society and deter corrupting external influences.

The introduction also draws attention to the school’s placement in proximity to the Nile River, particularly its source, explaining that the students go on yearly pilgrimages there to visit the statue of Our Lady of the Nile. The narrator then transports the scene back in time, to the years before the school was built and describes the ceremony during which a statue of the Virgin Mary was placed near the spring.<sup>6</sup> To the crowd’s surprise and joy, the bishop pulls back the veil

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<sup>5</sup> “There is no better lycée than Our Lady of the Nile. Nor is there any higher. Twenty-five hundred meters, the white teachers proudly proclaim. ‘Two thousand four hundred ninety-three meters,’ points out Sister Lydwine, our geography teacher. ‘We’re so close to heaven,’ whispers Mother Superior, clasping her hands together” (7). All English translations of this text come from Mauthner, Melanie, trans. 2014. *Our Lady of the Nile*. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books.

<sup>6</sup> In this flashback, the narrator also points out a small pyramid structure near the Nile’s source attributing the 1924 discovery to a European discovery mission. In *Ce que murmurent les collines* (Mukasonga 2014, 28–29), Mukasonga explains how several different explorers claimed to have found the source of the Nile river in various places across Rwanda. “Le plus grand Malheur qui soit arrivé aux Rwandais, c’est d’habiter aux sources du Nil, là où, depuis l’Antiquité, s’était déposé le mythe d’une contrée originelle, d’un paradis perdu et inaccessible. [...] Aux sources du Nil, on allait, à défaut de les trouver, inventer des êtres tout juste sortis de la Fable, une race quasi primordiale...” [The greatest Misfortune that has befallen Rwandans is living at the source of the Nile, where, since Antiquity, the myth of an original land, of a lost and inaccessible paradise, had been deposited. [...] At the source of the Nile, failing to locate the beings straight out of the Fable, a quasi-primordial race, they would invent them...].

to reveal a Black Mary: “Notre-Dame du Nil était une femme noire, une Africaine, une Rwandaise, pourquoi pas?” (13).<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the passage insinuates that the statue had been painted to resemble a Black skin tone, a “mask of negritude” (65).<sup>8</sup> “La Vierge qui émergea du voile ressemblait certes à la Vierge de Lourdes comme celle que l’on pouvait voir à l’église de la mission, même voile bleu, même ceinture azur, même robe jaunâtre, mais Notre-Dame du Nil était noire, son visage était noir, ses mains étaient noires, ses pieds étaient noirs...” (13).<sup>9</sup> The statue’s European physiognomy covered with a layer of paint in an attempt to “Africanize” the Virgin Mary is a telling link to Arthur de Gobineau’s theory and European explorers’ belief that the Tutsi people were not actually Black but “white Hamites.” As Catherine Coquio extensively elaborates in *Rwanda: le réel et les récits* (2004, see especially 32-34), herein lay the origins of the Hamitic myth.

Early European explorers in Africa sought a “lost race” said to exist at the source of the Nile River descending from the biblical figure Ham. Upon arriving in Rwanda and observing the advanced sociopolitical structure in place, European explorers dubbed the members of Rwandan aristocracy to be the descendants of ancient Pharaohs of Egypt. In doing so, colonizers codified Rwandans into their own hierarchy, mutating the labels of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa into discrete “ethnicities” and then “races” and imbedding the categories into Rwandan collective imagination (Coquio 2004). Other scholars studying *Notre-Dame du Nil* often focus on the thematic of the

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See also Coquio (2004) for more on the history of European explorers searching for the source of the Nile River and the impacts of that search.

<sup>7</sup> “Our Lady of the Nile was a black woman, an African woman, a Rwandan woman—indeed, why not?” (11).

<sup>8</sup> Later on Modesta comments on the statue: ““Les Blanc l’ont maquillé en noir. C’est sans doute pour nous faire plaisir à nous les Rwandais, mais son fils, à la chapelle, lui, il est resté blanc”” (223) [The whites put black makeup on her. Probably to please us Rwandans, but her son in the chapel, well, he remained white (196)]. Modesta’s astute observation echoes with the same wry awareness that runs throughout the novel.

<sup>9</sup> “The Virgin who appeared from beneath the veil certainly resembled Our Lady of Lourdes, who can be seen at the mission church dressed in the same blue veil, the same azure belt, the same yellow dress, but Our Lady of the Nile was black: her face was black, her hands were black, her feet were black” (11).

Hamitic myth as a nefarious force permeating the school. In their studies, Hetzel (2016) and Mimoso-Ruiz (2017) examine how the myth forms M. de Fontenaille's obsession with Tutsi students, echoing the specious ethnographies of colonizers. It also feeds Modesta's anxieties over racial purity. Furthermore, the myth influences standards of beauty at the school. Toward the end of the novel, Gloriosa's disdain for this "Tutsi-looking" Mary statue drives her to attempt to give it a more "Hutu-looking" nose.<sup>10</sup> However, she falls from the pedestal and gets scraped up and muddy. To cover for her failed late-night escapade with Modesta, Gloriosa fabricates a story about being attacked by Tutsi rebels living in the hills around the school. Her lie leads to a witch-hunt for the non-existent rebels and the persecution of Tutsi students at the school. Gloriosa's perjury also evokes the Hamitic myth in that they both generate murderous consequences. Importantly, these falsehoods all flow from the source of the Nile River, the symbolic source of malevolent tales. The proximity of Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school to this destructive wellspring also implicates the school in the creation and perpetuations of dangerous fantasies.

In fact, the school's archives contain evidence of a violent past, despite the proud piety of its teachers. After relaying the details of the statue's ceremony, the narrator returns forward in time to the school's library where we first meet students Gloriosa, Modesta, and Veronica who have been assigned to organize its archives. As they flip through the discolored, dusty images of the ceremony's attendants, they find a picture of the local chiefs and their wives whose faces have been crossed out in red ink. Gloriosa menacingly explains, "Les photos de chefs qui ont subi la 'révolution sociale,'" dit Gloriosa en riant. 'Un coup de stylo, un coup de machette, et pffft..., fini les Tutsi'" (16).<sup>11</sup> Gloriosa's glib yet threatening posture only intensifies as the

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<sup>10</sup> As Hitchcott explains, certain physical characteristics became associated with the Tutsi, one of the most common being the shape of the nose (2015, 5).

<sup>11</sup> "The chiefs' photos have suffered the *social revolution*," said Gloriosa, laughing. 'A dash of ink, a slash of machete, that's all it takes... and no more Tutsi'" (14).



school year continues. In a grim instance of foreshadowing, Veronica fears for her own life in this moment, wondering if the class portrait would eventually show a red X over her face.

By “revolution sociale,” Gloriosa is referencing a movement that began right before Rwanda gained independence in 1962 and continued into the post-independence era. As talks about and preparations for independence were beginning in the late 1950s, a Hutu-led group of intellectuals and politicians began crafting narratives of liberation. These narratives largely centered the idea that the Hutu people were victims of years oppression at the hands of the Tutsis. For example, politician Joseph Gitera drafted the “11 Commandments of the Hutu” in 1959 and then adapted them as the “Hutu Ten Commandments.” (Years later, these texts were printed in *Kangura*, a publication spreading anti-Tutsi propaganda beginning in 1990 and leading up to the 1994 genocide.) The religious connotations of these texts signal how readily they would be taken up and heeded by a majority Christian Hutu population (Brown 2014; Hitchcott 2015). Colonial powers were not absent from this power shift and propaganda. For example, the Rwandan identity cards instituted by the Belgians in 1933 became a major tool for discrimination and killing, beginning with the first pogroms in the 1950s and lasting to the 1994 genocide. Furthermore, the Tutsis had been favored by colonizers since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because of their ensuing financial, educational, and political edge, the Tutsi elite were the most organized in the move toward independence. However, to extend their control of the region, Belgian powers began to back Hutu-led political groups in what Catherine Coquio (2004, 21) calls a “brutal reversal.” With the backing of the Belgian colonizers and the Church, a small Hutu elite was ready to step into power when Rwanda finally did gain independence in 1962. However, ethnic disdain remained consistent throughout the longer period of decolonization. The term “social

revolution” was euphemism for the harassment, forced displacement, and systematic murder of Tutsi populations in Rwanda beginning in 1959.

It is not coincidental that this novel opens with a look into the school’s archives. By entering this “epistemic site” (Mbembe 2015), Mukasonga’s novel draws attention to the larger historiographical dilemma of archiving genocide. However, *Notre-Dame du Nil* itself offers important possibilities for representing the atrocity. As the reader witnesses Veronica observe the photograph of the ceremony that had, years later, been altered with the red Xs, the novel layers four temporal moments each with historical significance: a colonial past, a period of neocolonial ethnist pogroms, the continued harassment of Tutsis like Veronica, and the novelistic, modern day rendering of it all. By layering the different temporalities and forms of documentation, Mukasonga calls for a necessarily layered, heterogenous representation of trauma, atrocity, and history.

Mukasonga’s strategy shares affinities with the concept of the “anarchive.” In *Absent the Archive*, Lia Brozgal (2020) calls to activate the “anarchive” when “official” archival documents do not exist or when the material at hand does not fit into the traditional archive. Herein lies the importance of fictional renderings of history. In her work with the anarchive, Brozgal focuses “less on questions of fact and more on the function, aesthetics, and even the political stakes of representation, a gesture that acknowledges the crucial role played by cultural texts in the production and transmission of historical knowledge and subjective experience alike” (27). Accordingly, by introducing her novel in the setting of the archive, Mukasonga implicates her novel into the inscription of Rwanda’s history.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As Rodrigues (2018) argues, the slash of the pen on the faces of the murdered Tutsis in the image would, many years later, be balanced by the pen which writers like Mukasonga use to inscribe the memory of victims and survivors. Remembering and commemorating the Rwandan genocide has inspired many literary depictions. For example, the project “Rwanda, Écrire par devoir de mémoire” was launched in 1998 by Fest’Africa. The movement

Scholars largely agree that Mukasonga's works challenge readers to understand Rwanda and its history beyond the prism of the 1994 genocide (Dauge-Roth 2010). First of all, none of her works portray the events of 1994. In a 2018 interview published in the *New Yorker* (Treisman 2018), Mukasonga explains why.

I described my family's deportation to Nyamata in my first book, "Cockroaches." But I always feel hesitant or reluctant to speak of the genocide of the Tutsi people in 1994. I wasn't there. I was in France while my loved ones and a million other victims were massacred. I still have a sense of guilt at having outlived them. I feel that I survived a loss, but I don't consider myself a survivor.

Nevertheless, her work plays an important role in expanding the (hi)story beyond the events of 1994 and the tensions that exploded in that moment. *Notre-Dame du Nil* effectively and importantly underlines how Rwanda had been a powder keg for decades. It is by addressing the historical underpinnings of ethnic hate and conflict in Rwanda and in setting her story in an environment that was saturated and corrupt with the tension, competition, the politics of the period that Mukasonga is able to contribute to the larger representation of the genocide itself.<sup>13</sup>

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sent ten writers from around the African continent to Kigali to do research and ultimately produce a literary work centering the Rwandan genocide. Fictionalizing unthinkable events such as genocide generates even more questions of ethics and aesthetics. As Nicki Hitchcott says in her extensive analysis of Rwandan fiction *Rwanda Genocide Stories* (2015), "Like all creative works about traumatic experiences, genocide fiction is a paradoxical genre insofar as it attempts to imagine that which is defined as impossible to imagine" (19). Authorial strategies that literary scholars have located in the works of "Rwanda, Écrire par devoir de mémoire" include subverting traditional, and often Western-centric, literary conventions such as narrative linearity, favoring non-linear and fragmented narratives. Generic conventions are also morphed, and certain works vacillate between narrative and document forms, between narration and journalistic recounts. Some authors make use of satire, for example in representing atrocity, or the fantastical. Other strategies include intertextuality, especially referring to other atrocities such as the Holocaust. A final example is the effect of polyphony generated through including several testimonies, incorporating different voices that bear witness to the atrocity (Semujanga 2008). All of these narrative strategies demonstrate the ethical and aesthetic intentions of the authors in the complex and perhaps impossible task of representing atrocity, and all of these narrative strategies succeed in navigating the ethical and aesthetic confrontations to a greater or lesser extent.

<sup>13</sup> Expanding on Borzgal's concept, Michel Laronde (2023) posits that perhaps the anarchive could "be archived." In other words, cultural texts like Mukasonga's could "jouer son propre rôle dans la mise au présent de l'écriture de l'Histoire au côté de l'archive officielle, dans un processus où les deux régimes s'informerait mutuellement afin de garder l'Histoire vivante dans le présent en apportant des corrections, aussi minimes soient-elles, à des faits historiques spécifiques" [play its own role in bringing the writing of History to the present alongside the official archive, in a process where the two regimes would inform each other in order to keep History alive in the present by making corrections, no matter how small, to specific historical facts] (98).

We could consider *Notre-Dame du Nil*, therefore, as more than a foreshadowing; it is the palimpsestic text upon which the genocide will be “written” twenty years after the events of the narrative.

This episode in the school’s archives evokes Notre-Dame-du-Nil’s connection to the layers of violent historical and contemporary events. In these first pages of *Notre-Dame du Nil*, we move from a wide-angle shot of the school to the historical heart of the institution. The chapter opens with descriptions of the prestigious placement and reputation of the school and ends with a close-up look at the reality of its violent history and its present danger. Right away, Mukasonga’s novel presents the school as closely tied with the country as a whole, implicating the institution in the darker side of Rwanda’s history.

The initial presentation of the school launches an important narrative pattern. It establishes an ironic tone that becomes a central discursive strategy in Mukasonga’s portrayal of the school. The introduction juxtaposes an exaggerating narration (“il n’y a pas de meilleur lycée”) with the heavy self-importance from school leadership (“On est si près du ciel”) to emphasize the extent of their misplaced superiority and obliviousness to or complicity in the immoral activities happening within the school. The following analyses will explore how narrative voice contributes to the mechanisms of irony and polyphony meant to nuance the novel’s revelatory portrayal of the school.

Irony crops up as a useful register in other novels studied in this dissertation, namely Mongo Beti’s *Mission terminée* and Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*. As Chapter Four will elaborate, Diome’s protagonist, Salie, targets neocolonial regimes of globalization with her irony, not school. In *Mission terminée*, we can recall that during the public deliberation, Medza and his mastery of Western rhetorical moves do nothing to win over the men in his community,

despite them wanting to intimidate the Kalans with his Western knowledge. In both *Mission terminée* and *Notre-Dame du Nil*, irony serves to lay bare the (erroneous) understandings of what schooling provides for its students. The register in these two texts therefore challenges purely positive discourse about school. However, *Mission terminée* places its critique in naïve students (like Medza) and so-called African traditionalists (like the patriarch Bikokolo). Moreover, Mongo Beti's irony has a lighter comedic effect. Finally, it is the narrating Medza who pokes fun at his youthful ignorance and his community's hypocrisy. On the other hand, the third-person narrator of *Notre-Dame du Nil* controls the irony and targets its critique firmly in the hypocrisy of the school. While at times comedic, its effect is decidedly darker.<sup>14</sup>

The ironic tone of *Notre-Dame du Nil*'s initial chapters helps to establish a pattern that neatly represents the entire novel's tactic in revealing the truths about the school. The narrative voice first gives readers the readily accepted and respectable understanding of the institution but then reveals more grisly realities of its activities. In doing so, the narrator plays into the stark difference between accepted narratives of school and disturbing truths, depicting them in an ironic juxtaposition. For example, in the initial description of the school setting, the narrator explains that its geographical placement is essential of its functioning. "C'est pour les filles qu'on a construit le lycée, bien haut, bien loin, pour les éloigner, les protéger du mal, des tentations de la grande ville" (9).<sup>15</sup> The distancing of the school purportedly helps preserve young feminine innocence.<sup>16</sup> Soon after, however, the narrator discloses the real priorities of the

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<sup>14</sup> This narrative voice cannot be traced a specific identity, yet if the objective of *Notre-Dame du Nil* is to give an honest account of the school's complicity of colonial and ethnic violence, the narrative voice could be said to align with that of Mukasonga herself. For more instances of *Notre-Dame du Nil*'s irony, see Camelin (2017).

<sup>15</sup> "The reason for building the lycée so high up was to protect the girls, by keeping them far away from the temptations and evils of the big city" (8).

<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the double protection from "mal" but also "temptations" insinuates that it is not just external influences that may prey on the girls, but that the girls are not totally innocent or incorruptible. The geography and spatial configuration of the school act as much to keep girls in as to keep others out. In Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *The First Woman* (2020), the main character Kirabo, a student at a girls' boarding school in 1970s

high school when explaining how these protective—or suppressive—measures are actually meant to preserve girls for marriage: “C’est que les demoiselles du lycée sont promises à un beau mariage. Il faut qu’elles y parviennent vierges, au moins qu’elles ne tombent pas enceintes avant. Vierges, c’est mieux” (9).<sup>17</sup> In the same breath, the narrator mocks the non-academic purpose of the school and points out its immorality and patriarchal marital expectations of women. This construction implies that the third-person narrator can speak truths that the characters cannot. Although avoiding premarital pregnancy may be an unspoken reality of the school, an extradiegetic perspective puts forth the provocative comment. The narrative voice rearticulates the idealized narratives and then challenges them through its candor, thus becoming a sort of intermediary between the girls and the reader.

In marrying the immediate introduction of the school with a thick layer of irony, Mukasonga quickly establishes a critical posture towards the institution as well as its purported protection of feminine virtue and contribution to “development.”<sup>18</sup> Highlighting the paradoxical difference between the theory and the practice of the school is one of the most powerful tools *Notre-Dame du Nil* uses to critique it. In a way, Mukasonga’s narrative pattern recalls the modernity/coloniality construction. As Mignolo (2018) explains, both are mutually constitutive, but the positive rhetoric of modernity masks the darker side of coloniality. “Modernity is half the

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Uganda, has a similar realization about the wall surrounding her school. “‘Why is the school in such a remote area?’ ‘To minimise escaping.’ ‘Missionaries believed cities were corrupt...morally.’ The car crawled up a steep hillside until they finally came to the school gate, which sat at the very top of the peak. A hedge of old fir trees. The school motto welded above the gate claimed YOU EDUCATE A WOMAN, A NATION IS EDUCATED. Now Kirabo realised. The fir hedge was a facade; behind it was a high wall, topped with jagged glass shards, then barbed wire” (167).

<sup>17</sup> “Good marriages await these young lycée ladies, you see. And they must be virgins when they wed—or at least not get pregnant beforehand. Staying a virgin is better” (8).

<sup>18</sup> As Rodrigues (2018) elucidates, the school is “onde se cruzam política, religião, colonialismo, machismo e violência, sob o manto de um discurso de avanço, progresso e de modernidade” [where politics, religion, colonialism, machismo and violence intersect, under the cloak of a discourse of advancement, progress and modernity] (70). Bhattacharya (2018) also traces the connection between education, progress, and coloniality. In *Notre-Dame du Nil* “schools are foregrounded as sites of replication of the biopolitics of Rwanda, as religion, manipulated history, and a certain idea of progress colluded in the configuration of the enemy” (86).

story constantly hiding and repressing what doesn't fit the imaginary and desires of storytellers that legitimize themselves in the name of science, politics and economy..." (113). Decolonial projects endeavor to reveal both sides of the modernity/coloniality matrix of power and how they interact. "The implications of *seeing* two sides of the story, modernity/coloniality, instead of one side (modernity) are immense" (113). In that vein, Mukasonga's novel presents the positive rhetoric of Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school alongside its darker, hypocritical, and often violent designs, laying bare both sides of the modernity/coloniality matrix.

The omniscient narrative voice persists throughout the first few chapters until the bulk of the narration is taken over by the intradiegetic voices of different students. Ironical comments continue throughout the novel, but the text also strategically employs polyphony and episodic segments to portray the nuanced experience of schooling. Many of these episodes are relayed by girls recounting their story to their peers. In featuring these more intimate moments between classmates, the narration allows the reader a closer look into their lives, revealing again all sides of this institution that exists at the intersection of public and private space. As Lousa (2018, 79) puts it, giving voice to the girls invites and implicates them into the telling of the story and contributes yet again to the "anarchive" of narratives that make up the polyphony and larger history of the genocide. By ceding the narration to direct discourse, Mukasonga's novel grants the girls agency in the narrative and historical (re)construction of their experiences.

Besides destabilizing monolithic narratives of the genocide, the polyphony of *Notre-Dame du Nil* also destabilizes monolithic narratives of schooling. In other words, through the lens of different characters, the novel portrays different textures of and attitudes toward the schooling experience. For example, for Tutsi students like Virginia and Veronica (not to mention Mukasonga herself), the opportunity to attend Notre-Dame-du-Nil is a hard-won rarity and

source of pride for their families. Gloriosa's mother, on the other hand, understands her daughter's education differently, which the narrative voice expresses through a wry use of free indirect discourse. When she drops her daughter off at the school, Gloriosa's must address the mother superior to insure that "sa fille recevait au lycée Notre-Dame-du-Nil l'éducation démocratique et chrétienne qui convenait à l'élite féminine d'un pays qui avait fait la révolution sociale qui l'avait débarrassé des injustices féodales" (32).<sup>19</sup> The power dynamics between families and the high school differ wildly and reflect the power dynamics of wider 1973 Rwandan society.

While *L'Enfant noir*, *Mission terminée*, *Le Baobab fou*, and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* present a more personalized, internalized portrait of the school through first-person narration, *Notre-Dame du Nil* and *L'Aventure ambiguë* offer a prism of perspectives. *L'Aventure ambiguë* also employs a third-person voice that passes between different characters' points of view. For example, Kane's novel presents the classroom through the perspective of Jean-Luc, the white classmate of Samba Diallo, and grapples with the difficult decision of the colonial school through the perspective of La Grande Royale. As I demonstrate in the final chapter of this dissertation, Fatou Diome presents a mosaic of stories and experiences of migration from Senegal to France, but they all pass through the lens of the protagonist, Salie, an author in her own right. Furthermore, *L'Aventure ambiguë* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* have one protagonist that stands out among secondary characters. The focalization of *Notre-Dame du Nil* is dispersed, making it more truly polyphonic.

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<sup>19</sup> "...the lycée of Our Lady of the Nile would provide her daughter with the kind of democratic, Christian education appropriate to the female elite of a country that had undergone a social revolution, freeing it from the injustices of a feudal system" (27-28).



The novel does not ignore the danger in allowing these students to recount their own stories. When Gloriosa and Modesta are injured and dirty after trying to remodel the nose of the statue of Notre-Dame-du-Nil, they craft their lie about being attacked by Tutsi rebels. Their story spreads and expands until Gloriosa can instigate an entire false narrative about Tutsi plots against the school and bring in the Militant Rwandan Youth to terrorize Tutsi students. In “Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide,” Sara E. Brown (2014, 449) elucidates how Rwandan women’s involvement in the genocide often goes unaddressed, dismissing them from the larger narrative. Brown continues to posit that the patriarchal structure of 1994 Rwanda constrained women’s agency and that violence perpetrated by women acted to “simultaneously contradict and uphold patriarchal norms” (450). I would argue that similar constructs apply to women in 1973 Rwanda, and, as in the case of *Notre-Dame du Nil*, to youth. Mukasonga’s novel coincides with Brown’s attempt to use gender analysis to better understand the Rwandan genocide in not simply casting women and children as victims, but as agents. Gloriosa assumes an active role in the violent events portrayed in *Notre-Dame du Nil* through bullying (indeed persecution) of Tutsi students and facilitated by the structures of the school they are attending.

Not yet adults and no longer children, these lycéennes exist in the liminal space of adolescence. Adolescence brings with it the impulses of adulthood, an understanding—sometimes precocious—of inequalities, yet an underdeveloped brain and lack of experience to properly process complex issues. In the context of 1973 Rwanda, these students are at once victims and perpetrators, naïve and lucid, underdeveloped and all too aware. *Notre-Dame du Nil* aptly represents what scholar of childhood in literary studies Haider (2020) expresses: “...children and youth are enmeshed with societal power relations in the politics of culture and transnational conflicts,” and by centering youth in a fiction work, we see “processes of

subjectification, socialization, and identity construction, that is, the micro-politics of personal experience and the macro-politics of the public sphere” (194). As such, the antagonistic students featured in *Notre-Dame du Nil* are not the target of the novel’s critique. The narrator claims the role of relaying both the theory and the practice of the school, both the said and the unsaid, its expectations and outward appearance as well as its reality and the danger it presents. However, traces of colonial and patriarchal forces are not limited to its geographical placement. The girls’ instruction itself also bears vestiges of these agents.

Each novel studied in this dissertation helps shed light on aspects of the school often taken for granted, implicitly accepted, or wholly unconsidered, e.g., its pedagogy, classroom space, power dynamics. The depictions of the school and its processes firmly plant each work in the scholastic milieu but also reveal important phenomena of the school within (post)colonial contexts. In *Notre-Dame du Nil*, the narrativization of the school serves to implicate the institution in Rwanda’s violent history, beginning with European exploration and colonization. An in-depth reading of what may appear as inconsequential details of the girls’ day-to-day routine actually reveals great, grave consequences of the school’s original and persistent coloniality. After all, in his explanation of Western disciplinary apparatuses such as the school, Foucault ([1975] 2006) indicates that the art of the power of domination resides in “l’émminence du détail” (164).<sup>20</sup> Dialoguing with the history of formal education in Rwanda as well as theorizations of schooling, the following analyses will uncover some of the school’s persistent tools of domination and coloniality in Mukasonga’s depiction.

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<sup>20</sup> “Dans cette grande tradition de l’émminence du détail viendront se loger, sans difficulté, toutes les méticulosités de l’éducation chrétienne, de la pédagogie scolaire ou militaire, de toutes les formes finalement de dressage” (164) [In this great tradition of the eminence of detail, all the minutiae of Christian education, of scholastic or military pedagogy, all forms of “training” found their place easily enough (140)]. All English translations of this text come from Sheridan, Alan, trans. 1995. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books.

The narrator of *Notre-Dame du Nil* insinuates that a top priority of the school is to separate the daughters of ministers, military officers, and businessmen from moral corruption. A more palatable and readily accepted recasting of that function is the rhetoric of cultivating new generations of sophisticated Rwandan women. To add to the school's paradoxical pretense, every administrator, teacher, and clergyman at the school boasts constantly about this role: "former l'élite féminine du pays." The mantra appears repeatedly throughout the novel, creating an echo chamber that amplifies this one idea of the school and blinds everyone to the coercive colonial, political, sexual, and patriarchal forces that dominate the space in reality (for example, Père Herménégilde's predatory meetings with students, M. de Fontenaille's delusional role playing with Veronica, the deep stigma around menstruation at the school, and Gloriosa's threatening words toward Tutsi students). In fact, the insular, sealed nature of the school's physical and discursive construction, which I will discuss later on, contribute to the effect of the echo chamber, indicating another way that the school itself exacerbates the oppressive forces within. The accumulation of the mantra only enhances its irony, which in turn reinforces the importance of the narrative voice and the glimpses it allows into more intimate spaces and the internal thoughts of the girls in revealing the corruption of the school.

What comprises an elite feminine formation in 1973 Rwanda? In the beginning of the novel, once the students arrive at Notre-Dame-du-Nil for the start of the school year, their schedules establish a steady rhythm. What may seem like a simple course schedule at first blush is a means to communicate how school contributes to the coercive force of coloniality.

La sonnerie de la cloche retentissait à nouveau. C'était le début des cours.

Français, maths, religion, hygiène, histoire-géo, physique, sport, anglais, kinyarwanda, couture, français, cuisine, histoire-géo, physique, hygiène, maths, religion, cuisine, anglais, couture, français, religion, sport, français...

Les jours s'ajoutaient au jours, les cours succédaient aux cours. (48)<sup>21</sup>

This excerpt reveals a number of aspects about the school structure and routine in general. First, the material taught demonstrates colonial endurances. For example, the religion course (Catholicism in this case) harkens back to the first mission schools that were established in Rwanda. In his extensive historical studies of colonial and post-independence education in Rwanda, Pierre Erny (2001a; 2003) conveys that the region's first schools were largely started and sustained by Les Pères Blancs, a group French missionaries whom the German colonial authorities were happy to have establish and manage the formal education system. With the drive to "convertir, former, préserver,"<sup>22</sup> the objective of these schools was first and foremost to pass on Christian doctrine through catechism courses (Erny 2001a, 31). In turn, baptism was required to attend the school. Witnessing how this education was directly tied to social advancement, certain Rwandans were happy to convert. Tutsi nobility avoided conversion at first, but when they saw the advantages it offered newly baptized and schooled Hutu, they too joined the trend. After independence, the church retained much of its political, spiritual, and academic power. "L'Église héritée de la colonisation belge était une puissance considérable, sur le plan temporel et spirituel, détenant le contrôle de l'enseignement, assurant un encadrement efficace de la population, jouant sur le plan politique un rôle non négligeable" (Erny 2003, 27).<sup>23</sup> Remnants of this initial school setup reside in the fact that Notre-Dame-du-Nil is a Catholic school but also in its religious curriculum.

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<sup>21</sup> "The bell clanged again. Lessons were about to start: French, Math, Religion, Health and Hygiene, History, Geography, Physics, Physical Education, English, Kinyarwanda, Sewing, French, Cooking, History, Geography, Physics, Health and Hygiene, Math, Religion, Cooking, English, Sewing, French, Religion, Physical Education, French... The days wore on" (41).

<sup>22</sup> "convert, educate, preserve"

<sup>23</sup> "The Church inherited from Belgian colonization was a significant power, on temporal and spiritual levels, controlling education, ensuring effective supervision of the population, playing a sizable role at the political level."

A second endurance of coloniality in this course schedule is the subject that occurs the most frequently and also opens and closes the list: French. Although Rwanda was not colonized nor scholasticized by French administration, colonial language still plays an important role in the “civilizing” process that Les Pères Blancs and original iterations of school in Rwanda aimed to complete. French remained the major language of instruction in Rwandan schools until 2008 when it was replaced with English (Hitchcott 2015, 36). To reiterate, anti-colonial scholars such as Ngũgĩ ([1981] 2005) have penned powerful indictments of the content of (neo)colonial education. The curriculum of the school (at least in the texts studied here) favors Western history, literature, and culture. It implicitly impresses on students that Western culture is superior to their own, recalling what decolonial thinkers explain as the “coloniality of knowledge.” In *Notre-Dame du Nil*, the young women glamorize and venerate the West when they, for example, fawn over the arrival of the Belgian queen or when they prioritize continuing their studies in Europe.

What the representations of school studied here show is that *beyond* the curricular content, the designs of the institution also carry colonial mindsets and epistemologies. For example, at the level of narration, this excerpt further reveals the school’s mechanisms of control. The accumulation and repetition of subjects adds to the feeling of routine and monotony of the day-to-day. The long list of classes and the ellipsis at the end also suggest a nearly hypnotic repetition. We can recall other hypnosis-like states in *L’Enfant noir*, for example, when Laye explains how the material entranced students into a state of complete attention. We will also see this repetitive, mesmerizing school material in Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* when the main character Salie attributes her love for French and her escape from her insular hometown to her education and, specifically, her teacher. Finally, when Samba Diallo considers

how he was “conquered” by colonizer, he admits, “Longtemps, je suis demeuré sous la fascination de ces signes et des ces sons qui constituent la structure de la musique de leur langue” (171).<sup>24</sup> While these three students credit their enrapture to the alterity of the material presented, the hypnotic state in *Notre-Dame du Nil*’s school day is more closely linked to its monotony. The situations differ in that the former inspires hyperfocus while for *Notre-Dame-du-Nil*’s lycéennes, the effect is more soporific. For the students in Mukasonga’s novel, the content does not enthrall them but lulls them into submission to the routine.

Finally, the notion of time and controlling time permeates this depiction of the school regimen. In *Surveiller et Punir*, Foucault ([1975] 2006) explores how these chronometric devices are essential facets of the school structure. For example, the excerpt evokes the presence of the bell, a quintessential sonic symbol of the school that controls timing and movement of bodies. Characteristic of most Western disciplinary institutions, Foucault demonstrates how the “Signal” is particularly powerful mechanism of control, where the bell carries “dans sa brièveté machinale à la fois la technique du commandement et la morale de l’obéissance” (195).<sup>25</sup> The division of time into classes and days also depicts the separation and control of time. However, the linear chain of class following class and day following day blends time together, making it hard to sense the division as well as the passage of time. School time, therefore, is at once divided and controlled, repetitive and blurred, again establishing a steady rhythm that lulls everyone—students, teachers, and administration alike—into a numbing sense of normalcy. The bell, the repartition of the school day, the movement of bodies between classrooms—all elements typical

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<sup>24</sup> “‘I remained for a long time under the spell of those signs and those sounds which constitute the structure and the music of their language’” (159). All English translations of this novel come from Woods, Katherine, trans. 1963. *Ambiguous Adventure*. New York: Walker and Company.

<sup>25</sup> “...in its mechanical brevity both the technique of command and the morality of obedience” (166).

of most, if not every, standard model school—contribute to mechanisms of control, micropower, and taming, in other words domination.

The colonial traces in Notre-Dame-du-Nil's instruction extend beyond its routine and course schedule. The teachers themselves demonstrate a certain mental colonization that seeps into their lessons. For instance, one of only two Rwandan teachers at the school is Sœur Lydwine, the history-geography teacher. "Mais elle distinguait nettement les deux matières: selon elle, l'histoire, c'était pour l'Europe, la géographie, pour l'Afrique" (48-49).<sup>26</sup> Her strict division of these subjects is reminiscent of (neo)colonial ideas of Africa being a continent without history. Furthermore, when Veronica exclaims that she has seen Sœur Lydwine's favorite medieval characters in movies, the teacher snaps back, "'Tu veux bien te taire, se fâchait sœur Lydwine, ils ont vécu il y a bien longtemps, quand tes ancêtres n'avaient pas encore mis les pieds au Rwanda'" (49).<sup>27</sup> Evidently, Sœur Lydwine has bought into the idea that Tutsis like Veronica were foreigners to Rwanda, part of the myth planted by European explorers.

The ironic narrative voice continues to reveal the school's contradictions in this episode, emphasizing the paradoxical nature of Sœur Lydwine's beliefs. When she furtively whispers to students that there is an enormous crack through the middle of the continent of Africa that will one day cleave it in two, the girls burst into dismissive laughter. "...les Blancs décidément n'arrêtaient pas d'inventer des contes à dormir debout histoire de faire peur aux pauvres Africains" (50).<sup>28</sup> The laughter of the girls alongside this comment by the narrator once again ties

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<sup>26</sup> "...but she made a clear distinction between the two subjects: History meant Europe, and Geography, Africa" (41).

<sup>27</sup> "'Will you please be quite!' said Sister Lydwine crossly. 'They lived a very long time ago, before your ancestors had even set foot in Rwanda'" (42).

<sup>28</sup> "Clearly the whites never stopped coming up with far-fetched tales to scare the poor Africans" (42).

the truth-telling role of the narrative voice to what the girls are all too aware of yet may not say out loud.

Of the works explored in this study, *Notre-Dame du Nil* is the one that most actively mocks the teachers. The students in *L'Enfant noir*, *Mission terminée*, *L'Aventure ambiguë* express a certain respect out of fear for the teachers in those narratives.<sup>29</sup> When relaying the violence she experienced at the hands of her instructors, Ken in *Le Baobab fou* assumes a grave tone. As we will see in the next chapter, Salie in *Ventre de l'Atlantique* considers her teacher with the utmost respect and gratitude. However, it is not only the narrative voice of *Notre-Dame du Nil* that lays out an ironic appraisal of their hypocrisy, the students also recognize the teachers' incompetence and participate in the ridicule, indicating a different power dynamic and lucidity of those lycéennes. Interestingly, this is really the only time in Mukasonga's portrayals where teachers are found wanting. In her other works, she has a much more respectful posture towards educators. The deviation in *Notre-Dame du Nil* supports even further the idea that this novel has the particular goal of exposing the school and its corrupt or foolish instructors, contributing to the decolonial valence of the work.

### **Constructing an inaccessible, impermeable space: the school à huis clos**

The introduction to *Notre-Dame-du-Nil* high school communicates how its geographical location contributes to the school's functioning and goals. The narrator also signals the importance of its geographical positioning next to the source of the Nile River. While the school

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<sup>29</sup> There is a case in *L'Enfant noir* when Laye's father goes to his son's school to have a word with the director over the older students' bullying. In this episode, the director, roughed up Laye's father, is made out to be the coward. Laye is awed by his father's power to cow the school authority figure, but his pride quickly turns to anxiety when he thinks the scandal will negatively affect him at school. While the director shows weakness and corruption, he is never openly mocked in the Camara's novel.



administration sees this proximity as a symbol of purity and distinction, the narration indicates more sinister symbolism of this fictional location: at the confluence of European explorer destination, dangerous myths of Tutsi provenance, and religious claiming of indigenous space.<sup>30</sup> Besides its elevated and heavily symbolic location, the construction and space of the school also hold these layers of meaning. More specifically, the school space is meant to uphold its prestige, yet the novel steadily reveals how it actually serves to perpetuate harm. In this section, I show how the physical and narrative construction of the school itself helps sustain colonial and patriarchal forces. To begin, I will demonstrate how the novel reinforces the particular inaccessibility of the eponymous high school, both geographically and politically.

First of all, Notre-Dame-du-Nil is meant to be physically inaccessible. It exists in a removed location, but the topography surrounding the school makes it that much more difficult to reach.

Depuis la capitale, la piste qui y mène se faufile interminablement dans le labyrinthe des vallées et des collines, et puis, pour finir, quand on s’y attend le moins, elle escalade en quelques lacets l’Ikibira (les montagnes que les livres de géographie nomment, faute de mieux, la chaîne Congo-Nil) et c’est alors que l’on découvre le grand bâtiment du lycée. (23)<sup>31</sup>

The narration itself gives the impression of a jerky, strenuous climb, employing a lexical field that is related both to the topography and the difficulty of navigating it (“se faufile interminablement,” “labyrinthe des vallées et des collines,” “escalade quelques lacets”). The

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<sup>30</sup> Camelin (2017) also describes the significant choice of setting for this novel. “Scholastique Mukasonga a situé son roman en un lieu imaginaire et symbolique, aux sources du Nil, afin de démontrer [sic] la terrible corrélation entre les fantasmes européens et le génocide de 1994. Cet espace imaginaire permet d’associer différents moments de la folie qui a mené au génocide” [Scholastique Mukasonga placed her novel in an imaginary and symbolic place, at the source of the Nile, in order to demonstrate the terrible correlation between European fantasies and the 1994 genocide. This imaginary space allows us to combine different moments of the madness which led to the genocide] (122).

<sup>31</sup> “The track leading to the lycée from the capital, winds its interminable way through a labyrinth of hills and valleys and ends, quite unexpectedly, in a twisting climb up the Ikibira Mountains—which geography textbooks call the Congo-Nile range, for want of any other name. The lycée’s imposing main building comes into view...” (19).

description emphasizes a sense of relief when the reader finally reaches the school at the end of this sentence. Throughout the text, there are continual references to washed out roads and struggling vehicles, driving the impression that the journey to the high school is particularly treacherous.

The school is also inaccessible in its elitism. Most of the students are daughters of politicians, diplomats, military leaders, bankers, and wealthy businessmen who have the clout and finances to enroll their daughters in the best school. Furthermore, most of the students are Hutu, which reflects the historical reality of similar institutions at the time. After the country gained its independence in 1962, the Hutu-led government continued to cultivate ethnic divides through strict identity card practices and violent anti-Tutsi campaigns, claiming years of unjust Hutu subjugation at the hands of Tutsis. By 1973, the vast majority of elite, wealthy, and powerful Rwandan's still living in the country were Hutu. Ethnic quotas also limited the number of Tutsis that could hold employment and attend school (Hitchcott 2015, 6). In *Notre-Dame du Nil*, the Tutsi quota for the final year students consists of Virginia and Veronica, two students per class of twenty. The school, then, is inaccessible to certain students who are not financially and socially elite as well as to those who do not fit its ethnist criteria.

Finally, the location and reputation of Notre-Dame-du-Nil and the discourse that surrounds it generate a fantastical quality for the school, thus a third sphere of inaccessibility. “Tout là-haut, sur la montagne, il brille, pour les petites écolières, comme un palais illuminé de leurs rêves inaccessibles” (23).<sup>32</sup> The school is often concealed by the clouds, hiding it in a mist and contributing to this ethereal image. Mukasonga's novel paints Notre-Dame-du-Nil with a mythical, obscuring qualities, although behind the veneers of virtue, modernity, and a rigorous

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<sup>32</sup> “The lycée sits on the mountaintop, glinting at the schoolgirls, a palace that shines with their impossible dreams” (19).

timetable are menacing forces. In building a fictional institution and emphasizing its almost magical, mysterious qualities, the author weaves in elements of imagination and myth. In this way, her depictions draw out the unreality of the tensions and conflict in Rwanda, revealing the essential layer of the imaginary. These elements of imagination and myth, I argue, recall the dangerous misconceptions and myths that originated during colonization and perpetuated the interethnic tensions throughout the country. In the years building up to the genocide, anti-Tutsi sentiment was so systematically ingrained into the every-day of Rwandan life that the narratives being told about Tutsi's, the "myths" surrounding their oppressive superiority, entered firmly into the collective imaginary of a vast majority of the country. The mythical register that the novel teases conveys the role that myth and collective imagination played in the mounting and ultimate explosion of ethnic tension in Rwanda.

Notre-Dame du Nil also tries to be an impermeable space, and there are several other diegetic and narrative facets of the school that separate (or attempt to separate) its students from outside influence. A first line of defense is physical. The school is surrounded by high brick walls and patrolled by armed guards. Furthermore, the school gate is a constant presence through the novel. "Ils [les bâtiments de l'école] forment une grande cour que ferme un mur avec un portail en fer qui grince, quand on le ferme le soir ou qu'on l'ouvre le matin, plus fort que la sonnerie du coucher ou du réveil" (29).<sup>33</sup> Like the school bell, the sound of the gate controls students' routines and movements. Characters often hear the gate opening or closing or they are listening for the gate to announce an arrival, but unlike the regulating school bell, it becomes a distraction for students. This sonic presence of the very symbol of the school's threshold emphasizes its important role in allowing entrance to and exit from the school space. For readers,

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<sup>33</sup> "They [the school's buildings] form a courtyard closed off by a wall, with a metal gate that whines when it's opened in the morning and closed at night, much louder than the wake-up and bedtime bells" (24).

the repetition draws attention to the importance of comings and goings of the school, which I explore below.

Another way the Notre-Dame du Nil attempts to create a closed space is through language. As soon as the students cross its threshold, they must only speak French—an inheritance from the colonial education system. We can recall from Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* ([1981] 2005) that this strict language rule is a typical of the Western-model school in (post)colonial contexts. Central to its functioning was pitting students against each other, calling on classmates to turn others in who were caught speaking Gĩkũyũ. “Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one’s immediate community” (11). Language regulation, then, did not only underdevelop students’ knowledge of their primary language. It also sewed competition amongst them, creating yet another level of surveillance and animosity within the school space. In Mukasonga’s novel, language regulation has implications beyond the academic or even the colonial: it is a homogenizing technique that erases elements of students’ identity. On the first day back at school, Glorisa says to another student, “‘... mais dépêche-toi de franchir le portail, au lycée on ne parle que français, on pourra enfin comprendre ce que disent les gens de Ruhengeri’” (33).<sup>34</sup> Whether Gloriosa is snidely mocking the accents of her classmates or taking advantage of the common language to eavesdrop on others who would normally speak something other than Kinyarwanda, the language rule helps her keep hold of power. Moreover, it is Gloriosa who leads the school-wide shift into Kinyarwanda when she becomes the “maîtresse absolue du lycée” (255)<sup>35</sup> towards the end of the novel, exploiting the preestablished language rule for her

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<sup>34</sup> Ruhengeri is a city in northern Rwanda. “Come on, move it, through the gate, and remember, we don’t speak anything but French in school: we’ll finally get to know what the Ruhengeri girls are saying” (28).

<sup>35</sup> “absolute mistress of the lycée” (226).

own purposes and using the local language as a way to claim bolster nationalist (Hutu) sentiment. The school's pedagogical strategy and language bubble is harming students by empowering the bully.

The school is protected by the physical barriers of the gate and its walls. It is guarded linguistically to hinder student complicity and therefore any privacy and solidarity as well. Finally, the episode when students Immaculée and Veronica visit the rainmaker suggests a different kind of protection. The chapter "La pluie" ("Rain") details how this particularly powerful element of nature is a central, life-giving but sometimes dangerous force in traditional practices in Rwanda. After their consultation, the girls must rush back to the school to beat a gathering storm: "Nous avons couru, couru sur la pente de la montagne et sur la piste. Les nuages s'accumulaient et montaient vers nous. Le tonnerre grondait. Quand nous avons franchi le portail du lycée, la pluie s'est déchaînée et un éclair a déchiré le ciel" (75).<sup>36</sup> After a period of mounting tension, the girls arrive back at school at the very moment the rain begins in a violent burst. Their relief in reaching the school is palpable, but on the level of narration, the climactic build along with their impeccable timing gives the impression of the school as a hermetically sealed space, impenetrable to the rain and its traditional power.

The physical, linguistic, and hermetic protections of the school attempt to make it a closed space so students are protected or are contained to remain "pure." However, we can also see how these elements of enclosure contribute to the coloniality of the institution. For instance, the insular nature of the school contributes to the effect of the echo chamber mentioned earlier. Specifically, the school's outward objectives of forming a new feminine elite, promoting democracy, and "develop" Rwanda bounce around the "seal" of the school. It generates both a

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<sup>36</sup> "We ran and ran down the mountain and down the track. Clouds were massing, rising toward us. Thunder rumbled. Just as we entered the lycée gates, a torrential rain began to fall, and lightning ripped across the sky" (64).

façade that masks its dangerous realities and a crucible that incubates and perpetuates those realities. Regardless of the physical or discursive seal surrounding Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school, the novel also exposes the fault lines in its protective barrier and the forces that take advantage of them.

### **Breaches in the school and their de/colonial potential**

Mukasonga's novel constructs a scholastic space that is lofty and prestigious but also sealed and inaccessible. Despite these efforts, Notre-Dame-du-Nil is not an impermeable space. In reality, the comings and goings that ostentatiously, routinely, and clandestinely cross the barriers around the school ultimately corrupt it. In this section, I will analyze how the novel depicts consistent and inevitable breaches in the school's barrier that undermine the school's goals to remain sealed. However, both counter-hegemonic and nefarious forces can take advantage of these breaches. Indeed, Mukasonga's portrait troubles the idealization of the broader concept of the school by destabilizing its construction within the narrative. In this way, her portrayal of the school is distinct from those of the other novels studied here. Ken Bugul's text eventually offers its critiques, but *Notre-Dame du Nil* builds its very narrative on confronting the positive rhetoric of modernity surrounding the school and unveiling its coloniality. Unlike the regret, repression, or gratitude in the other texts, *Notre-Dame du Nil* critiques the colonial complicity of the school, and Mukasonga uses the narrative upper hand of irony to do so.

To begin, the description of the student arrivals at the beginning of the year indicates the importance of entering the school. "Il y avait les Mercedes, les Range Rover, les grosses jeeps militaires dont les chauffeurs s'énervaient, klaxonnaient, faisaient de grands gestes menaçants en

tenant de doubler les taxis, les camionnettes, les minibus surchargés de jeunes filles qui peinaient à gravir la dernière pente” (31).<sup>37</sup> The families’ ostentatious arrivals, performances wealth, highlight the notoriety and elitism of the school as well as its inaccessibility. Cars receive particular attention throughout the novel, emphasizing over and over the importance of entering the school space within the narration.

In fact, some sort of coming into or going out of the school space is a driving motif in the novel. Sometimes characters use these breaches to resist the stringent limitations imposed by school authorities, often rooted in coloniality. For example, the school endeavors to accustom the students to imported foods from Europe by only serving “white people food” in the cafeteria. However, the reader learns soon after their arrival that the students have all smuggled in their favorite local foods in defiance. “La nuit, dès que la surveillante avait quitté le dortoir, le festin commençait” (59).<sup>38</sup> This feast—a clandestine consumption of food from outside the school walls—becomes an indulgent subversion of school rules, one that centers Rwandan custom and culture over the European ways that the school promotes.

Furthermore, when the girls are granted the privilege to decorate their dorm area, they choose images of long-haired singers and blonde bikinied French actresses snuck from their teachers’ magazines instead of favoring crucifixes and religious paraphernalia as the sisters expected. When the Mother Superior discovers the unwholesome display, she exclaims, “‘Vous voyez cela, dit-elle au père Herménégilde qui l’accompagnait, nous avons cru protéger nos filles des malices du monde et le monde a forcé nos portes’” (193).<sup>39</sup> In this case, the external

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<sup>37</sup> “There were Mercedes, Range Rovers, and enormous military jeeps, their impatient drivers hooting and waving their arms about, fierce and threatening, as they tried to overtake taxis, pickups, and minibuses so overloaded with young women that they struggled to climb the last slope” (26).

<sup>38</sup> “At night, as soon as the monitor had left the dorm, the feast began” (51).

<sup>39</sup> “‘Just look at that!’ she said to Father Herménégilde, who was standing beside her. ‘We thought we had protected our girls from the evils of the world, and the world has come crashing through our doors’” (170).

influence implies European culture and Western standards of beauty. The Western values that the school wishes to promote or discourage have been carefully picked and chosen. Despite all of Notre-Dame-du-Nil's physical and narrative features meant to block out foreign entities, the seal of the school is inevitably punctured, and it cannot sustain a completely controlled space.

Beyond literal breaches of the school space, these gaps have symbolic value as well. Do the fault lines in the construction of the school present decolonial avenues? I argue that the breaches in *Notre-Dame du Nil* have certain affinities with “decolonial cracks” that Walsh describes in “Pedagogical Notes from the Decolonial Cracks” (2014).<sup>40</sup> As Walsh explains, cracks in the modern/colonial order are places from which defiance of modernity/coloniality can spring forth. They are places of subversion and interruption.<sup>41</sup> The students' clandestine feast is an example as breach-as-decolonial insurgence, especially because it celebrates indigenous tastes and traditions.

In another episode of *Notre-Dame du Nil*, Virginia is able to take advantage of the breachability of the school's seal in order to escape its dangerous confinements. Outside of the school's borders, while visiting home for the Easter holiday, Virginia arranges to visit Rubanga, an old man known as a “witch” possessing important ancient knowledge. Virginia, haunted by dreams of an ancient Rwandan queen whose remains were moved by M. de Fontenaille, seeks advice from the elder as to how to relieve the unsettled spirit. Back at school, Virginia successfully follows the elder's commands and the dreams cease. In the days leading up to the

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<sup>40</sup> See also “(Re)existence in times of de-existence: political-pedagogical notes to Paulo Freire” (2021) where Walsh situates the pedagogical possibilities of the cracks in the colonial school order. In other words, “inventing pedagogies and practices of learning outside, and in the margins and cracks of state and formal schooling” (475).

<sup>41</sup> In *The World on Edge*, Edward S. Casey (2017) considers the particularly “interruptive” nature of gaps: “it breaks open what would otherwise be a smooth surface or a continuous transition between surfaces, and it often does so in a jarring manner—unanticipated, calling for a renegotiation of our expectations” (33). Casey's spatial study and conceptualization of gaps is relevant to *Notre-Dame du Nil* precisely because of the detailed way in which it constructs the school space.



raid on the school, however, Virginia has another dream in which the queen presents her with details that would help her escape the murderous Militant Rwandan Youth. The seal of the school could not keep out the oneiric communication between Virginia and the Rwandan queen. In this way, Virginia is able to use the cracks in the school's physical and discursive order to save herself. As explored in Chapter Four, Salie in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* also takes advantage of rifts in the school's spatial construction, listening through the windows and sneaking through the door to the back of the room so she can attend M. Ndetare's lessons. However, Salie's case differs importantly from Virginia's because Salie is able to harness the decolonial possibilities of the cracks in the structure of the school to leave her oppressive community. She subverts the colonial order by manipulating the cracks for her own re-existence, or "the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination" (Albán Achinte 2008, 85–86; translation from Walsh 2018, 18). Besides being able to relish in their own local foods, the other students in *Notre-Dame du Nil* are less successful in leveraging the rifts in the makeup of their school.

As Walsh illuminates, breaches of the school's walls or cracks in its order do not automatically lead to decolonial horizons.

In and of themselves, the cracks that I am thinking about denote little more than apertures or beginnings. While they may weaken and fracture the hegemonic whole, their effect is dependent upon what occurs within the fissures and crevices, on how the seeds planted, sprout, flourish, and grow, on how they extend ruptures and openings. Of course cracks can also be covered over, patched, and re-filled; in this way the rupture—including the horizons and sentiments it affords—is made to appear less evident, as if it has simply faded away. (2014, sec. 4)

I argue that *Notre-Dame du Nil* demonstrates how these cracks can be exploited by other, malevolent forces. Worming their way into these fissures are also racial and patriarchal hegemonies that take hold of the cracks' potential. The ruptures in the (what we know to be

imperfect) order of modernity—or the breachability of the school—are exploited by its own coloniality and other harmful facets of the colonial matrix of power. More malevolent comings and goings—transversings of the protective seal—occur throughout the novel and serve to destabilize the school. A major example is M. de Fontenaille. Each time that the school organizes a pilgrimage to the nearby source of the Nile, M. de Fontenaille takes advantage of the students exiting the school space to ogle them and sketch images of his chosen favorites. M. de Fontenaille fawns over Veronica, and his perverted attention only serves to make her classmates disdain her more. Nevertheless, Veronica is seduced. Because of her weekly surreptitious departures from the school space, and because of the detrimental influence of M. de Fontenaille's demented games, this crossing of the school's perimeter exploits the cracks to colonial and patriarchal ends.

Père Herménégilde also takes advantage of breaches of the school space for predatory purposes. “Chaque mois, un camion de l'organisation humanitaire venait livrer de gros ballots de fripes [...] Le père Herménégilde se réservait quelques habits, des robes principalement, pour ses œuvres personnelles” (127-128).<sup>42</sup> The explicit mention of the vehicle coming into the school space, which has become a noticeable occurrence within the narrative, highlights the breach in the school's protective measures. The courtship between Frida and her fiancé, the ambassador of Zaire, is yet another example on constant, flagrant breaches of the school space. Frida leaves for entire weekends to spend time with her betrothed until “[u]n samedi, alors que les averses succédaient aux averses en prélude à la saison des pluies, une caravane de quatre Land Rover franchit le portail du lycée et s'arrêta devant le Bungalow” (134).<sup>43</sup> The ambassador's presence

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<sup>42</sup> “Every month, a truck from the humanitarian organization delivered fat bundles of old clothes [...] Father Herménégilde kept a few garments, dresses mainly, for his own personal good works” (110-111).

<sup>43</sup> “One Saturday, marked by the successive showers that heralded the rainy season, a procession of four Land rovers drove through the lycée gates and stopped outside the Bungalow” (117).

in the space not only scandalizes the sisters and begrudges the other students but results in Frida's pregnancy, which ultimately kills her. Finally, when Gloriosa assumes power of the school at the end of the novel, she throws open the school's doors in order to allow in the Rwandan Military Youth to terrorize Tutsi students and seek out and kill Veronica. Arrivals and departures defy the protective layer around the school. Their steady accumulation reveals the corruption of the school, especially in contrast to its public image. They also serve to build the impression of foreboding, danger, and the expectation that this lofty institution must ultimately collapse.

This fall, however, does not happen in the novel. Because of an unnamed conflict with her father's job, Gloriosa disappears at the end of the school year, and Goretti replaces her as unofficial ruler. This power shift mirrors a pivotal moment in the history of Rwanda: the 1973 military coup that ousted President Grégoire Kayibanda and replaced him with General Juvénal Habyarimana. Gloriosa, daughter of an important diplomat in Kayibanda's circle, is replaced by Goretti, daughter of an influential military leader fittingly similar to the rank of Habyarimana. After the invasion, no significant changes take place at the school and things proceed as if nothing happened. The teachers do not resume control. The Tutsi students who remain are still tormented. As Walsh warns, cracks are filled in, covered up. The narrative is then left on the verge of a climactic fall that is never fulfilled. A telling component of *Notre-Dame du Nil*'s premonition of the genocide is this lack of reassuring resolution at the end of the novel. Similarly, for wider Rwandan society, tension continued to build in the years between the 1973 military coup and the 1994 genocide. The unfulfilled resolution of the novel leaves us with a foreshadowing of the unspeakable falling action to come. Ultimately, the potential of the decolonial cracks remains at the level of narration and is not fully realized in this novel.

### A conflictual relationship with school

Mukasonga crafts a powerful critique of school in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, but her other works treat school differently. They blur together childhood innocence, the given difficulties of adolescence, and a genuine curiosity for learning, alongside the more ominous roles of school in national conflict and global imperialism as seen in *Notre-Dame du Nil*. Her appraisal is a reminder of the complex and often contradictory experiences of students who attend school during times of conflict. Mukasonga's fictional and autobiographical accounts are characterized by both hope and learning, but also despair since the school is a place where she experienced trauma and discrimination. These layers temper or at least complicate the critique of education in *Notre-Dame du Nil*. For example, the title of her 2018 autobiographical work *Un si beau diplôme!* gives a taste of the many layers of her outlook on schooling. The title is at first a celebration, an exclamation suggesting direct discourse. Mukasonga does write that this is something her father says to her to celebrate her success in school, which she achieves against all odds considering the limits to and dangers of being a well-educated Tutsi in Rwanda in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Inyenzi*, Mukasonga describes the importance of education for her father, not only in terms of personal success for his children, but for their escape and survival. “[Mon père] comptait avant tout sur la réussite scolaire de ses enfants. Il croyait que ce serait peut-être pour la famille un moyen de s’en sortir, d’être épargnée” (2006, 74).<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, a high degree of education often became a target on the backs of schooled Tutsis. The promise of instruction thus turned fatal.

Echoing this turn of fortune, there is irony in the title. The exclamation point and emphasizing “si” exaggerate enough to ring cynically and hint toward bitterness and regret.

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<sup>44</sup> “His children’s scholarly success meant more to him than anything. He thought that might give his family some chance of surviving, of being spared” (75).

Mukasonga's education is ultimately what allowed her to leave Rwanda and therefore be absent during the 1994 genocide when she lost 37 members of her family. The burden of survivorhood colors the title with yet another layer, this one of anguish and grief.<sup>45</sup>

A diploma is a complicated cultural object. It is a carrier of institutionalized cultural capital that holds significant financial and social potential for its possessor but only in the right system and cultural context. Mukasonga writes about having to redo her social work degree after arriving in France because her new country does not recognize her degree from Burundi nor her years of experience working in Burundi and Djibouti. This is yet another colonial vestige tied to the schooling system and a specific example of the coloniality of knowledge and knowledge hierarchy controlled by the Global North (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). In this title, the fact that a diploma—a piece of paper featuring somewhat arbitrary text—is described as beautiful feels vacant, almost futile. This immense value of the diploma recalls Medza's community's fetishization of diplomas in *Mission terminée*. Not inaccurately, Mongo Beti's novel demonstrates how the piece of paper often wields more power than the meaning behind it, that is to say the knowledge and skills gained and tested through the education itself. In *Un si beau diplôme!*, the excessive exclamation and praise hollow out, empty the artifact and its meaning. Mukasonga grapples with this hollowness and futility when she writes,

Aujourd'hui encore, je déplie le carton jauni de mes diplômes d'assistante sociale, le burundais, le français, qui n'en font plus qu'un dans ma mémoire, ce diplôme que j'ai tant désiré et tant haï, ce diplôme que je croyais enfin posséder et qui m'échappait toujours, qui disparaissait pour réapparaître telle une grossesse nerveuse. Et je n'ose pas me poser la question: n'y avait-il pas mieux à faire que de m'entêter à courir après un bout de papier? (2018, 145)<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Scholars Azarian (2011), Pfeiffer (2014), and Brinker (2016) all explore Mukasonga's posture towards the genocide as a witness or "témoignage de l'absent" [absent witness] (Coquio 2004) since she was not in Rwanda at the time of the genocide.

<sup>46</sup> "Even today, I unfold the yellowed cardboard of my social worker diplomas, the Burundian one, the French one, which are the same in my memory, this diploma that I so desired and so hated, this diploma that I thought I finally had and which always eluded me, which disappeared only to reappear like a nervous pregnancy. And I don't dare ask myself the question: wasn't there something better to do than persist in chasing after a piece of paper?"

The fact that Mukasonga compares her quest for the diploma, namely her education, to a false pregnancy, speaks once more to the hollowness of the artifact, to the pain and bitterness of growing something only to realize it never really existed.

In *Notre-Dame du Nil*, Virginia, who Mukasonga has stated most closely mirrors herself, also struggles with this commitment to or obsession with the diploma. When Veronica warns her to have an escape plan as the threat of the JMR draws nearer, Virginia bucks. ““Écoute, dit Virginia, moi, je ne quitterai pas le lycée sans mon diplôme. Renoncer si près du diplôme, jamais. Si tu savais ce qu’il représente pour ma mère, les rêves qu’elle a bâtis sur ce morceau de papier. Et puis je pense à toutes celles qui étaient aussi douées et peut-être plus que nous et que le fameux quota a exclues”” (251).<sup>47</sup> Virginia will hold out as long as possible, even at the risk of losing her life. For her, the diploma symbolizes more than social and financial advancement, but the pride of her family and vindication for the other Tutsi youth her were not allowed to attend school. Nevertheless, when the school has been raided, when Virginia has escaped in the trunk of Immaculée’s car, the latter asks what Virginia will do, if she would really consider abandoning her schooling. Virginia’s tune changes completely: ““Je ne veux plus de ce diplôme”” (274).<sup>48</sup>

In other texts, however, Mukasonga revels in the positive aspects and mutable potential of a postcolonial schooling experience. The short story “Titicarabi” in *Ce que murmurent les collines* narrates how a *conte*, or folktale, in one of their school textbooks featuring a wily, trickster dog became something of a community legend. The tone of the story is jovial as it shows how her community adopted and adapted the story for their own context, jokes, and play.

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<sup>47</sup> ““Listen,” said Virginia, ‘I’m not leaving the lycée without my diploma. Give up so close to the diploma? Never. If you knew how much this means to my mother, the dreams she’s built upon that piece of paper. When I think of all those girls who were just as smart as us, maybe smarter, and were excluded by the famous quota’” (222).

<sup>48</sup> ““I’m done with that diploma”” (243).

Furthermore, in the opening to *Inyenzi*, Mukasonga recounts how, rising from a nightmare, she takes to writing the names of her loved ones lost in 1994 in a student's notebook: "Je copie et recopie leurs noms sur le cahier à couverture bleue, je veux me prouver qu'ils ont bien existé, je prononce leurs noms, un à un, dans la nuit silencieuse" (2006, 10).<sup>49</sup> Mukasonga grieves the dead through copying and pronouncing, reviving them through written and spoken language practices. The text closes with the same important item: "Les assassins ont voulu effacer jusqu'à leur mémoire mais, dans le cahier d'écolier qui ne me quitte plus, je consigne leurs noms et je n'ai pour les miens et tous ceux qui sont tombés à Nyamata que ce tombeau de papier" (158).<sup>50</sup> In her own therapeutic process at the intersection of mourning and remembering exists this conspicuous object that, I argue, fittingly gestures towards the prevalence of scholastic education as well as its complex value in Mukasonga's own life as well as in her body of work.

Still, *Notre-Dame du Nil* represents an important moment in Mukasonga's whole corpus in terms of content, mode, and tone that suggests a particular value for the 2012 novel. While her first three texts, *Inyenzi*, *La Femme aux pieds nus*, and *L'Iguifou* "met[tent] en jeu une double stratégie mémorielle et mémoriale" (Azarian 2011, 425)<sup>51</sup>, *Notre-Dame du Nil* diverges from the autobiographical and the commemorative to serve a more playful, albeit critical function. When discussing the shift to fiction in writing *Notre-Dame du Nil*, Mukasonga has stated herself that "Fiction is magical, it's less painful. As I was writing it, I would sometimes catch myself smiling. It felt good" (Treisman 2018). Despite the dark material, both the playful and critical reside in the novel's ironic tone, characterization of adolescent students, and shifts into a

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<sup>49</sup> "Over and over, I write and rewrite their names in the blue-covered notebook, trying to prove to myself that they existed; I speak their names one by one, in the dark and the silence" (10).

<sup>50</sup> "The murderers tried to erase everything they were, even any memory of their existence, but, in the schoolchild's notebook that I am now never without, I write down their names. I have nothing left of my family and all the others who died in Nyamata but that paper grave" (165).

<sup>51</sup> "...offer a double strategy of memoir and memorial."

fantastical, mythical register. It is also interesting to note that Mukasonga's writing moves further away from narratives of the genocide or the history leading up to the 1994 violence in her publications following *Notre-Dame du Nil* (Hitchcott 2017, 131). She weaves into her subsequent texts more Rwandan lore and custom, while never fully neglecting the influences of colonialism and violence in her country of origin. For example, in *Cœur tambour*, the protagonist who is a famous singer draws her powers from the ancient queens of Rwanda. Furthermore, in *Kibogo est monté au ciel*, local histories and folklore are melded with Catholic teachings to generate a localized version of religion. By weaving in more indigenous knowledge, storytelling, and ways of being, Mukasonga's corpus nods toward a decolonial shift. It could also signal how Mukasonga's earlier autobiographical works have helped her process the trauma of her personal experience and how she is therefore now more liberated and empowered to craft these blends of history, folklore, and fiction and continue to contribute to Rwandan literature. *Notre-Dame du Nil* acts as a turning point for Mukasonga's body of work, and in the scope of this dissertation it also acts as a turning point for more decolonial portrayals of the school.

## Conclusion

In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Walter D. Mignolo describes decolonial thinking as "the relentless work of unveiling how the matrix works. And the decolonial option is the relentless project of getting us all out of the mirage of modernity and the trap of coloniality" (2011a, 17). This analysis of *Notre-Dame du Nil* by Scholastique Mukasonga has shown that this novel engages in the work of unveiling the power matrices of the school, a step towards unveiling the trap of modernity and coloniality. *Notre-Dame du Nil* reveals that breaches of the modern/colonial order are inevitable, and as Walsh shows, breaches can engender decolonial



possibilities. However, Mukasonga's novel also shows us that the modern/colonial order is incredibly persistent. *Notre-Dame du Nil* offers glimpses of how cracks in the modern/colonial order can be harnessed for decolonial possibilities, suggesting a decolonial turn in the portrayal of the school in contemporary sub-Saharan African Francophone literature. Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, which I explore in the next chapter, will present even more decolonial possibilities of schooling along with the potential for re-existence.

## CHAPTER 4

### Disobedience and Dignity: Conditional Emancipatory Schooling in Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*

The previous chapter elaborated how Scholastique Mukasonga's portrait of the school reinscribes broader historical events in the context of an elite lycée in 1973 Rwanda, revealing the coloniality of the institution and taking a critical stance toward it. Her ironic writing unsettles the school's architectures and pedagogies of control at the level of narration, but we have yet to see a *student* leverage their schooling for decolonial ends. Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) may present such a case. While Mukasonga's critical valence stems from a brutal history, Diome situates her narrative and critique in a very contemporary issue, that of globalized hyper-commercialism and capitalist economy provoking streams of migration from Africa to Europe. In Diome's work, these contemporary paradigms intersect with an attention to schooling to offer an updated portraiture of the institution that may present additional decolonial potentialities. Differently than the other students featured in this dissertation, Diome's main character, Salie, uses her education as a vehicle by which she escapes an insular and marginalized existence on her home island. I analyze Salie's circumstances as an example of an instruction that leads to dignity and self-determination that is denied to her by members of her community. From there, we can ascertain if Diome's novel continues to point toward a decolonial turn in these more contemporary representations of school.

This chapter examines the conditions necessary for Salie's effectual use of school for personal emancipation. I draw on Anbál's concept of "re-existence," as explored by Walsh and Mignolo (2018) to consider how Salie achieves dignity and self-determination despite her exilic existence. Salie's schooling experience is indeed unique, differing from other characters in

Diome's novel but also from other students featured in this dissertation. Unlike others', Salie's entrance into school is characterized by a subversion of scholastic norms. Moreover, her memories of her schooling and her teacher resound with gratitude. School leads to a certain version of success for Salie, yet other characters' efforts to attain prosperity and their engagement with formal education lead to less fruitful conclusions. The characters' ability to harness schooling is thus contingent on certain facets of their identities. The following analyses reveal the ways in which Salie's situation is more of an exception than a model to replicate. Furthermore, my close readings show that aspects of Salie's memory of and reverence toward her instruction betray some of the same pedagogies and architectures of the school that are based in coloniality, namely Euro-centric knowledge paradigms and hierarchic teacher-student relations. Considering the conditionality of Salie's success through schooling, this chapter explores the questions: Does Diome offer school as a solution to the socioeconomic pressures placed on African youth living in globalized structures of capitalism? And—differing vastly from the portrayal in Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*—is school a means to *temper* the illusions of France as a promised land? Finally, how do the new forms of “colonisation mentale” that Diome portrays in her pages, for example globalized mass media networks, echo some of the same forces of coloniality as the school?

As demonstrated by nearly every work treated in this study, authors' depictions of school repeatedly intersect with their lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> Fatou Diome admits to sharing many qualities with Salie, the main character and narrative voice of *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*.<sup>2</sup> Fatou Diome

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* presents yet another example of autofiction, which is defined as self-writing that considers, indeed celebrates, the invention and oftentimes instability of memory and the “je” within the textual space. First conceived of by Serge Doubrovsky (1977), the concept of autofiction questions the possibility of a strict, pure form of autobiography. Scholars of Francophone African Women's writing have adapted and expanded this concept to show how autofiction allows women authors to represent themselves and the experiences of African women that for decades has/had been cast by colonial texts or representations of African male authors.

<sup>2</sup> See Diome's interviews with Njoya (2008) and Richard (2022).

was born in the Sine-Saloum Delta region of Senegal in 1968. She was raised by her mother's parents and pursued an educational trajectory that led her to secondary and post-secondary education in M'Bour and then Dakar. In 1994, she married a man from France, and they moved from Dakar to Strasbourg. Two years later they divorced, and Diome decided to take up her studies again at the University of Strasbourg, earning her doctorate in *Lettres modernes*.

Salie follows this very same arc in Diome's first novel. However, while Salie is yet a budding writer trying to get by in Strasbourg in the early 2000s, Fatou Diome has since anchored herself in the French literary scene, starting with the publication of her celebrated novel *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* in 2003 and an earlier collection of short stories, *La Préférence nationale*, in 2001. She has also published the novels *Kétala* (2006), *Inassouvies, nos vies* (2008), *Le vieil homme sur la barque* (2010), *Celles qui attendent* (2010), *Impossible de grandir* (2013), *Les veilleurs de Sangomar* (2019), and another collection of short stories entitled *De quoi aimer vivre* (2021). These works share affinities in their continued treatment of multicultural France, migration (especially female experiences), globalized economies, and other vestiges of coloniality acting upon Africa. These themes also characterize her non-fictional works such as the essays *Marianne porte plainte !* (2017) and *Marianne face aux faussaires* (2022) as well as an illustrated collection of poetry *Mauve* (2010).

Embodied by Salie in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, the figure of the educated young migrant woman appears in several texts across this author's œuvre. Critic Xavier Garnier draws attention to the reappearance of the "Sénégalaise lettrée" as narrator figure in Diome's works, the "étudiante ou encore écolière [qui] sert de point de focalisation unique dans tous ses récits" (2004, 30).<sup>3</sup> For instance, in *La Préférence nationale*, the first short story "La mendicante et

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<sup>3</sup> "...the student or even schoolgirl who serves as a unique point of focalization in all of her stories."

l'écolière" features a middle school student who is bullied by her classmates but who finds an unlikely friend in a local peanut vendor. The stories "Le visage de l'emploi" and "Cunégonde à la Bibliothèque" treat the experience of a schooled adult woman in France having migrated from West Africa. In each text, the main character is a student working as a housekeeper to financially sustain her life in France, and in each text, her knowledge of and interest in French literature—initially hidden from her employers—upsets the hierarchical balance in her workplaces. Furthermore, ten years after the publication of *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique, Impossible de grandir* resumes the story of Salie, who is still grappling with her childhood memories. Diome's continued return to the student figure evokes important connections with Scholastique Mukasonga, whose works also prominently feature student characters. These two contemporary French-language authors, both of whom live permanently in France, share a proclivity for narrating this figure and therefore indicating—consciously or not—a "fixation" on education.<sup>4</sup> Their continual return to this character indicates an impulse to unravel the ambiguous meaning and function of schooling in African migrant life, proliferating it in their written works.

It is also fruitful to draw comparisons between Diome's writing and that of Ken Bugul, especially in how memories of schooling manifest in their texts. A first similarity is stylistic. Borgomano (1989) posits that Ken Bugul's poetics and manipulation of generic norms set her apart from earlier women autobiographical writers.<sup>5</sup> Diome's style also frequently engages the

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Conisbee Baer (2019, 4) uses the term "fixation" to describe Senghor and Césaire's continuous treatment of education in their respective earlier works. Baer posits that Senghor and Césaire's engagement with schooling led naturally to their involvement in politics at later stages of life, thus linking questions of education to state and national development. In contrast, I see Mukasonga and Diome's return to questions of education and schooling in literary forms as a means to navigate and reckon with the very personal, psychological, epistemic, and often traumatic traces of the schooling experience for schooled adults. Although personal, these representations can and should influence the larger cultural, political, and social matters of schooling precisely for what they reveal about the colonality of the institution.

<sup>5</sup> "La voix de Ken Bugul se distingue, par cette composante [une charge poétique], de celle de toutes les autres femmes africaines autobiographiques et, débordant les limites du genre, devient la voix d'un poète" [Ken Bugul's

poetic and plays with hybrid generic forms. Like Bugul, she employs languages other than French,<sup>6</sup> invokes orality, and, according to Haskell (2016), subverts the traditional *Bildungsroman*. The stylistic, linguistic, and generic divergences in these more contemporary works speak to a conscious break from previous literary norms. Such innovations, especially driven by female authors, change the way school is represented but also how the African novel is transforming over time. As another example, Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome both utilize non-linear temporalities to underscore lasting impacts of school throughout adult lives, and this literary technique portrays trauma, memory, and childhood more viscerally. Still, the non-linearity in these two novels produces differing effects: Bugul's reflects the fracturing of the main character while Diome's communicates the fluidity and hybridity of the main character's identity.

The driving forces for the protagonists of *Le Baobab fou* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* also differ. Bugul's text is planted firmly in the personal *quête identitaire* while Diome's novel treats the larger migration question. In *Le Baobab fou*, Ken lacks reference points and belonging due to traumatic moments in her childhood (including school). On the other hand, Salie's sense of self, although fluid, remains relatively strong throughout the novel, mediated by her connection with literary figures, her own writing, and her hyperawareness of how the circumstances of her birth inform her identity. Again, like *Le Baobab fou*, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* comprises of a non-linear plot, leaping between time, place, and perspective. However, Salie's handle of the narrative is much more controlled than Ken's. The "progressive-regressive" movement that Mudimbe-Boyi (1993) attributes to Ken's psychological instability

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voice distinguishes itself, by this component [a poetic charge], from the voices of all other autobiographical African women and, going beyond the limits of genre, becomes the voice of a poet] (Borgomano 1989, 60).

<sup>6</sup> Diome employs more translanguaging in her later works. However, in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, many of the characters' names have corresponding meanings in Serer, Diome's first language, or Wolof. For example, Ndétare means "other," Sankèle means "the sacrificed," Madické means "one who must absolutely disembark" and Garouwalé, Madické's friend who resists Salie's pleas for the young men not to emigrate, means "the one who gossips" (Njoya 2008, 173). For more on Diome's multilingualism, see Hogarth (2019) and Dieng (2020).

contrasts from the smoother leaps in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. Salie's narration and memories are reflective and deliberate while Ken are repressed and involuntarily surge forth. This difference articulates the disparity between the two protagonists' schooling experiences. Ken's memories of school resurface in her psychologically lowest points and are consistently linked with her mother's departure. Salie's, on the other hand, are characterized by deference and gratitude. Therefore, Diome's text points to a more positive and generative outcome of school and, as such, may point to its liberatory potential. Diome's attention to education and her school-days memories, explored in depth below, are nested within and woven throughout her larger objective. Indeed, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, through Salie's narration, flows with intention from episode to episode, present to past, perspective to perspective in order to achieve one of its central goals: to communicate truths about the African migrant experience in Europe.

The novel presents a rich mosaic of stories intertwined to shed light on the realities of migration for young Senegalese dreaming of starting a life in France.<sup>7</sup> The work begins by immersing readers in a 2000 European Cup football match between Italy and the Netherlands. The reader experiences the match with the unnamed narrator, "viewing" through their commentary and physical reactions to the intensity of the game.<sup>8</sup> Eventually the reader learns that it is Salie, a Senegalese woman living in Strasbourg, watching the match in order to relay its

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<sup>7</sup> Many literary scholars have pointed out this objective in their analyses of Diome's novel (D. Thomas 2006; 2007; Nyawalo 2011; Touré 2012; Bates 2019). For Salie, this means dissuading her brother from moving to France. However, Diome herself nuances the question of immigration. In a 2008 interview, she stated, "le roman ne propose rien sur l'immigration. C'est juste une mise en garde" [the novel does not propose anything on immigration. It is just a caution] (Njoya 2008, 168 & 180).

<sup>8</sup> Goldblatt (2019, 96) analyzes this initial passage as a moment in the work where Diome truly engages with freedom, as in freedom from historically constructed identities rooted in binaries. "The novel's opening sequence, in which our protagonist—not yet named, raced, gendered, or located in place and time—watches Maldini play televised soccer, forces readers to experience an opacity that is often denied to African characters and literature."

highlights to her younger half-brother, Madické.<sup>9</sup> Madické lives in Niodior, Senegal, and his obsession with the Italian football player, Maldini, is often the only thing that Salie feels drives their expensive, telecommunicative relationship. “C’est toujours le même scénario avec lui. Il m’oblige à l’appeler, je me ruine pour lui raconteur des matchs de football, mais impossible de lui soutirer des informations. Il ne pense qu’à son foot!” (40).<sup>10</sup> Football, like the glossy Coca Cola and Miko ice cream commercials that play on the island’s only television during the matches, is a central catalyst of contemporary globalization, commercialization, and exploitation of Africa as it is portrayed in this work. And it is through football that Madické envisions his ticket to migration to France. “Mon frère avaient la ferme intention de s’expatrier. Dès son plus jeune âge, ses aînés avaient contaminé son esprit. L’idée du départ, de la réussite à aller chercher ailleurs, à n’importe quel prix, l’avait bercé ; elle était devenue, au fil des années, sa fatalité. L’émigration était la pâte à modeler avec laquelle il comptait façonner son avenir, son existence tout entière” (165-166).<sup>11</sup> Here, the impulse to migrate is painted as an intergenerational inheritance and a key part of Madické’s upbringing: “L’idée...l’avait bercé.” The triple meaning of “bercer” as “to dupe someone” and “to bring up (a child)” and “to lull” evokes the complex realities of childhood education under contemporary paradigms of mass media global migration. Migration, one could say, is part of the island’s larger education system (education in the sense of upbringing or raising a child).

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<sup>9</sup> Despite sharing only one parent, Salie rather ferociously defends her relationship with Madické, saying “pour moi c’est mon petit frère, tout simplement” (18). Their close relationship is also different than most half-siblings in a polygamous society because they have the same mother but different fathers.

<sup>10</sup> “It’s always the same scenario. He makes me call him and I bankrupt myself reporting football matches, but it’s impossible to drag any news out of him. Football’s all he thinks about!” (23). All English translations of this novel come from Norman, Lulu & Ros Schwartz, trans. 2006. *The Belly of the Atlantic*. London: Serpent’s Tail.

<sup>11</sup> “My brother was dead set on leaving the country. From his earliest childhood, his mind had been contaminated by the older boys. He’d grown up with the notion of leaving, of success to be found elsewhere, at any price; over the years it had become his destiny. Emigration was the clay out of which he planned to model his future, his entire life” (115-116).



The novel narrates Salie's efforts over the course of two years to reveal to Madické and his friends the narrow margin for economic prosperity and psychological wellbeing for African migrants in Europe, particularly those without official documentation. Over their phone calls and discussions during Salie's visit home, Salie uses different tactics to dissuade Madické's dream of playing for a club in France, cognizant of his minimal chances of success. She narrates more grisly migration stories, which Eubanks describes as "intercalated cautionary tales" (2015, 125) and that I explore in more depth below, and even saves a significant amount of money for Madické to start a business venture on the island. Ultimately, Madické does decide to stay in Niodior, vested in his new grocery business. It is ambiguous if his decision to stay is inspired by Salie's deterrent advice or the startup money she lends him. His change of heart also coincides with the victory of the Senegalese national football team over France during the 2002 World Cup. Therefore, a potential combination financial independence, national pride, and—Salie's hope—resistance to new forms of mental colonization changes Madické's mind.

Salie's efforts to communicate the bleaker realities of immigration are complicated by the fact that she herself has established a life in France, albeit meagre and lonely. Among the intimate portraits of island habitants as well as Salie's own childhood memories and reflections, she reveals that her schooling was a major key to escaping an insular existence on her home island. Salie's keen attention to and representation of her schooling informs the work's larger concerns with migration. The following analyses explore the difference between Salie's and Madické's trajectories and why schooling specifically facilitates success for Salie, while it does not present as a possibility for others.

### **From school to football: New forms of “colonisation mentale”**

Between the two football matches that bookend the novel, Salie presents Niodior’s inhabitants, forming a broader portrait of the island community. As narrator, she steadily untangles their complex interconnected relationships, fitting of an insular society. She elucidates their respective roles in reproducing or refuting the illusion of France as a promised land. For example, the “contamination” that Salie blames for her brother’s desperate desire to migrate stems largely from the example of the island’s wealthier inhabitants returned from France, like *l’homme de Barbès*. Besides this man’s falsified accounts of life in France, contemporary technologies and globalized mass media also contribute to the dreams of the island youth. I will explore how these technologies contribute to new origins of “mental colonization” as well as how they foster a different migrant experience and relationship to school than the other migrant fictions and novels studied in this dissertation.

*L’homme de Barbès* embodies the misleading correlation between migration and prosperity. He touts his success, gained in France, through his large house and multiple wives. Nevertheless, Salie unsettles this vision of affluence, describing his wealth with a veneer of irony. For instance, she points out to the reader his knock-off designer goods, which the islanders do not recognize as such. The youth that surround him ask for stories from “là-bas,” “là où les morts dorment dans des palais, les vivants devaient certainement danser au paradis” (85).<sup>12</sup> *L’homme de Barbès* consistently indulges them, responding, ““Ah! La vie, là-bas! Une vraie vie de pacha!”” (85),<sup>13</sup> along with tales of half-truths that beguile the young people. *L’homme de Barbès*’s stories are not his only contribution to the enticing illusion. Among his material symbols of success, his television sparks an important transformation in how youth on the island

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<sup>12</sup> “...where dead men sleep in palaces, surely the living must be dancing in paradise” (56).

<sup>13</sup> “Ah! Life, over there! A real life of luxury!” (56).

conceive of France. “D’une de ses malles magiques il avait sorti cet appareil étonnant, devant les yeux ronds de ses quatre épouses flanquées de bambins qu’il ne connaissait que de nom. La nouvelle se répandit comme une traînée de poudre et les enfants ne furent pas les derniers à accourir” (49).<sup>14</sup> Again, the narration is not without judgement of l’homme de Barbès, who enjoys the status symbol of many wives and children, but because of his many sojourns in France, does not, in Salie’s judgement, fulfill the role of father. This passage describing the arrival of the television continues to detail in a lexicon of wonder the enchanting images and strange language emitted by the appliance.

L’homme de Barbès and his wealth coincide with what Mbembe (2013) has pointed out about the fantasies of material want generated by colonization. “...la colonisation est une prodigieuse machine productrice de désirs et de fantasmes. Elle met en circulation un ensemble de biens matériels et de ressources symboliques d’autant plus convoités par les colonisés qu’ils sont rares, font l’objet d’envie et agissent comme des opérateurs de différenciations (de prestige, de statut, de hiérarchie, voire de classe)” (168).<sup>15</sup> During the colonial period and for decades after independence, these material and symbolic riches—indicators of proximity to colonial power and wealth—were acquired through schooling. We can recall Ken’s schooled brother in *Le Baobab fou* in Dakar whose telephone, tiled kitchen, and white neighbors drew him closer to westernization (171-173). Likewise in *L’Enfant noir*, Laye spends his first night in a “maison européenne” when he moves in with his schooled uncle in Conakry (169). He also remarks on

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<sup>14</sup> “From one of his magical suitcases he’d produced this astonishing device, to the wide-eyed stares of his four wives, flanked by toddlers he knew only by name. The news spread like wildfire, and the village kids didn’t need to be told twice” (29).

<sup>15</sup> “...colonization [is] a prodigious machine for the production of desires and fantasies. It puts into circulation an ensemble of material goods and symbolic resources that are all the more coveted by the colonized because they are rare, because they have become objects of desire and act as operators of differentiation (in terms of prestige, status, hierarchy, or class)” (113-114). All English translations of this text come from Dubois, Laurent, trans. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. New York, USA: Duke University Press.

the steady westernification of his bedroom back in Kouroussa as he progresses in school (197).

Alternatively, Diome's novel shows how in more recent times signs of wealth are acquired through different means due to contemporary paradigms of migration, encouraged by new forces. These transformations indicate a shift in posture toward the social utility of the school.

The television episodes emphasize the effect of globalized media on children in particular, drawing attention to the impressionability of youth under contemporary telecommunicative devices. They are particularly drawn to the reports on football. When the television first arrives, "Madické et ses copains s'extasièrent à la vue des beaux stades et du court reportage..." (51).<sup>16</sup> In fact, the children's collective obsession with the sport undergoes a shift thanks to the arrival of the television. As Salie introduces her brother's love for football, she remembers young Madické's insatiable desire to play and to watch the matches between older boys on the island. However, upon the arrival of the television, the younger boys stop attending the adolescents' games in order to watch the matches on the TV, specifically the French team. Thus, their obsession relocates to a French landscape.<sup>17</sup> A decade or so later, in a similar episode at halftime of the 2000 Italy-Netherlands match, the children linger around the television to watch the colorful commercials. I will cite this episode at length in order to capture the favorable messaging in European commercials, the narration's attention on the children, its calculated use of African stereotypes.

À la télé, plus rien que de la publicité. Coca-Cola, sans gêne, vient gonfler son chiffre d'affaires jusque dans ces contrées... où l'eau potable reste un luxe. Surtout, n'ayez aucune crainte, le Coca fera pousser le blé dans le Sahel! Attirée par la télé, une troupe de gamins rachitiques âgés de sept à dix ans, avec pour uniques jouets des bouts de bois et des boîtes de conserve ramassées dans la rue, s'esclaffe en voyant la scène suggestive de la publicité [...] Ensuite, c'est au tour de Miko d'aiguiser leur appétit. Un énorme cône de

<sup>16</sup> "Madické and his friends were in raptures over the beautiful stadiums and the brief report" (31).

<sup>17</sup> In *The Beautiful Skin: Football, Fantasy, and Cinematic Bodies in Africa*, Dima (2020) also explores how the frenzy for football is a consequence globalized mass media as well as a vector for the collective fantasy positing Europe as a land of inevitable success.

glace, aux couleurs chatoyantes, remplit l'écran, puis un enfant bien potelé apparaît, léchant goulûment une glace démesurée. Des ronronnements d'envie remplacent les insanités de tantôt : 'Hum! Hâm! Hâââmmm! C'est bon! Hum!' font-ils de concert. Les glaces, ces enfants n'en connaissent que les images. Elles restent pour eux une nourriture virtuelle, consommée uniquement là-bas, de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique, dans ce paradis où ce petit charnu de la publicité a eu la bonne idée de naître. (18-20)<sup>18</sup>

The narrative voice paints this scene of the children's (virtual) delight with a heavy dose of irony. It highlights the egregious economic and infrastructural disparities between quotidian life on the island and European life (or at least what is portrayed through media). Still, the narrator seems to indulge in stereotypes of Africa and "third world" rhetoric to heighten the contrast. In fact, Salie repeatedly leverages clichés about Africa in order to ridicule them. Nevertheless, the children are blissfully (if destructively) unaware of the (neo)colonial injustices the narration lays bare, wrapped up in their enjoyment of European delights mediated through the television. This device of telecommunication forever links this insular society to the rest of the world but in limited, deceptive ways. In other words, the television helps to entrench the children's fantasy of European prosperity and to crystalize how they envision their future.

In her objective to "correct the illusion" (Thomas 2007, 196) about African migration to Europe, Salie is posed as a trustworthy source because she herself is living the migrant experience. Furthermore, by way of literary magic, she omnisciently narrates the accounts of other characters in the novel. For example, l'homme de Barbès successfully hides his bleak existence in France through a guise of material possessions back home in Senegal. However, the narrating Salie relays his reality in France, characterized by poor living arrangements, degrading

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<sup>18</sup> "Nothing but ads on the TV now. Even in these regions, where drinking water's still a luxury, Coca-Cola brazenly comes to swell its sales figures. Have no fear, Coca-Cola will make the Sahel wheat grow! The TV attracts a group of scrawny seven- to ten-year-olds, their only playthings the sticks of wood and tins they've picked up in the street, who burst out laughing at the ad's suggestive scene [...] Now it's Miko's turn to whet their appetites. An enormous ice-cream cone, colours glistening, fills the screen, then a chubby little boy appears, greedily licking a huge ice cream. Envious purrs replace the inanity of a moment ago: a chorus of 'Mmm! Oooh! That's good! Mmm!' These kids know ice cream only through images. For them it's a virtual food, eat only *over there*, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the paradise where that plump kid had the good sense to be born" (6-7).

employment, and a deteriorating psychological state. Her omniscient ability may indicate a connection amongst those who have this shared experience. The connection may be psychological, even literary, her omniscient power stemming from her vocation as writer within the diegetic frame, her narratorial authority in the novel, and her own transatlantic identity.

The novel consistently draws attention to literary production in conveying truths about the migrant experience. For example, when the narration reveals the reality behind l'homme de Barbès's experience, it describes him as "soulagé d'avoir réussi, une fois de plus, à préserver, mieux, à consolider son rang. Il avait été *un nègre à Paris* et s'était mis, dès son retour, à entretenir *les mirages* qui l'auréolaient de son prestige. Comptant sur l'oralité pour battre tous ceux qui avaient écrit sur cette ville, il était devenu le meilleur ambassadeur de France" (88, original emphasis).<sup>19</sup> First, the written word is evoked in opposition to orality as l'homme de Barbès evades the truth that has been penned about the migrant experience in France. We could consider this as a nod toward Diome's own effort to reveal realities through her novel. The reference to the written word also draws attention to the intertextual references to other migrant narratives. Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) and Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1937), as well as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* which Salie cites elsewhere, treat the difficulty of Senegalese experiences in France. Diome's contemporary situation presents a transformation in the migrant experience and a shift in the encounter with European culture, which has implications for her posture toward the school. In his chapter of *Black France* that treats *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Dominic Thomas (2007) differentiates Diome's contemporary angle as a broadening and updating of the migratory context in light of globalization and its

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<sup>19</sup> "...relieved that once again he'd succeeded in preserving, even consolidating, his status. He'd been a *n----- in Paris*, and as soon as he'd returned he'd set about sustaining the illusions that gave him an aura of success. Relying on the oral tradition to outdo all those who'd written about that city, he'd become France's best ambassador" (58-59).

consequences on Africans. He states that Socé, Kane, and Dadié “were concerned with the ‘ambiguous’ nature of the cultural encounter with France—initially in colonial schools through the exigencies of the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) and subsequently through travel to the *métropole*” (186-187). In *Ventre de l’Atlantique*, however, “Diome’s attention has shifted to a consideration of the socioeconomic realities confronting individual and collective migrants upon entry into the sociopolitical zones of both France and of course the European Community as well, for whom such experiences are now informed by the difficulties associated with the new lexicon of migration, namely, border control, travel and residency documents, refugee status, and the risks of clandestinity” (187). Thomas aptly touches on one of the reasons why Diome’s representation of the school offers a different perspective than her literary allusions as well as the other works in this study: her perspective on the migrant experience as well as, I argue, her take on schooling is informed by new flows of power, knowledge, and capital.<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, Salie understands the youth’s migration fixation in similar terms to those which we have seen describe the influence of schooling, that is of the mental hold of coloniality. After describing the arrival of the TV and the children’s diverted attention, she explains how “après la colonisation historiquement reconnue, règne maintenant une sorte de colonisation

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<sup>20</sup> Brown (2017) also points out these intertextual references and their particular connection to the education question. Additionally, Robert Nathan (2012) describes changes between 20<sup>th</sup> century migrant literature and Diome’s contemporary portrayals. “The voyage to the metropole, ever a popular topic in African literature, was once portrayed within the confines of a sojourn to what constituted a foreign land. Whatever crises of culture and identity such voyages may have engendered, they transpired paradigmatically in a context of legal temporary travel for a purpose beneficial to one’s social standing at home, often in the context of students seeking degrees... The background for Diome’s novel, however, is one in which African communities are ambiguously ensconced in the French landscape, migrants who are often travelling in less favourable circumstances, and the outcomes of movement are uncertain and potentially deleterious to one’s social status both at home and abroad” (75). We can compare Salie’s experience in Strasbourg to that of Samba Diallo’s in Paris and Ken’s in Brussels. For example, all three student characters must face racialization, clashes of culture, alienation from community, and navigating hybrid identities. Nevertheless, the experience of l’homme de Barbès as well as Moussa (which I expound on later) deal with different factors of the paradoxical simultaneous disintegration and reinforcement of national borders in contemporary forms of globalization, especially the more acute effect of patrols, surveillance, and document checks on migrants from the Global South that both Awitor (2015) and Khabarovskiy (2015) examine in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*.

mentale: les jeunes joueurs vénéreraient et vénèrent encore la France. À leurs yeux, tout ce qui est enviable vient de France” (52-53).<sup>21</sup> Salie’s mention of mental colonization echoes many of the sentiments that Africanist thinkers, authors, and theorists have expressed about school. We are reminded of Nugui wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) who speaks of a “fascination” and “spiritual subjugation” through school (9). Critical educationalist and scholar Ali A. Abdi (2021) writes that colonial schemes of education were/are “actively designed processes of the psycho-social and psycho-cultural subalternization (perhaps in simpler term, otherization) of people so as to execute more effectively the de-patterning of native minds...” (3).<sup>22</sup> However, in Diome’s novel, as Salie casts it, the mental colonization may not come from school anymore but from the designs of globalized media and commercialist capitalism. While these forces and the school are not mutually exclusive in their ability to perpetuate mental colonization, Diome’s updated portraiture of the migrant experience alongside school suggests that new modes of mental colonization must be acknowledged. Unlike the embourgeoisement that school promised for a select few during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Mohamed Kamara (2023) demonstrates, schooling does not inspire dreams of prosperity for Niodior’s youth in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*. How can we account for this novel’s shift in the value of school?

Differing from the other novels examined in this dissertation, *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* portrays a significant anti-(French)-school sentiment in the island community. Throughout the

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<sup>21</sup> “...after the historically recognised colonisation, a kind of mental colonisation now prevails: the young players worshipped and still worship France. In their eyes, everything desirable comes from France” (32).

<sup>22</sup> What these thinkers portray in different ways is that colonization extends beyond the physical, administrative, political, and juridical to the psychological and epistemological, characterized by inferiority complexes and imbalanced power in the production of knowledge. For decolonial thinkers, this latent (as well as explicit) persistence of colonization is coloniality. “Coloniality of power articulates continuities of colonial mentalities, psychologies and worldviews into the so-called ‘postcolonial era’ and highlights the social hierarchical relationships of exploitation and domination between Westerners and Africans that has its roots in centuries of European colonial expansion but currently continuing through cultural, social and political power relations (Quijano 2007; Grosfoguel 2007)” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a, 8).



novel, characters repeat and manipulate an established lexicon of anti-West rhetoric, and their recitation of this canned language reveals the complicated and selective melding of “modernity” and “tradition” in Niodior. The island forms an echo chamber that reproduces and reinforces somewhat hollow anti-colonial ideologies that distract from the new forms of mental colonization detailed above. In other words, an anti-West rhetoric permeates attitudes of islanders who paradoxically desperately want to migrate to France. By studying the nature of these ideologies of the island, we can trace how attitudes toward school differ from the other novels featured in this study.

Despite the presence of a French school on the island and the enthusiastic teacher Monsieur Ndétare, most island inhabitants are uneducated (in the formal, Western schooling sense). Salie never explicitly names schooling as a solution to the Niodiorois’ financial and social strife, yet she repeatedly communicates her belief that lack of formal instruction breeds narrow-mindedness and credulity on the island. When the islanders gather for an inaugural viewing of the national news in front of the TV, no one understands the reporter’s French. They rush to bring Ndogou, a local girl who attended school, to translate. The report she relays is rife with a positive rhetoric of development and international diplomacy that glosses more dire realities, i.e., drought, colonial debt, malaria. Fittingly, it concludes with a glowing report on the “braves Sénéfs (Sportifs nationaux évoluant en France)” (50)<sup>23</sup> who are apparently seeing great success in Europe. These reports entrance the viewers, who cannot understand the language, let alone read the neocolonial rhetoric of the news report. In the end, the report fortifies their fantasies of France. As she relays the scene, Salie’s judgement of their education brushes with condescension. “Alors, sur l’île, même si on ne sait distinguer, sur une carte, la France du Pérou,

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<sup>23</sup> “...valiant national sportsmen in France” (30).

on sait en revanche qu'elle rime franchement avec chance" (53).<sup>24</sup> Again with a hint of disdain, Salie blames what she perceives as ignorance to explain what keeps the islanders from sending their children to school. "Comme beaucoup de garçons de l'île, Madické n'avait fait que l'école coranique et ignorait tout des cours de Ndétare. Son père trouvait qu'il était plus utile d'apprendre à connaître Dieu et d'étudier les voies du salut que de s'embarrasser à décoder le langage des Blancs" (80).<sup>25</sup> School's perceived irrelevance to island life and parental resistance are important reasons why schooling and continuing studies abroad do not present themselves to the youth on the island as a path to migration, social advancement, and financial success. Football, on the other hand, does. "Pour des petits prolétaires analphabètes comme eux, il n'y avait pas trente-six chemins possibles [pour aller en France]. Le seul qui pouvait les y mener commençait indéniablement, pensaient-ils, au terrain du foot" (91).<sup>26</sup> From these excerpts we see that islanders do not widely value schooling, and Salie does not shy away from expressing her frustration (and even superiority) toward them.

The vieux pêcheur, an infamous figure in Niodior, contributes to outwardly anti-school ideologies in the community. He preaches to the young men that the island's teacher is colonially contaminated and admonishes them to leave the island. For him, migration is linked with success, freedom, and dignity. In response to one of Monsieur Ndétare's lectures, who shares Salie's objective of saving the island's young men from a miserable life in France, the vieux pêcheur urges, "Partez, partez où vous pouvez, mais allez chercher la réussite au lieu de rester là, à server de compagnie à ce dépravé blanchi [...] Partez chercher du travail, éloignez-vous de

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<sup>24</sup> "Thus, on the island, even if we can't tell France from Peru on a map, we're well aware it rhymes with chance" (32).

<sup>25</sup> "Like many island boys, Madické had attended only Koranic school and knew nothing of Ndétare's classes. his father considered it more worthwhile to learn to know God and to study the paths of salvation than to tie yourself up in knots decoding the whites' language" (53).

<sup>26</sup> "For little illiterate village boys like them, there was precious little option; the only route open to them [to go to France] began on the football pitch" (61).

ce masque de colon et n'oubliez pas, mes enfants, *chaque miette de vie doit servir à conquérir la dignité*” (124).<sup>27</sup> The vieux pêcheur's distaste for the schoolteacher, demonstrated through his insults like “dépravé blanchi,” likely speaks less to a robust anti-colonial disposition; these two men have a fraught relationship due to their storied past. Now years later, Ndétare and the vieux pêcheur are still enemies. According to the vieux pêcheur's rhetoric passed on to the young men, however, schooling is linked with immobility and continued colonial subjugation. Additionally, the concluding proverb meant to drive his point home arises throughout the novel. Its italics imply not only how it appears as an oft-cited slogan but also how it reverberates as a propagandist imperative in island ideology, etching itself into the consciousness of the young men.

In the island's ideology, “dignity” boils down to two tenets. The first is material wealth, which is often conflated with providing for one's family. The second is a (gendered and selective) adherence to “tradition,” for instance having many wives. Models of dignity for islanders are limited to l'homme de Barbès and Wagane, a “digne fils de chez nous”<sup>28</sup> according to the vieux pêcheur (124). Wagane is another respected migrant who has amassed wealth but, as Salie lays bare, through decidedly non-“traditional” ways. Zadi (2010) explains how Wagane's riches are ultimately won through a capitalist framework and tools of modernity, pushing out other fisherman with his motorized boats that monopolize the market. But because Wagane retains the right aspects of “tradition,” namely his Muslim identity and practices of polygamy, he is considered a model of dignity by the islanders. Once again, the respect for traditional practices is selective and, ultimately, quite gendered.

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<sup>27</sup> ““Leave, go where you can, but seek success instead of staying here, just to keep this depraved westernised man company. [...] Go and look for work, get away from this dirty coloniser and don't forget, my sons, *every scrap of life must serve to win dignity!*”” (84).

<sup>28</sup> ““...worthy son of our village”” (84).

Madické generally takes the vieux pêcheur's advice with a grain of salt, expressing earlier, "ras la casquette de tous ces proverbes improvisés" (23).<sup>29</sup> Later, however, echoes of these anti-school sentiments ring in his accusations toward his sister. When Salie warns Madické not to visit a marabout to help him in his plans to migrate, he erupts, "'Tu crois avoir percé tous les mystères à l'école! T'es vraiment occidentalisée! Mademoiselle critique maintenant nos coutumes. Et d'ailleurs, comme t'es devenue une individualiste, tu ne veux même pas m'aider'" (141).<sup>30</sup> Madické's allegations resound with recited language, as if the young man has heard these stock phrases brandished before to set school and the West in opposition to tradition as the vieux pêcheur did. Zadi (2010) has pointed out that, in Diome's novel, "L'un des chefs d'accusation les plus sérieux dont un personnage du village puisse se rendre coupable est en effet celui de l'individualisme qui traduirait un renoncement à cette valeur culturelle [de la solidarité]" (179).<sup>31</sup> Madické weaponizes this language to discredit his sister. Antithetically, the island community wields anti-West discourses to denounce the school, despite pervasive desires to go to France.

We do not see similar sentiments in the other representations of school explored in this study. *L'Enfant noir*, *Mission terminée*, *L'Aventure ambiguë*, *Le Baobab fou*, and *Notre-Dame du Nil* do acknowledge the colonial effect of the school on the children, manifested in separation from family, distancing from customs toward "modernity," and hybrid identities that no longer fit in students' culture of origin. Nevertheless, these fictional communities treat school-gained knowledge as an advantage, a means to social mobility, belonging, or even a way to combat

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<sup>29</sup> "Enough already with all these convenient proverbs" (10).

<sup>30</sup> "You think you learned everything there is to know at school! You're so westernised! And now Miss high-and-mighty criticises our customs. And worse: you've become an individualist, you won't even help me" (96-97).

<sup>31</sup> "One of the most serious accusations of which someone from the village can be guilty is in fact that of individualism, which would reflect a renunciation of this cultural value of solidarity."

coloniality itself. On the island of Niodior in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, the colonial associations of school are a reason not to attend. Still, to Salie's great frustration, those who promote the same anti-school and anti-West discourses do not perceive the forms of mental colonization that have developed in contemporary times, namely the veneration of France due to globalized mass media and commercialism. As I see it, the rhetorical insularity of the island contributes to its community's (mis)perceptions.

The rhetoric has damaging consequences. In this vein, literary scholar Dieng (2020) has studied the misguided effect of repeated mottos and slogans throughout *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. "L'idéologie communautaire a aussi son système de propagande, décliné sous forme de maximes, qui ont la valeur de slogans, car, au lieu de sensibiliser les candidats à l'aventure européenne sur les risques liés à l'immigration clandestine, elles constituent un encouragement à l'acte" (54).<sup>32</sup> Dieng expounds on the risks of wielding such stock language. "Si le slogan est l'instrument de la propagande idéologique et de la communication efficace, la rhétorique est une arme à double tranchant, dont la modalité peut être méliorative ou péjorative" (54).<sup>33</sup> Madické's use of "individualism" and "westernization" due to schooling leans toward the pejorative modality. While individualism and westernization may run counter to island values, weaponizing them as a means to coerce family members into exploitative dependence and to reject school is counterproductive and ultimately colonial. Khabarovskiy (2015, 167) also demonstrates how these island ideologies become harmful if followed to the extreme.

En exposant les limites de l'idéologie communautaire, Fatou Diome suggère qu'à trop la suivre, l'individu se dissout complètement dans la communauté, alors que les sentiments humains, le respect et l'amour du prochain, perdent toute valeur Diome montre que

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<sup>32</sup> "The community ideology also has its propaganda system, expressed in the form of maxims, which have the value of slogans, because, instead of making candidates for the European adventure aware of the risks linked to illegal immigration, they encourage them to act."

<sup>33</sup> "If the slogan is the instrument of ideological propaganda and effective communication, rhetoric is a double-edged sword, the modality of which can be meliorative or pejorative."

choisir entre tradition et modernité, ou même tenter de faire la symbiose harmonieuse des deux, est un faux problème.<sup>34</sup>

To this last point, Khabarovskiy also speaks to the trap of authenticity that Mbembe explains in *De la postcolonie* (2000), that there “persiste encore, presque partout, le préjugé beaucoup trop simpliste et trop étroit selon lequel les formations sociales africaines relèveraient d’une catégorie spécifique, celle des sociétés simples ou encore des sociétés de la tradition” (11).<sup>35</sup> What Diome is demonstrating is that the “modernity/tradition” dichotomy, which many (older) representations of schooling fall into, is ultimately harmful and, as scholars from Mongo Beti to Mbembe have argued on “authentic” African tradition, stems from coloniality itself.

Mignolo (2011a; 2018) has demonstrated similar dangers of the “rhetoric of modernity,” whose terminologies situated in the meliorative modality, to use Dieng’s term, obscure the darker designs. A similar process is happening on the island of Niodior with anti-West sentiment. The island is navigating intersections of “tradition” and “modernity” where ideologies of both get blurred and convoluted through the filter of more immediate material needs and desires. This canned language, bouncing around the echo chamber of the island, has anchored itself into a collective lexicon that distracts from the root of the issue.

Neither side of the migration argument is immune to deceptive lexicons. Even Monsieur Ndétare betrays some of the rhetoric of modernity in his efforts to advise the young men. In opposition to the vieux pêcheur’s guidance to leave the island, Ndétare implores the young men to reconsider their options and suggests a different pathway, decidedly more intellectual.

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<sup>34</sup> “By exposing the limits of community ideology, Fatou Diome suggests that by following it too much, the individual completely dissolves into the community, while human feelings, respect and love of neighbor, lose all value. Diome shows that choosing between tradition and modernity, or even trying to create a harmonious symbiosis of the two, is a false problem.”

<sup>35</sup> “...the simplistic and narrow prejudice persists that African social formation belong to a specific category, that of simple societies or of traditional societies” (3). All English translations of this text come from Berrett, A.M., trans. 2001. *On the post colony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

‘D’accord, soyez prêts au départ, allez vers une meilleure existence, mais pas avec des valises, avec vos neurones! Faites émigrer de vos têtes certaines habitudes bien ancrées qui vous chevillent à un mode de vie révolu. La polygamie, la profusion d’enfants, tout cela constitue le terreau fertile du sous-développement. Nul besoin de faire des mathématiques supérieures pour comprendre que plus il y a de gens, moins grande sera la part de pain à partager.’ (179)<sup>36</sup>

Ndétare attempts to show the young men some of the origins of their hardships, that the overwhelming financial pressure from their families is tied to outmoded signs of prosperity, that large families do not symbolize abundance in and of themselves. However, his lecture rings with the same terminology seen in discourses of development (“vie révolue,” “sous-développement”), suggesting the influence of the rhetoric of modernity corresponding to his school-centered identity. Also fitting of a teacher, his solutions are situated in the cerebral. Nevertheless, his lectures do little to inspire the young men who see more immediate answers to their problems in football and migration.

Ndétare is somewhat of a paradoxical figure, which may detract from his ability to make an impression on the island’s youth and why resistance to school is so prevalent on the island. He, too, is an outsider. On the island, he is widely referred to as “l’étranger.” He is confined to Niodior precisely because of his socialist activism, a pursuit likely adopted through his schooling and experience studying in France. Salie explains how Ndétare was sent to Niodior as school director “depuis que le gouvernement, l’ayant considéré comme un agitateur dangereux, l’a expédié sur l’île en lui donnant pour mission d’instruire des enfants de prolétaires” (65).<sup>37</sup> He is unwillingly confined to the island and generally unwelcome there, yet he attempts to convince

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<sup>36</sup> ““OK, be prepared to leave and head for a better life, but not with suitcases – with your brain cells! Rid your heads of some of the deeply ingrained habits that tie you to an outmoded way of life. Polygamy, too many children – all that helps sustain underdevelopment. You don’t need a maths degree to grasp that the more people there are, the less bread there is for each person”” (126).

<sup>37</sup> “...ever since the government, considering him a dangerous agitator, sent him to the island with the mission to teach the children of the proletariat” (41).

his young mentees to stay as well. Furthermore, his schooling and guidance ultimately helped Salie to move to France, which once again offers a conflicting message in his attempt to discourage migration. His words and his actions relay some mixed messaging.

Ndétare is also the coach of the island's football team, pushing the young men to practice while simultaneously trying to dissuade them from considering football as a means to migrate. To discourage this idea, Ndétare recounts the story of Moussa to the football-fanatic young men. “‘Vous auriez dû demander à Moussa de vous raconter sa France à lui. Lui aussi avait suivi le chant des sirènes...’” (93).<sup>38</sup> In the novel, Moussa is a young man who is recruited by a French football club, but he fails to perform successfully on the pitch and loses the club's support. His sponsor, ironically named Monsieur Sauveur, takes advantage of Moussa's sense of indebtedness and lack of papers to manipulate the young man into exploitive work. Moussa is close to giving up and returning home but decides to stay after receiving a letter from his parents in which we again hear contradictory anti-West rhetoric. “...tu dois continuer à respecter nos coutumes: tu n'es pas un Blanc. Et, comme eux, tu commences à devenir individualiste. Voilà plus d'un an que tu es en France, et jamais tu n'as envoyé le moindre sou à la maison pour nous aider” (103).<sup>39</sup> His parents, similarly deluded by the illusions of France as unequivocally lucrative, reject him as a failure. L'homme de Barbès's words “‘[i]l faut vraiment être un imbécile pour rentrer pauvre de là-bas’” (87)<sup>40</sup> sting all the more in their falsehood. Targeted by police for his appearance while out exploring Marseille, Moussa is deported back to Senegal without having achieved his goal of providing for his family. Upon his return to Niodior, Moussa becomes an outcast in the community, and his despair drives him to commit suicide. The islanders wield this

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<sup>38</sup> “‘You should have asked Moussa to tell you his experience of France. He, too, listened to the siren song...’” (62).

<sup>39</sup> “‘You must continue to respect our traditions: you're not a white man. You're turning into an individualist like them. You've been in France for over a year now and you've never sent so much as a penny home to help us’” (69).

<sup>40</sup> “‘...you'd have to be a real idiot to come back from there poor’” (58).



communitarian ideology to their own detriment as the rhetoric obscures contemporary colonialities, yet another way that the rhetoric of modernity has evolved to hide the tricks and designs of coloniality (Mignolo 2011a; Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

Through all these mixed messages that Madické receives, his sister's own (relative) success in France remains a sticking point. “‘Puisque tu ne veux pas m’aider, laisse-moi faire. Tu es devenue une Européenne, une individualiste. Un gars du village revenu de France dit que tu réussis très bien là-bas, que t’y as publié un bouquin. Il jure qu’il t’a même vue à la télé’” (159).<sup>41</sup> Again, Madické misunderstands his sister's reality in France and uses anti-West, neocolonial terminology to defend himself and point out her hypocrisy. He makes a legitimate point. Despite pushing her brother to stay on the island and invest in a life there, Salie claims to have been destined to leave the island. Madické points out contradiction of her wishes. “‘Si tu trouves que c’est mieux de se débrouiller au pays, pourquoi ne reviens-tu, toi ? [...] Tu veux que je reste ici, et toi, pourquoi t’es partie, toi ?’” (223).<sup>42</sup> What Madické does not understand at this point is her instinct or destiny to leave comes from a deeper unbelonging on the island related to her marginalized identity. Salie reflects, “Petite déjà, incapable de tout calcul et ignorant les attraits de l’émigration, j’avais compris que *partir* serait le corollaire de mon existence” (225).<sup>43</sup> As yet uninfluenced by school or glossy commercialism and wealth, her impulse to leave stems from being an outcast. “Ayant trop entendu que mon anniversaire rappelait un jour funeste et mesuré la honte que ma présence représentait pour les miens, j’ai toujours rêvé de me rendre

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<sup>41</sup> “‘Seeing as you won’t help me, let me do things my way. You’ve turned into a European, an individualist. A guy from the village who’s back from France says you’re doing very well over there, that you’ve published a book. He swears he’s even seen you on TV’” (110).

<sup>42</sup> “‘If you think it’s better to try to get by at home, why don’t you come back? [...] You want me to stay put but you...so why did you get out?’” (159).

<sup>43</sup> “‘Already, as a child, incapable of any ulterior motive and unaware of the attractions of emigrating, I’d understood that *leaving* would be the corollary to my existence” (160).

invisible” (225).<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, it is this marginalized identity that helps her use school as an escape.

### **Salie’s marginalized identity and subversive schooling**

Even in the context of the conservative island, Salie’s identity affords her an important edge, especially in how she arrives at school. Her difficult youth is revealed in her own narrated memories of childhood, which also include her most concentrated narration of her schooling. My readings in the following sections reveal that Salie’s experience—retold with repetition, affect, and Salie’s signature irony—is singular. In comparison to other youth and educated adults in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*, Salie is unique in the way she remembers her schooling and harnesses it for personal emancipation and self-determination. This also sets her apart from the other students’ experiences studied in this dissertation. Nevertheless, the narration of school in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* also shows consistencies with the representations explored in this study that suggest Salie’s instruction and her posture toward it as an adult are still beholden to certain architectures and epistemologies of the school based in coloniality. What the following analyses ultimately demonstrate is that the specific intersections of Salie’s identity along with some exceptional circumstances and people (i.e., her grandmother and Ndétare) allow Salie to leverage schooling for counterhegemonic ends, personal emancipation, and dignity. However, the novel does not offer hers as a replicable model or solution to Madické’s dilemma, for whom she wants “une vision plus locale de la réussite” (Bates 2019, 150).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “Having heard too often that my birthday reminded people of a disastrous day and symbolised the shame my presence constituted for my family, I always dreamed of making myself invisible” (160).

<sup>45</sup> “...a more local vision of success.”

Salie's unique schooling experience stems partly from the fact that Salie is a unique person. Her very existence runs against accepted Niodiorois norms since she is a child born to unmarried parents. Readers learn that island custom does not readily accept unions that exist beyond marriage conventions, traditionally formed "en fonction d'intérêts familiaux et d'alliances immuables" (127).<sup>46</sup> To further exacerbate Salie's marginalization, outsiders are held in particular disdain, and Salie's father originates from off the island. In the contemptuous tone of the islanders, Salie expresses that her mother "...au lieu de regarder près d'elle, de se contenter d'un fils de bonne famille du village, était allée choisir ailleurs un prince charmant, qui l'avaient gratifiée d'une bâtarde" (77).<sup>47</sup> Salie's existence is juxtaposed against the story of Sankèle, who is the daughter of the vieux pêcheur. She fell in love with Ndétare despite her father's plan that she would marry l'homme de Barbès. Sankèle conceived a child with the teacher in order to escape the arranged marriage. However, the vieux pêcheur drowns the newborn baby to punish Sankèle for her resistance and to save face in the conservative community. Devastated, Sankèle runs away from the island with the help of Ndétare, and she is never heard from again. Moreover, the reader learns early on that the vieux pêcheur himself once conceived a child out of wedlock, a child whom he denied and whose mother was ostracized from her community. These parallel stories serve to highlight the strictures and hypocrisy of the conservative island tradition but also the subversiveness of Salie's mere survival.

Salie is set further apart because she is raised by her grandparents, more specifically her grandmother. An island matriarch such as she could easily embody the "menhirs sur le socle de tradition" (60)<sup>48</sup> as Salie dubs the other women in Niodior. Yet the grandmother instead

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<sup>46</sup> "...according to family interests and immutable alliances" (86).

<sup>47</sup> "...that woman, instead of looking around her and being satisfied with a son from a good family in the village, had gone elsewhere to choose a prince charming, who'd rewarded her with a bastard" (51).

<sup>48</sup> "menhirs of tradition" (38).

“betrays” tradition (74) and takes decidedly less conventional routes by raising her granddaughter. Once again, this move diverges from the vieux pêcheur who ended the life of his grandchild. Salie’s grandmother is all the more empowering of her granddaughter because of her eventual support of Salie’s schooling.

Salie’s unconventional entry into the world poses difficulties for her in the community. As Eubanks (2015) puts it, “Salie’s illegitimacy prevents her from being able to fully belong to the island society and has implications for both her development as a girl and her socialization” (124). Nevertheless, Salie’s marginalized identity proves to be a productive vector toward dignity. The social obstacles she must overcome, I argue, inspire a wily moment of disobedience that grants her her “premier désir conscient, aller à l’école” (66).<sup>49</sup>

Salie’s grandmother becomes the biggest supporter of her granddaughter’s schooling, but first Salie has to resort to subversive measure to get there. She is not originally enrolled, yet as she goes about her childhood on the island, she passes the school. As the adult Salie describes it, her first encounter with school comes through the ear. Although she is not officially allowed into the classroom, Salie becomes “[c]urieuse, intrigue surtout par les mots que prononçaient ses élèves à la sortie des cours—their chansons mélodieuses qui n’étaient pas celles de ma langue, mais d’une autre que je trouvais tout aussi douce à entendre...” (66).<sup>50</sup> The sonic allure of the French language is not new to this study. It echoes other initial encounters with school, for example Laye, Samba Diallo, and Ken, all of whom express the particularly enticing, even overwhelming aural encounter with instruction, the French language in particular. Like we saw in these other three cases, the encounter can produce hypnotic, conquering, and rupturing

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<sup>49</sup> “...first conscious desire, to go to school” (42).

<sup>50</sup> “I was curious, especially intrigued by the words his students uttered when they came out of class—their melodious songs that weren’t those of my language, but from another that sounded just as sweet” (42).

consequences, respectively. Salie's draw to the "chansons mélodieuses" may also point to an entrancing encounter that characterizes the French school—for better or for worse.

Salie's curiosity drives her to disobedience because she enters school by rebellious means. To get into the school, she confesses "Alors, j'ai triché, j'ai volé, j'ai menti, j'ai trahi la personne que j'aime le plus au monde: ma grand-mère!" (66).<sup>51</sup> Salie even asks God for forgiveness for the sins she committed to satisfy her curiosity, presented as an instinctual, fateful pull despite all constraints against her. "Pardon, bon Dieu, pardonnez-moi, mais c'était pour la bonne cause, sinon je n'aurais jamais pu lire votre nom dans tous les livres saints. Merci!" (66).<sup>52</sup> Salie's contrition towards her grandmother comes across as sincere, but her religious confession contains her distinctive irony. By exaggerating the gravity of her sins, she draws attention to their innocuousness.

Salie expands on her offenses, which she organizes for the reader in parallel structure, launching each paragraph with "j'ai triché:", "j'ai volé:", and "j'ai menti:" respectively. She explains how she neglected her chores, sneaking away from their home when her grandmother was distracted. She stole money from her grandmother's coin purse to buy chalk, and she would fabricate excuses about where she disappeared to when her grandmother chastised her upon returning. Her acts are characterized by language of surreptitiousness and deceit: "je m'éclipsais," "je cachais," "je filais l'école en douce," "dérober," "j'inventais une histoire" (67).<sup>53</sup> As I see it, both the narration and young Salie revel in the chase of getting into the school.

Whether or not the rebellion is just fun and games, Salie's subversive actions do disrupt elements of the school's spatial configuration because Salie disobeys classroom rules and

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<sup>51</sup> "So I cheated, I stole, I lied. I betrayed the person I love the most in the world, my grandmother" (42).

<sup>52</sup> "Forgive me, God, forgive me, but it was in a good cause, or I'd never have been able to read Your name in all the holy books. Thank you!" (42).

<sup>53</sup> "I'd sneak off," "I hid," "I'd slip away," "steal," "I'd make up a story" (42).

authority. Not officially enrolled, Salie slips into the classroom. She describes her incursions in a style that communicates her stealth but also a climactic build up to her giving herself away.

J'entrais; il y avait une place vide au fond, je m'y installais, discrète, et j'écoutais. Il écrivait des lettres ou des chiffres étranges au tableau et donnait l'ordre de recopier. Je recopiais. Puis venait le moment où il appelait les écoliers au tableau à tour de rôle; quand tous étaient passés, moi aussi je décidais d'y aller à mon tour. Monsieur Ndétare s'offusquait, ouvrait le compas géant de ses jambes et se dirigeait vers moi: 'Tu déguerpis tout de suite! Allons, dehors, tu n'es pas inscrite!' Je sortais en courant (67).<sup>54</sup>

Salie does as she is told, scurrying out of the classroom, but in no time, she sneaks back in to join the lesson. "...et le cirque recommençait" (68).<sup>55</sup> The narrating Salie insinuates the thrill and comicality of the scene, a repeated performance that demonstrates the young girl's tenacity and ludic mischief of the scene. By milking the transgressive nature of her entrance into school, Salie's confessional memories disclose a false remorse for her disobedience. Her desire to attend school, however, is genuine. Finally, Ndétare gives in and unofficially enrolls Salie in the class by adding her name in pencil at the bottom of his roster. He alters an official school document, a subversive act itself. Salie gets her way, but not until after repeatedly breaking the rules. Salie's subversive measures of getting into school match her subversive existence and identity.

Salie's disobedience also subverts the archetypes of the "good" as well as the "rebellious" student. First, Salie proves herself to be gifted in the content she is learning, though in the disciplinary systems of the school, a "good student" is more often attributed to those who demonstrate behavioral compliance. Second, Salie is not rebelling against the authority of the school in order to disrupt the establishment. Her desire is to get *into* the establishment.

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<sup>54</sup> "I'd go in. There was an empty desk at the back. I'd sit there, quietly, and listen. He'd be writing strange letters or numbers on the blackboard and instruct the class to copy them. I copied. Then came the moment when he'd call the schoolchildren to the blackboard in turn; when they'd all gone up, I decided I'd go too. Monsieur Ndétare would be annoyed, he'd open the giant compass of his legs and come towards me: 'Off with you, right now! Go on, outside. You're not a member of this class!'" (43).

<sup>55</sup> "...and the circus would begin again" (43).

Consequently, the classroom, even the threshold itself, becomes a site of contestation. This is one of the few moments of rebellion or even disobedience seen in the novels studied in this dissertation. The female students in *Notre-Dame du Nil* criticize their teachers, but never directly, finding more subtle ways: posing ironic questions, posting suggestive pictures from Western magazines, sneaking in and out of the school's confines. In fact, the narrator of *Notre-Dame du Nil* takes most responsibility for cheeky comments. In *L'Enfant noir*, when the younger students are struggling with bullies (other students and teachers alike), it is the parents that step in. For example, Laye's father sees his son suffering from events at school and takes it upon himself to show up on school grounds to rough up the administrator. Outright insubordination in the classroom from a student is rare across these representations. This is surprising since such a disciplined and controlled space, paradoxically, sets perfect conditions for subversion.

Salie's disobedience affords her the ability to use her education differently. Laye, Medza, Samba Diallo, and the students of Notre-Dame-du-Nil high school are sent to their formal education by their parents. Their communities are generally proud or invested in their schooling, yet these students did not show the same school-facilitated self-determination that Salie does. Therefore, community or parental support changes how students catalyze their education. For Laye in *L'Enfant noir*, his father made the decision. Medza's father in *Mission terminée* uses school as a means to keep his son out of trouble. Medza's community, though outwardly respectful, exploits his education and credentials for their own ends. Despite their more noble motivations, Samba Diallo's community in *L'Aventure ambiguë* is ultimately sacrificing him to the school for their own survival. The young women of *Notre-Dame du Nil* are sent there for safe keeping by their families. Perhaps that is why these students cannot draw on their schooling for their emancipation: their education is not theirs to claim. Salie, because she chose to attend

school of her own accord built on a desire to access school knowledge and a stubborn perseverance, is able to use schooling for her own emancipation.

On the other hand, Ken's situation parallels Salie's in many ways. They both share a less-than-privileged status in their families and communities, Ken being born the last girl to older parents in a larger polygamous family. Both women lack a true sense of belonging throughout their childhoods, Ken abandoned by her mother and Salie rejected by her community. Like Salie, Ken encounters resistance to her enrollment, but it comes from her grandmother who does not think girls should go to school. Ken does brandish her exposure to Western culture and education to push others away, similar to Salie, but Ken does so with short skirts, high heels, straightened hair, and the French language. Salie, for her part, uses her writing. When comparing herself to the other women on the island, she states, "*Mon stylo continuait à tracer ce chemin que j'avais emprunté pour les quitter. Chaque cahier rempli, chaque livre lu, chaque dictionnaire consulté est une brique supplémentaire sur le mur qui se dresse entre elles et moi*" (171).<sup>56</sup> As described in Chapter Two, Ken's assimilation tactics are more superficial, using clothing and gestures to perform identification, whereas Salie's defense mechanisms are more psychologically and critically situated.

Ken and Salie face some of the same frictions and unsavory experiences in Europe (e.g., degrading doctors' visits, potent loneliness). But what facilitates Salie's critical consciousness of life in Europe that Ken lacks? On her departure, Ken imagined finding belonging and identity in Europe due to the identity (de)formation that her schooling fostered. Contrastingly, Salie is under no illusion that Europe would provide her with roots, disabused of that idea when her in-laws reject her because of her race and her husband in turn divorces her. In response, Salie writes her

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<sup>56</sup> "My pen went on tracing the path I'd taken to leave them. Every notebook I filled, every book I read, every dictionary I consulted was one more brick in the wall dividing us" (120).



own identity through a transatlantic framework, existing between Senegal and France by way of “Letters” whereas Ken continues to fracture herself to identify completely with the West. Ken does not navigate the migrant experience in transcultural terms but in essentialist terms, which may be why she cannot harness her schooling—albeit hard-won—for dignity like Salie can.

Beyond her self-achieved education, Salie has two other advantages over Ken: her supportive mother figure and exceptional teacher. Indeed, *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* is the only work studied in this dissertation to depict a quality, supportive, complex teacher character in their vivid depictions of the school. We have either mostly anonymous figures (in *L’Enfant noir* and *L’Aventure ambiguë* and *Mission terminée*) or ineffectual if not outwardly antagonistic educators (the administrator in *L’Enfant noir*; the Mère Supérieure, Père Herménégilde, and the European teachers in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, and the frustrated, violent despots in *Le Baobab fou*). Those educators who do appear leave much to be desired and reveal their role in the darker sides of the Western-model school. In order to understand how Ndétare contributes to Salie’s re-existence, let us look at the ways he is exceptional.

Ndétare is the one who inspires Salie’s vivid and extensive reflection of her childhood and schooling. During a telephone conversation with Madické, Salie learns that her brother has begun taking French lessons with Ndétare. In the middle of one of his long monologues about the progression of his dream to move to France, Madické stops and asks, “‘Ben alors, tu ne dis rien, tu ne te souviens pas de lui?’” (63).<sup>57</sup> Then, Salie’s reflection on this man who changed her life begins, the magnitude of his impression on her and her memory meriting an entirely new chapter unto itself. Salie’s memory cuts into the phone conversation. On a new page beginning the fourth chapter, she thinks, “‘Bien sûr que je me souviens de lui’” (65),<sup>58</sup> and after a short

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<sup>57</sup> “‘So, you’re not saying anything. Don’t you remember him?’” (40).

<sup>58</sup> “Of course I remember him” (41).

biographical description of the teacher, she repeats “Bien sûr que je me le rappelle” (65).<sup>59</sup>

Further on in the chapter, she reiterates, “Bien sûr que je me rappelle monsieur Ndétare” (77).<sup>60</sup>

Salie launches her narration of school with this parallel structure, her memories mediated by this essential figure in her life.<sup>61</sup>

Another reason Ndétare is exceptional is that he too subverts some school rules. First, Ndétare breaks school code by unofficially enrolling Salie in his class for the benefit of a child whom he wants to help and in whom he recognizes a thirst for knowledge. Second, Salie mentions that “La classe de monsieur Ndétare n’était jamais fermée” (66).<sup>62</sup> She reinforces this point not only through repetition but additional emphases: “À l’école, la classe de monsieur Ndétare, je vous l’ai déjà dit, n’était jamais fermée” (67).<sup>63</sup> In highlighting the open door, she draws attention to this seemingly minor element of the spatial demarcation of the school space. It is not minor at all, however, because the open door is how Salie hears what is happening in the classroom and how she trespasses. Despite Ndétare chasing her from the room, one could imagine that Ndétare’s door, “qu’il s’obstinait à laisser ouverte” (80),<sup>64</sup> remains that way on purpose: to draw in new students to the school.<sup>65</sup> Ndétare’s open door creates a porosity of the

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<sup>59</sup> “Of course I remember him” (41).

<sup>60</sup> “Of course I remember Monsieur Ndétare” (50).

<sup>61</sup> In an interview with Thierry Richard of Ouest-France (2022), Diome admitted to wanting to stay in Niodior and perhaps follow in the footsteps of her beloved teacher. “Je pensais venir, plus tard, visiter le pays de Hugo, Rimbaud, Prévert, etc., tous ces poètes dont nous récitons les textes à l’école. Mais je n’avais pas du tout l’idée de m’installer ici. Je voulais être prof chez moi, rester auprès de mes grands-parents adorés. Les choses se sont passées comme elles se sont passées ; je ne me suis pas débinée, j’ai poursuivi mes études. Et, pour être honnête, j’ai peut-être aussi voulu prouver au crapaud que je pouvais tenir bon, avec ou sans lui” [I was thinking of coming, later, to visit the country of Hugo, Rimbaud, Prévert, etc., all those poets whose texts we recited at school. But I didn’t have the idea of settling here at all. I wanted to be a teacher at home, to stay with my beloved grandparents. Things happened as they did; I didn’t give up, I continued my studies. And, to be honest, maybe I also wanted to prove to that frog that I could hold my own, with or without him].

<sup>62</sup> “Monsieur Ndétare’s classroom was never closed” (42).

<sup>63</sup> “At school, as I’ve already said, Monsieur Ndétare’s classroom was never closed” (43).

<sup>64</sup> “which he insisted on leaving open” (52).

<sup>65</sup> Salie also mentions that it is the teacher specifically that she wants to meet by going into the school, more so than the language or content. “...je voulais découvrir le génie qui apprenait aux enfants scolarisés tous ces mots mystérieux” (66) [I wanted to discover the genius who taught the schoolchildren all these mysterious words (42)].

school space that resists conventional configurations, or “clôture” inherent to disciplinary processes like the one we saw in *Notre-Dame du Nil* (Foucault [1975] 2006).<sup>66</sup> This episode in *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* lends particular attention to this factor, pointing to its own cognizance of the irregularity of this practice and therefore a lucidity of the conventions of school set up. While the four walls of the school and classroom are habitually meant to keep others out—and keep students in—Salie and Ndétare disrupt this architecture. Furthermore, Salie’s comings and goings into the school space, normally dictated by bells and schedules and controlled by authority figures, pose a sort of resistance to these scholastic strictures. Diome’s portrait of the willful child challenges the ordered arrangement of the schoolroom and therefore, to a certain point, the coloniality of scholastic instruction.

Repetition is an important device in the narration of these childhood memories. The following excerpt is a substantial ode to Ndétare that I will cite at length to demonstrate the extent of its parallel structure and use of repetition. In it, adult Salie expresses her continued gratitude for Ndétare but also reveals patterns in her memory that have important implications for the potential of a decolonial turn in this representation. In the midst of her memory, Salie soliloquizes,

Bien sûr que je me le rappelle. Je lui dois Descartes, je lui dois Montesquieu, je lui dois Victor Hugo, je lui dois Molière, je lui dois Dostoïevski, je lui dois Hemingway, je lui dois Léopold Sédar Senghor, je lui dois Aimé Césaire, je lui dois Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar, Mariama Bâ et les autres. Je lui dois mon premier poème d’amour écrit en cachette, je lui dois la première chanson française que j’ai murmurée, parce que je lui dois mon premier phonème, mon premier monème, ma première phrase française lue, entendue et comprise. Je lui dois ma première lettre écrite de travers sur mon morceau d’ardoise cassé. Je lui dois l’école. Je lui dois l’instruction. Bref, je lui dois mon *Aventure ambiguë*. Parce que je ne cessai de le harceler, il m’a tout donné : la lettre, le

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<sup>66</sup> “La discipline parfois exige la *clôture*, la spécification d’un lieu hétérogène à tous les autres et fermé sur lui-même. Lieu protégé de la monotonie disciplinaire” (166) [Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony (141). All English translations of this text come from Sheridan, Alan, trans. 1995. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books.

chiffre, la clé du monde. Et parce qu'il a comblé mon premier désir conscient, aller à l'école, je lui dois tous mes petits pas de french cancan vers la lumière. (65-66)<sup>67</sup>

This excerpt illustrates the novel's close consideration of the schooling question and the learning process. Notably, Salie expresses great reverence toward the literary aspect of her education, listing a number of canonical authors that she knows because of Ndétare's instruction. As the list of gratitude progresses, she focuses more on the French language, which ultimately gives her entry into those authors' works, "la clé du monde." She mixes cultural references, not only through her list of authors, but also in her references to Kane's seminal school-focused novel. The rhythm of this list begins rapidly with short clauses then picks up with more elongated sentences, mirroring the pieced construction of language that she describes—phoneme, monème, phrase—as well as the cumulative nature of the learning process. The use of repetition recalls the pedagogy used in the classroom, which Salie references soon after: "C'était encore l'époque de la méthode CLAD: l'instituteur devait faire répéter aux écoliers des mots, des phrases que diffusait une radiocassette" (68).<sup>68</sup> Salie's recollection of this minute, pedagogical detail speaks to the novel's mindfulness of the learning process.<sup>69</sup> Salie's reference to Kane's work also places the novel within the cultural waters and heritage of works that have raised the "education question" since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still, it is interesting that in this celebration of her schooling and teacher, Salie references a work that mourns the coming of the school into

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<sup>67</sup> "Of course I remember him. I owe him Descartes, I owe him Montesquieu, I owe him Victor Hugo, I owe him Molière, I owe him Balzac, I owe him Marx, I owe him Dostoevsky, I owe him Hemingway, I owe him Léopold Sédar Senghor, I owe him Aimé Césaire, I owe him Simone de Beauvoir, Margurite Yourcenar, Mariama Bâ and the rest. I owe him my first secretly written love poem, I owe him the first French song I murmured, because I owe him my first phoneme, my first moneme, the first French phrase I read, heard and understood. I owe him my first letter of French, written wonkily on my broken slate. I owe him school. I owe him education. I owe him, in short, my *ambiguous adventure*. Because I pestered him endlessly, he gave me everything: letters, numbers, the keys to the world. And because he fulfilled my first conscious desire, to go to school, I owe him all my small French cancan steps towards the light" (41-42).

<sup>68</sup> "It was still the era of teaching by radio: the teacher had to make the pupils repeat words and sentences spoken by a voice on a radio cassette player" (43).

<sup>69</sup> Importantly, however, repetition and recitation are also integral to Quranic education (Ware 2014, 67) and orality, so Diome's and other authors' use of repetition could be attributed to those practices as well.

West Africa, Senegal specifically, and ultimately divides its main student character into fatally fractured pieces. Nevertheless, she does employ the possessive pronoun “my” (“mon *Aventure ambiguë*”), indicating that the encounter with school for African subjectivities is varied and personal, yet nearly always ambiguous.

Salie’s posture toward her teacher is one of gratitude and deference, and the repetition in the paragraph cited above reads like a prayer to the teacher himself. The repetition and rhythm also recall a hypnotic function, not unlike those seen in the other novels studied in earlier chapters. For example, in *L’Enfant noir* Laye recalls how students were “extraordinarily attentive,” amazed into learning due to the strangeness of the material. Moreover, in response to Adèle’s prompt, “‘Raconte-moi comment ils t’ont conquis,’”<sup>70</sup> Samba Diallo in *L’Aventure ambiguë* responds, “‘C’est peut-être avec leur alphabet [...] Longtemps, je suis demeuré sous la fascination de ces signes et de ces sons qui constituent la structure et la musique de leur langue’” (171).<sup>71</sup> In *Le Baobab fou*, Ken’s seemingly uncontrolled trances during traumatic moments brings forward school memories. Finally, in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, the repetition of the class schedule lulls students into submission. In this vein, we can recall again Mignolo’s (2018, 144). metaphor of the puppet and the puppeteer in describing the colonality of knowledge, specifically “puppets that enchant you distracts you from the tricks and designs of the enunciator.” Salie demonstrates much more control over these memories, but her narration yet again recalls the hypnotic force of school reminiscent of colonial control.

The choice and order of authors on Salie’s reading list also merit more profound consideration. The list takes on geographical, temporal, racial, and gendered categorization. It

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<sup>70</sup> “‘Tell me how they conquered you’” (159).

<sup>71</sup> “‘Perhaps it was with their alphabet [...] I remained for a long time under the spell of those signs and those sounds which constitute the structure and the music of their language’” (159). All English translations of this novel come from Woods, Katherine, trans. 1963. *Ambiguous Adventure*. New York: Walker and Company.

starts with white Frenchmen. Then it extends forward in time to include white men from other Western nations (Marx, Dostoyevsky, Hemingway). Then it picks up with two Black male authors, and it finishes with a list of women: white, European women first then finally Senegalese author Mariama Bâ. It is notable that the three women do not appear in their own independent clause and are latched to “les autres.” I do not read this as a conscious hierarchization on Salie’s part, yet considering the building-block construction of this excerpt, this list does suggest an order matching a pedagogical program that centers Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, the parallel structure in the narration triangulates instruction between student, teacher, and curricular content. The choice and proliferation of the verb “devoir” does indicate gratitude and deference but also a power dynamic between teacher and student that is typical of school-based pedagogies and hierarchies. It also insinuates a one-way exchange of knowledge from the knowing teacher to the unknowing student, as Freire ([1968] 2018) illustrates.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, this paragraph does echo colonial architectures typical of the classroom despite Salie’s reverence toward it and Ndétare’s defiance of it.

Even if Salie’s schooling produces liberatory outcomes, this representation is still embroiled in the idea of indebtedness. Debt is an important aspect of contemporary paradigms of

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<sup>72</sup> Descartes is the most popular reference in the corpus of works explored in this dissertation, also mentioned in *Mission terminée*, *L’Aventure ambiguë*, and *Le Baobab fou*. The numerous references speak to how often Descartes must have featured in curriculums in 20<sup>th</sup> century French schools in sub-Saharan Africa. These references also present interesting implications for the potential decolonial valence of these works, since Descartes’s mind/body dyad has been wielded to invalidate non-Western ways of being and knowing. For example, Walsh (2018, 65) points out how Cartesian thinking makes little room for those epistemologies drawing deep connections between humans and nature. Additionally, as Hlabangane (2021) evokes, Cartesian systems of thought “divorce the body from the soul” and have produced dominant worldviews that give “rise to dualist and teleological thinking that presupposes a linear trajectory of development” (168). I would argue that the continued presence of Descartes in these works represents yet another trace of coloniality in their representations of the school.

<sup>73</sup> Freire describes this “banking” form of education as a stilted form of learning that robs students of creativity and critical inquiry. “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire 2018, 72).

neoliberal capitalism and coloniality that Diome is trying to expose in this novel. In her study of *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Perisic (2019) demonstrates how financial dependence and debt in existing globalized economic systems (inherited from colonization), inevitably form “indebted subjectivities.” This scholar explores debt through Diome’s macronarrative examples of national indebtedness and development rhetoric as well as through micronarrative models such as Moussa and the repayment he “owes” Monsieur Sauveur. “The proprietor-possession dynamic is intertwined with a paternalistic attitude that suggests that French teams are enabling the ‘development’ of Senegalese players. This dynamic mirrors the French colonial ideology where economic utility is countered by (and sustained by) the ‘humanistic’ philosophy of the civilizing mission” (Perisic 2019, 86). Perisic’s nod to the civilizing mission is appropriate, where schooling and the rhetoric of modernity have also generated sentiments of indebtedness. With indebtedness comes a sense of guilt and responsibility in the debtor. Debt becomes a moral imperative that produces a power imbalance between the parties involved, and sustained, chronic indebtedness thus produces those “indebted subjectivities,” which has a negative impact on identity and self-actualization. While I see Salie’s gratitude toward her teacher as sincere, her narrative style and formulations in the passage above do evoke imbalances and moral repayments that traditional structures of the school maintain.

Traces of coloniality linger in Salie’s schooling experience as well as her narration of it. Therefore, Diome’s novel does not entirely complete the decolonial turn that we have been looking for in these literary representations of the school. Nevertheless, because of young Salie and Ndétare’s subversion of certain codes of the school, the work does indicate a pivot toward the decolonial direction. To be sure, Salie is one of the only students who we have seen able to use her schooling for her own emancipation. Her gratitude is well placed since her schooling

grows into a love of literature, which in turn grows into her own vocation as an author.

Ultimately, despite the school's persistent coloniality, Salie does find self-actualization as an African woman migrant with a hybrid identity. And she does so through her writing.

### **Authoring a transatlantic identity: Salie's dignity and re-existence**

Salie evades an oppressive existence in Niodior thanks to her schooling, yet *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* also illustrates that reconciling the migrant and hybrid identities that stem from her departure is no simple feat. When Madické asks her hypothetically to choose between Senegal and France, Salie responds, ““Et toi, tu préfère qu'on te coupe la jambe gauche ou le bras droit?”” (253).<sup>74</sup> Salie claims both cultures and communities. She listens to the music of Youssou N'Dour and Serge Gainsbourg. She reads Balzac and Sembène. Each location forms essential parts of her identity. Each location also poses its own oppressive structures. Salie faces othering, essentializing, and exoticization as an African woman migrant living in France from doctors, border agents, and her husband's French family. She also misses her kin in Niodior, but she abhors the practices dubbed “traditional” that continue to exploit and marginalize her upon returning home. In navigating these tensions, Salie uses writing to construct a sense of home and identity. Several literary scholars treat the theme of writing as a means of self-construction and identification in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (Garnier 2004; Nathan 2012; Haskell 2016; Latha 2016; Brown 2017). In this section, I will introduce a new perspective to the liberatory possibilities of schooling and writing by examining Salie's situation alongside the concept of re-existence as a decolonial project. In other words, Salie may present an example of how to define dignity within decolonial praxis.

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<sup>74</sup> ““What about you, would you rather have your left leg cut off or your right arm?”” (181-182)



For Salie, writing is not simply a salve for the pains of existing between two worlds. Writing is what allows her to break down barriers between them and exist in flux between geographical, cultural, and epistemic sites. “Exilée en permanence, je passe mes nuits à souder les rails qui mène à l’identité. L’écriture est la cire chaude que je coule entre les sillons creusés par les bâtisseurs de cloisons des deux bords” (254).<sup>75</sup> The lexicon of geography and identity here evokes decolonial thinker Ramón Grosfoguel’s concept of “locus of enunciation.” Salie’s locus of enunciation, or the “geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel 2007, 213), is particularly *Atlantic*; it exists in ebbs and flows between the two locations of her identity construction.<sup>76</sup>

Diome depicts the practice of writing in ways that engage art, language, and creation in the mediation and mitigation of these hybrid identities and transatlantic existences. At one moment when Salie is feeling particularly blue because of Madické’s insistence on coming to France, she turns to writing:

Ce sont toujours ces moments-là que choisit ma mémoire pour dérouler des films tournés ailleurs, sous d’autres cieux, des histoires tapies en moi comme d’anciennes mosaïques dans les souterrains d’une ville. Mon *stylo*, semblable à une pioche d’archéologue, déterre les morts et découvre des vestiges en traçant sur mon cœur les contours de la terre qui m’a vue naître et partir. [...] La nostalgie est ma plaie ouverte et je ne peux m’empêcher d’y fourrer ma plume. (224)<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “A permanent exile, I spend my nights soldering the rails that lead to identity. Writing is the hot wax I pour between the furrows dug by those who erect partitions on both sides” (182).

<sup>76</sup> Awareness of loci of enunciation is a particularly important decolonial stance, because invisibilization of that epistemic location, or the “point zero” perspective, is what allowed Western paradigms of being and knowing to convey themselves as universal truth. “By hiding the location of the subject of enunciation, European/Euro-American colonial expansion and domination was able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world” (Grosfoguel 2007, 214).

<sup>77</sup> “It’s always at this time that my memory chooses to project films shot elsewhere, under different skies, stories buried deep down inside me like ancient mosaics in a city’s subterranean tunnels. My pen, like an archaeologist’s pickaxe, unearths the dead and discovers remains, tracing on my heart the contours of the land that witnessed my birth and my departure. [...] Homesickness is my gaping wound, and I can’t help but dip my pen in it” (159-160).

Salie's writing helps her feel linked to her place of origin, even when connection with her family seems so distant. According to this passage, her writing provides both psychological and physical sustenance, "mes nourritures d'exil." The details she unearths from her memory and puts to writing connect her to home. Her authorship also provides her the income to literally put food on her table and sustain a life in France.

It is easy to trace the connection between Salie's childhood schooling and adult writing. First and foremost, she gained the skills to become an author at school, namely knowledge of the French language ("mon premier phonème, mon premier monème, ma première phrase française lue, entendue et comprise"), introduction to impactful authors ("Je lui dois Descartes"), and a love for the literary universe. Furthermore, she uses transcontinental language to describe both. Literature is her "clé au monde," and writing grounds her wherever she journeys: "un carnet, ça tient dans un sac de voyage. Alors, partout où je me pose mes valises, je suis chez moi" (255).<sup>78</sup> Finally, she can draw on her schooling both for her own liberation, in particular *thanks to* her marginalization. As examined earlier, Salie's status as an outcast facilitates her subversive entrance into school, which eventually proves to be a productive tool for her own self-determination and independence. Like Touré's (2012) argument suggests, Salie's writing proves similarly productive: "le projet littéraire chez Diome essaie aussi de métamorphoser cette marginalité en des paradigmes constructifs" (121).<sup>79</sup> Salie finds herself "Enracinée partout, exilée tout le temps" (181),<sup>80</sup> but her writing offers her the mental state of home that she cannot achieve completely in Senegal nor completely in France. Instead, she "cherche [son] territoire

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<sup>78</sup> "...a notebook that can fit into a travel bag. So, wherever I put down my suitcases, I'm at home" (183).

<sup>79</sup> "Diome's literary project also tries to transform this marginality into constructive paradigms."

<sup>80</sup> "Always in exile, with roots everywhere" (127).

sur une page blanche” (255)<sup>81</sup> and forms her own transatlantic identity and attains dignity through authorship.

Dignity is a recurring idea throughout the *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* and an ambition shared by all characters. As discussed above, characters often recite the proverb “*chaque miette de vie doit servir à conquérir la dignité*.”<sup>82</sup> The vieux pêcheur uses it to encourage the young men to leave the island to find work. His campaign for dignity is doubly ironic. Firstly, migrating to France often does not lead to dignity as the miserable experiences of Moussa and l'homme de Barbès showed. Secondly, the narration portrays the vieux pêcheur as quite undignified, dressed in rags, reeking of fish, and shamelessly helping himself to food offered in others' homes. In fact, the narration resorts to incorporating the proverb completely ironically. For example, it appears throughout Moussa's story and, poignantly, right after the discovery of Moussa's body washed up on the shore (114). The narration ridicules this canned language, but dignity itself remains a motivation within the narrative. Young Salie's story also evokes dignity, but unironically. When Salie is bullied by peers because of her name (that of her biological father who did not originate on the island), Monsieur Ndétare reminds her, ““Comme moi, tu resteras toujours une étrangère dans ce village, et tu ne pourras pas te battre chaque fois qu'on se moquera de ton nom. D'ailleurs, il est très beau, il signifie *dignité*; alors sois digne et cesse de te battre”” (78).<sup>83</sup> From that moment on, Salie ignores her peers and stands up to her adoptive father, and her newfound pride carries her through to success in school. Once again, Salie's marginalized identity ultimately empowers her.

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<sup>81</sup> “seek[s her] country on a white page” (183).

<sup>82</sup> “*every scrap of life must serve to win dignity*. ”

<sup>83</sup> ““You'll always be a stranger in this village, like me, and you can't fight every time they make fun of your name. Anyway, it's a beautiful name, it means dignity; so show some dignity and stop fighting”” (51).

In her interview with Njoya (2008), Fatou Diome nuances the ways that she conceptualizes dignity and success in this work, which give us insight into Salie's state at the end of the novel. First, when describing Ndogou, the young woman who translates the first TV broadcast for the viewers on the island, Diome states, "Donc elle traduit ce que le journaliste dit et tout le monde l'écoute. C'était une façon de montrer que l'instruction donne une dignité, ou une grade supérieure [sic]. Ça élève quelqu'un. C'est une porte de sortie" (165).<sup>84</sup> In this perspective, dignity is defined as receiving respect from one's community. Diome also associates dignity with upward and outward movement. Whether social or financial advancement, the service that Ndogou provides "raises" her up. The expression "porte de sortie" is interesting here since most often in the novel, leaving is linked to physical departure from the island. Since Ndogou remains on the island, the "exit" that the young woman accesses must be from the subordinate circumstances of unschooled women in a conservative community that Salie criticizes in the novel. It is interesting to note that despite Salie's advanced schooling, she does not gain the respect of her community. However, she does escape those constraints of inferiority. In the same interview, Diome also draws a distinction between the definitions of success held by the islanders and her own promoted in her novel. "Pour eux réussir c'est posséder; avoir une maison, la télé, le vidéo, beaucoup d'argent, se marier, pouvoir faire la fête, et avoir de quoi vivre sans s'inquiéter [...] Je voulais dire que réussir ce n'est pas seulement aller quelque part amener beaucoup d'argent. Réussir c'est aussi faire quelque chose qu'on aime même si on n'est pas riche, et être heureux avec ça" (Njoya 2008, 166–67).<sup>85</sup> I would argue that Diome's idea of

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<sup>84</sup> "And so she translates what the journalist says and everybody listens. This was a way of showing how education gives dignity or a higher status in life" (177).

<sup>85</sup> "For them, success is owning; having a big house, a TV, video, lots of money, getting married, being able to throw parties and having what something to live on with no worries [...] I wanted to say that success is not only going somewhere in order to bring back lots of money. Succeeding is also doing something that one likes even though one may not be rich, and being content with that" (178-179).

success here speaks to another definition of dignity, that of pride in one's work, self-actualization, and self-respect. Fittingly, this describes both Salie's and Madické's situation at the end of the novel. Even if they are not rich, Salie is self-actualized through her writing and Madické through his store. These versions of success uphold their self-respect and dignity.

Dignity is also an important concept in decolonial projects, particularly for "re-existence." A central praxis of decoloniality calls to reclaim modes of knowing and being outside of Eurocentric colonial order, in other words "epistemic reconstitution." Walsh calls this the decolonial *for*. "It is the *for* that takes us beyond an *anti* stance" (18). In other words, decolonial projects do not purely seek to reject or dismantle ways of knowing and being that have remained dominant through the colonial matrix of power (e.g., the school) but to restore respect for subalternized ways of knowing and being. Part of this decolonial "for" is the praxis of "re-existence." Originally developed by Adolfo Albán Achinte, re-existence is defined as "the mechanisms that human groups implement as a strategy of questioning and making visible the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization, procuring the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the bio-politic that controls, dominates, and commodifies subjects and nature" (2008, 85–86, translation from Walsh 2018, 18). According to these decolonial thinkers, re-existence goes beyond resistance to include the self-making and self-actualization of their humanity.

As I see it, Salie's story echoes with re-existence. I would not go so far as to argue that Salie is reclaiming subalternized or indigenous epistemologies, and she is surely not questioning the school and its "practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization." Nevertheless, she does disrupt the school spatial arrangement in order to attain the knowledge and skills in which she finds gratification and that ultimately lead her to dignity. If school is embedded with

coloniality, as we have seen throughout the literary representations examined in this dissertation, how is it that Salie can leverage her schooling for this potentially decolonial process of re-existence? Walsh invokes a response to this question in a reference to Audre Lorde's poignant observation about the master's tools. Lorde (1984) observes that one cannot dismantle oppressive structures using the same mechanisms that built those structures nor can one build a liberatory structure with those same mechanisms. In more concrete terms, one cannot delink from the coloniality of the school by using the same spatial configurations, pedagogies, and hierarchies that make up the school. On the other hand, Walsh points out that other tools are available to go beyond dismantling. "There are those who used those tools, developed additional ones, and built houses of their own on more or less generous soil. It is our view that the proper response is to follow their lead, transcending rather than dismantling Western ideas through building our own houses of thought" (2018, 7). In developing her own transatlantic identity through her writing, Salie is indeed developing her own tools (on more or less generous soil to be sure) that help her self-actualize, indeed that help her "redefine and re-signify life in conditions of dignity and self determination." Salie is decidedly not *anti*-school in this work, especially not in the same ways that Ken Bugul's fractured self and Scholastique Mukasonga's biting irony critiqued the school. Nevertheless, her subaltern position and disobedience allows her to disrupt some of the school's structures in order to then "transcend" the coloniality embedded there. By disrupting school architectures then harnessing her education and love for literature to construct her own transatlantic identity in the face of essentialist geographical and cultural definitions, Salie executes Walsh's observation "that decolonial re-existence in the circumstances of the present times requires creative pedagogies-methodologies of struggle" (2018, 96). Finally, I also posit that her goal to correct the illusion of France's superiority is her way of "confronting the

bio-politic that controls, dominates, and commodifies” her Senegalese community. Salie’s efforts and Diome’s novel itself are catalysts of re-existence.

### **Conditional emancipation through schooling**

Salie’s schooling, and by proxy her love of and gift for literary production, helps her to leave the oppressive island community and sustain a life in France in (relative) dignity. However, her example is again unique. *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* does not present Salie’s migratory trajectory as an option for anyone else. When considering how to help her brother, Salie thinks “Je n’ai pas de bâton magique capable de fendre les flots, je n’ai qu’un stylo qui tente de frayer un chemin qu’il lui est impossible d’emprunter” (211).<sup>86</sup> Schooling is not an option even for other women who experience similar marginalization under the conservative ideologies of the island. Eubanks (2015) corroborates this in her study and points to the ambiguous imitability of Salie’s example. “While she [Salie] had been an island girl and has become an Atlantic woman, it is not clear that (or how) her story can be an agent of change for girls and women on Niodior” (133). In fact, I would argue that the novel illustrates that schooling produces detrimental consequences for other characters. This section looks at the cases of Ndétare, Sankèle, Moussa, and Ndogou to explore how schooling or proximity to it can lead to less-than-dignified conclusions.

Besides his status as “l’étranger,” Ndétare’s association with the school exacerbates his marginalized position on the island. Islanders, specifically the vieux pêcheur, weaponize anti-West rhetoric to turn others against the teacher. Furthermore, the government has exiled Ndétare to the island of Niodior precisely for his school-gained knowledge and union work, considering

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<sup>86</sup> “I don’t have a magic wand to part the waters; I have only a pen that tries to forge a path that he can’t take” (149).

him a threat to the (neocolonial) balance of the country. Unlike Salie's emancipation through schooling, Ndétare's schooling has confined him. By virtue of his alterity, the island community perpetually keeps him at the margins. "Il savait que cette microsociété le dégoûterait toujours pour le maintenir à sa lisière. Il avait remarqué que certains habitants de l'île disposaient à peine d'un QI de crustacé, mais, méprisé, c'était lui, l'intellectuel, qui avait fini par se trouver une similitude avec ces déchets que l'Atlantique refuse d'avaler et qui bordent le village" (76-77).<sup>87</sup> This biting passage poses Ndétare's knowledge (and by proxy link to the school) against the, apparently, unintelligent islanders. The narration betrays a less-than-subtle condescension toward uneducated Niodiorois, finding they have more in common with the flotsam and jetsam around the island precisely because of their ignorance and that Ndétare should be more appreciated precisely because of his intelligence. To be sure, Ndétare does find solace in teaching, which in its own way does provide him some sense of gratification. For example, giving Madické extra French lessons "loin d'être une corvée, représentait pour lui une distraction bienvenue. Et puis, l'enseignement était son sacerdoce: 'Il faut semer la graine du savoir partout où elle est susceptible de pousser' disait-il" (62).<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, this motto, like the other slogans and proverbs discussed above, proves less salutary than expected: Madické is only taking French lessons to give himself a better chance at being recruited to play football in France. As such, schooling does not always lead to emancipation and dignity. In his objective to promote formal education on the island, Ndétare virtually becomes a human embodiment of the school itself, and

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<sup>87</sup> "He knew this microsociété would always spew him out the better to marginalise him. He'd notice that some of the island's inhabitants barely had the IQ of a crustacean, but, being scorned, it was he, the intellectual, who'd at last found a link with this flotsam the Atlantic refuses to swallow, which washes up in the village" (50).

<sup>88</sup> "...far from being a chore, would be a welcome distraction for him. In any case, teaching was his vocation: 'The seed of knowledge must be sown wherever it's likely to grow,' he'd say" (39).



as we will see with the other characters, proximity to this man translates to a proximity to school that produces negative consequences.

Sankèle is another character whose proximity to school does not generate liberating outcomes. Importantly, Sankèle never attends school formally, probably due to her father's stringent beliefs in conservative gender roles. Still, "En dépit d'une éducation traditionnelle, qui tâchait de la modeler comme du beurre de karité, Sankèle avait grandi avec des ailes de pélican assoiffé d'azur. Malgré son sourire timide et son regard fuyant, elle avait du cœur et de l'audace" (31).<sup>89</sup> To her potential advantage, she even shows some similarities with Salie in her audacity and disobedience. In fact, Sankèle is constructed with contradictions (e.g., "en dépit de" "malgré") which could potentially mirror Salie's emancipatory marginality. Due to their romantic relationship, Sankèle learns concepts taught in school from Ndétare that she did not receive in her traditional education.

Ndétare tenait bon et labourait vaillamment son champ: enseigner, encore et toujours, semer des idées dans toute cervelle disponible. Il aimait passer des heures à parler à sa dulcinée des grandes figures historiques de toutes sortes de résistances, y compris celles du féminisme. C'était donc très naturellement que Sankèle, pourtant analphabète, avait acquis le sens de la révolte. (129)<sup>90</sup>

Nevertheless, Sankèle's revolt ultimately leads to her extramarital pregnancy, the murder of her newborn at the hands of her father, and her flight from the island. She cuts all contact with the community after her escape, and she disappears into island lore. "Perdue dans un ailleurs indéterminé, Sankèle était devenue une ombre diffuse dans un territoire imaginaire" (136).<sup>91</sup> So

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<sup>89</sup> "Despite a traditional upbringing that attempted to mould her like shea butter, Sankèle had grown up with the wings of a pelican that longs for the open skies. In spite of her shy smile and elusive eyes, she had courage and daring" (17).

<sup>90</sup> "Ndétare held firm and valiantly ploughed his furrow: keep on teaching, always, plant ideas in every fallow brain. He enjoyed spending hours telling his beloved about the great historical figures of all the different resistance movements, including feminism. So Sankèle, despite being illiterate, had naturally acquired a sense of revolt" (88).

<sup>91</sup> "Lost in a nebulous elsewhere, Sankèle had become a vague shadow in an imaginary land" (93).

while her proximity to school ultimately provides her with escape from the island's oppression, her access to dignity is ambiguous at best.

Moussa's story also demonstrates how schooling does not necessarily lead to dignity. As a youth in Senegal, Moussa regretfully abandons high school due to lack of financial resources and pressure from his parents to provide for his large family. He finds in football a more immediate replacement for the "bureau climatisé de fonctionnaire dont il avait tant rêvé" (95).<sup>92</sup> When he is practicing with the club team in France, he attempts to integrate into the French cultural waters with school-gained knowledge only to incur ridicule from his racist teammates. During a particularly nasty moment in the locker room, his teammates mock his French history facts. "'Ben, il [Moussa] dit que c'est un célèbre sculpteur français du XVIIIe siècle, un certain Jean-Baptiste, qui aurait donné son nom à la rue Pigalle! Vous entendez ça, les mecs!' 'On se demande où il va chercher tout ça. Me dis pas que ça discute sculpture sous les bananiers!'" (100).<sup>93</sup> This passage once again nods to the French-centric knowledges fostered in school, which sting all the more acutely when Moussa's efforts backfire and the information learned in formal instruction—less relevant in Senegal—further alienate him in France. Moussa's astuteness is also juxtaposed against the French men's poor language. Garnier (2004) highlights this insufferable double standard.

L'inculture des Français est d'autant plus insupportable qu'elle est doublée du sentiment de la supériorité de leur modèle culturel. La vieille arrogance française est dénoncée par Fatou Diome comme le comportement analphabète par excellence. Quoi de plus instinctif et brutal que la suffisance de celui qui se croit dépositaire d'une distinction culturelle, ou qui s' imagine incarner les valeurs d'une civilisation. (31)<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> "...air-conditioned civil servant's office he'd dreamed of for so long" (63).

<sup>93</sup> "'Well, he [Moussa] says some Jean-Baptiste, a famous eighteenth-century French sculptor, gave his name to Rue Pigalle! Hear that, boys?' 'Makes you wonder where he gets it. Don't tell me they talk about sculpture under the banana trees!'" (67).

<sup>94</sup> "The lack of culture among the French is all the more unbearable as it is coupled with the feeling of the superiority of their cultural model. Old French arrogance is denounced by Fatou Diome as illiterate behavior par excellence. What could be more instinctive and brutal than the self-importance of someone who believes themselves to be the custodian of a cultural distinction, or who imagines themselves embodying the values of a civilization?"

Despite his adherence to school's norms and exigencies (i.e., his desire for the job of a civil servant, his knowledge of French history), Moussa's instruction detracts from his dignity. What's more, when Moussa returns to Niodior and finds solace in a friendship with Ndétare, they incur damaging rumors about the nature of their relationship. Once again, Ndétare's proximity is a hazard. In the end, Moussa distances himself from Ndétare and finds that the only solution to his despair is to end his own life. On one hand, as Robert Nathan (2012) notes, Salie's experience is distinct from other migrants precisely because of her education. "Clearly Salie has had substantial occasion to interact with French culture and society in a way that many migrants cannot... Salie's experience with French-language schooling deepened this interaction and opened up new avenues and channels of contact" (83). On the other hand, what Moussa's case shows is that schooling does not ensure productive, let alone positive, channels of interaction with French culture and society.

Ndogou is the only other female character in the novel to receive formal instruction besides Salie. To recall, she is the young woman the islanders run to when they need a translation of the news report during the first television viewing, and she eventually runs the *télécentre* on the island. As cited above in the interview with Njoya (2008), Diome references Ndogou precisely for how she exemplifies the benefit of schooling. "Dans le village où il y a beaucoup d'analphabètes, on la regarde comme une intellectuelle. Donc elle traduit ce que le journaliste dit et tout le monde l'écoute. C'était une façon de montrer que l'instruction donne une dignité..." (165).<sup>95</sup> With her investment in a local venture and her advanced schooling, Ndogou should be the perfect model for the advantage of schooling on the island and for Salie's aim to

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<sup>95</sup> "[In] the village where many are illiterate, she is seen as an intellectual. And so she translates what the journalist says and everybody listens. This was a way of showing how education gives dignity or a higher status in life" (177).

propose alternatives to migration. Although Diome does attribute Ndogou with dignity, Salie's narration of Ndogou's existence is more dismissive.

Ndogou, considérée comme une intellectuelle du fait de son bref passage au collège, occupe une place importante au village. Elle est responsable de ce qu'on appelle ici le *télécentre*... Mais l'essentiel du travail de Ndogou consiste à arpenter le village de 8 heures à 22 heures, à la recherche d'habitants réclamés au téléphone par des proches au bout du monde. (34-35)<sup>96</sup>

The narration here seems to detract from Ndogou's dignity, highlighting the brevity of her schooling and the menial nature of her job. The narration also specifies that Ndogou was "renvoyée du college pour redoublements frequents" (49).<sup>97</sup> It would seem that the narration does not offer Ndogou the same respect that Diome portends her education should.

Through the example of these other schooled characters we can see that this novel does not present Salie's success through schooling as replicable. What does this imply about the decolonial possibilities of the school? Can we consider Diome's portrait of the institution as decolonial despite its inefficacy, indeed detriment, for the novel's other characters? I contend that a success rate of one student does not indicate a complete decolonial turn for this more recent portrayal of the school and in the larger representation of this institution in sub-Saharan African Francophone literature more broadly. Nevertheless, what Salie's case does provide are new ways to consider breaking down the coloniality so firmly embedded into the systems and structures of education. In sum, the decolonial turn has yet to be fulfilled in either disrupting or harnessing the school for these African subjectivities. What is certain is that these contemporary

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<sup>96</sup> "Ndogou, who was considered an intellectual due to a brief spell in high school, occupies an important position in the village. She's responsible for what's known here as the call office: a small room where the one telephone, which serves the whole neighborhood, rests on its altar. People come with scraps of paper, scribbled with two or three phone numbers, to make calls in exchange for a few coins. Illiterate for the most part, they often need the young woman's help to dial a number. But Ndogou's work mostly consists in pacing the village from eight a.m. to ten p.m. looking for the villager wanted on the phone by loved ones on the other side of the world" (19).

<sup>97</sup> "...expelled from school for constantly failing her exams" (30).

literary portrayals of the school present “decolonial cracks,” those potentialities for decolonial insurgence that can “weaken and fracture the hegemonic whole” (Walsh 2014, sec. 4).

## Conclusion

Diome’s detailed and poignant rendering of the school contributes to revealing those designs of order of the classroom that uphold its coloniality. Young Salie’s willful disobedience destabilizes those barriers, pedagogies, and epistemologies. Then, adult Salie’s constructive authorship harnesses that education for her personal emancipation. Her hyperconnection with family in Niodior, her marginalized identity, and her migrant status facilitate her transatlantic identity. Her successful mediation of this identity, through her schooling, writing, and resistance of mental colonization, helps her attain the dignity that a life on the island would have denied her.

However, the continued traces of coloniality of scholastic instruction demonstrate that the shift towards decolonial possibilities of the school—at least in literary form—is not fully actualized here. Nevertheless, Diome’s rendering opens up to new possibilities of disrupting the school and finding a pedagogical otherwise. From here we can return to Walsh’s concept of the “decolonial cracks,” those “apertures or beginnings” that can lead to truly decolonial projects. As Walsh (2014) says, the effect of the decolonial cracks “is dependent upon what occurs within the fissures and crevices, on how the seeds planted, sprout, flourish, and grow, on how they extend ruptures and openings” (sec. 4). Even though these more recent works may not narrate fully decolonial representations of the school, the contemporary authors do point to and expand the cracks and fissures in it: Ken Bugul through her fracturing, Scholastique Mukasonga through her

irony, and Fatou Diome through Salie's disobedience. What matters next are what seeds we plant and nourish in the cracks laid bare by these writers.

## CONCLUSION

Beginning in 2015, the Rhodes Must Fall movement based in South Africa not only called to remove the statue of colonist Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus. It also demanded a broader decolonization of university curriculum. The statue was a material symbol of the colonial, Western-centric, and white supremacist values upon which the university was built, but movement members were clear that institutions of higher learning across the globe uphold these same hegemonies in the very educations they continue to provide. In his engagements with the movement, Achille Mbembe expanded the call for decolonization beyond course syllabi and required readings. In his spoken text “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive,” Mbembe states, “We cannot keep teaching the way we have taught. A number of our institutions are teaching obsolete forms of knowledge with obsolete pedagogies. Just as we decommission statues, we should decommission a lot of what passes for knowledge in our teaching. In an age that more than ever valorizes different forms of intelligence, the student-teacher relationship has to change” (2015, under “Classrooms without walls and different forms of intelligence”). Beyond content, Mbembe evokes those other essential components of the learning process that bear political and cultural ideologies. Accordingly, to decolonize an education originally instituted by colonial powers means divesting these components of their coloniality. The Rhodes Must Fall movement and its siblings in other regions have focused largely on tertiary learning institutions, yet Mbembe’s remarks ring equally true for each level of education. One objective of the present study has been to extend this decolonial thinking to the entire Western-model educational structure, demonstrating that the school can inculcate children with its epistemologies starting from their earliest introduction.

The institution has spilled much ink as sub-Saharan African authors over generations continually return to the school in their texts. While Big Data and development rhetoric ever increasingly control education policy in the Global South (Kirchgasler 2019), these literary works are becoming all the more essential to the larger decolonial movement. They shed light on the more intimate, psychological, affective, and subversive experiences of schooling. Through the art of literature, the authors of my corpus reveal how memory, identity, trauma, and history play out within and because of the schooling apparatus in post/neo/colonial contexts, providing critical insights that are invisibilized by data sets of test scores and literacy rates. The works in my corpus also reveal the ways in which coloniality endures in the school and, in some cases, how authors or students alike can delink from that coloniality.

My analyses in the preceding chapters have provided a framework for reading the school and detecting the coloniality therein, particularly in its pedagogies, architectures, and relationships of domination. In my investigation, I follow the connection Ware (2014) makes between knowledge and pedagogy: “After all, much can be learned about what people believe knowledge *is* by paying close attention to how they attempt to transmit it to one another” (3). Viewing school through the angle of its pedagogies and architectures adds complexity to the broader understanding of how the school contributes to the continued colonial project. The works in this corpus have communicated several important aspects of the school’s conception of knowledge. First, these representations have confirmed that the school prioritizes a disciplining of the body, as Foucault has also shown. In analyses of *L’Enfant noir* and *L’Aventure ambiguë* in Chapter One and *Notre-Dame du Nil* in Chapter Three, the school’s control of the space and time with its various disciplinary devices leads to a particular corporeal training that tames the body and turns it into a tool of power. We also witnessed how the student-teacher relationship in the



school is one of domination, per Paulo Freire's formulation. The violence that this hierarchy can beget is clear in the examination of *Le Baobab fou* in Chapter Two when Ken's teachers take out their colonial frustration on their pupils. Even the deeply positive student-teacher relationship of Salie and Monsieur Ndétare in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* explored in Chapter Four is one of indebtedness, which reflects the imbalanced power dynamic built into this scholastic hierarchy.

Yet another faculty of the school displayed by these texts is how it can bleed into and contaminate the value systems of the African communities it inhabits. This effect is particular to colonial and postcolonial contexts where the school promotes the ideologies of foreign entities instead of reflecting those of the surrounding society, as education should. In my analyses of *Mission terminée* in Chapter One and *Notre-Dame du Nil* in Chapter Three, I showed how schooling grants a social currency which can mutate the politics and ideologies of African societies themselves. In the former, Medza loses his agency as his communities commodify his diplomas and manipulate them for their own gain. In the latter, the systems of ethnic division established in the colonial school are wielded by post-independence ruling classes in Rwanda to perpetuate domination and violence. Finally, all these devices collaborate to produce a beguiling effect on students and communities alike. The spellbinding quality of the school is ubiquitously represented in the works of my corpus, whether it is the alterity of the material as shown in *L'Enfant noir* and *Mission terminée*, the hypnotic daily routine in *Notre-Dame du Nil*, or the French language in *L'Aventure ambiguë*, *Le Baobab fou*, and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. The school's ability—indeed, intent—to entrance students in submission and acceptance evokes what Ngũgĩ as well as Mignolo and Walsh refer to as the enchanting capacity of the school that “distracts you from the tricks and designs” functioning behind the illusion (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 144). Combined with the positive rhetoric of modernity touting school's necessity for

development, the allure of the school hides the darker designs it simultaneously promotes, namely a buy-in of Western superiority and suppression or complete erasure of indigenous epistemologies.

Despite affinities between these representations of the school, my corpus is marked by a shift in how authors address this institution. The classic works provide rich ground from which to expose the systems of the school, for example classroom power dynamics, alienating credentialism, and corporeal pedagogies. However, the present study also demonstrated how more contemporary representations of the school offer ways of conceptualizing the schooling experience through, for example, transatlantic trajectories and historical recastings. Ken Bugul, Scholastique Mukasonga, and Fatou Diome employ resurgent traumatic memory, spatial (de)construction, and epistemic disobedience to unsettle the domination of the school. These narrative tools also reflect ever-transforming (neo)colonial realities and decolonial possibilities. Additionally, Scholastique Mukasonga and Fatou Diome each demonstrated the power of irony in their representations of the school. While Mongo Beti's use of irony obfuscates his critique, its narrative function in the contemporary works intensify theirs. Even Ken Bugul's quotation marks around "nos ancêtres les Gaulois" draw ironic attention to this infamous expression associated with the French school in (post)colonial contexts. Indeed, irony contributes to the critical valence of the contemporary works.

Furthermore, each contemporary work builds narrative compositions that are particularly composite, though the effect of blended narration is unique in each text. In *Le Baobab fou*, repressed memories assume various textures and positions within Ken's story, and her symbolic language and layered traumas imply that her experience can be read as the collective story of an entire generation of schooled children. In *Notre-Dame du Nil*, a polyphony of narrative voice

allows for the omniscient narrator to assume its sardonic tone and for the youths of Notre-Dame-du-Nil to tell their own story of witnessing, suffering, and perpetrating school- and state-sanctioned violence. In *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Salie's narrative omniscience provides a birds-eye view of the (trans)Atlantic experiences of the Niodiorois both on and off the island.

Although the students represented in their works are unable to escape or subvert the colonial complexes of the school, both Ken Bugul and Scholastique Mukasonga challenge the school in their portrayals. In Fatou Diome's text, on the other hand, the student is able to subvert the architectures of control of the school to achieve her own dignity that was denied to her by her community and author herself a transatlantic identity thanks to her schooling. In short, the contemporary works provide new methods to represent, critique, or harness the school that expand on the foundations established by the classic works.

Do these newer portrayals reflect a decolonial shift in posture toward school? In the preceding chapters, I have argued that contemporary critical lenses echo decolonial praxis as Walsh and Mignolo describe it. "Reducing to size Western disciplinary apparatus and the institutions (university, museums, theological institutions) that created and maintain North Atlantic universal fictions, is unavoidable and necessary to open up the coexistence of epistemic and ontological pluriversality" (2018, 227). Ken Bugul's and Scholastique Mukasonga's critiques of the school are exactly the analytic that decolonial thinkers call for in challenging the broader colonial matrix of power. Nevertheless, their criticisms are only one portion of the "double movement" of decolonial praxis. In *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, however, Salie disobeys the school's architectures of control and reappropriates her instruction, transcending the colonality of the institution and harness it for her own re-existence. As such, Diome's novel may present one more action toward decolonial horizons. Still, Diome does not propose Salie's

schooling-for-re-existence as widely replicable, and many of her characters do not find the same dignity in schooling as Salie does. Therefore, I argue that the contemporary works indicate a movement toward the decolonial, though not a complete turn. Vitrally, what these novels do accomplish is to expose those “decolonial cracks” in the school that Walsh describes: the insurgencies, struggles, and rifts in the colonial matrix of power that “splinter bit by bit the heretofore established order” (2014, sec. 3). It is therefore the role of subsequent authors, scholars, educationists, and practitioners to expand those fissures and harness them in the movement to decolonize education worldwide.

Indeed, the present study leaves open several possibilities for future scholarship. It remains to be seen if the school will continue to persist so prevalently in sub-Saharan African francophone literary works and if those works will reveal further decolonial possibilities. One fruitful possibility of using this project’s approach to the school would be to pay attention to any continued trends or shifts in future literary production. As decolonial projects persist and reconstitute non-Western-centric epistemologies, future projects would (hopefully) encompass literary texts that advance indigenous learning systems and institutions in spite or in transcendence of the school structures embedded in these regions.

This dissertation’s framework for reading the school could also be used to analyze its representations beyond prose literature. For example, sub-Saharan African film provides ample representations of the school that would expand our understanding of its de/coloniality in more contemporary times. For instance, the character Rama in Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* (1975) is a student in the newly independent Senegal, and her political-mindedness and university engagements guide her critiques of her father’s corruption and mistreatment of his first wife, Rama’s mother. Hers may be another example of how schooling can be harnessed for liberatory

ends in a postcolonial context. Additionally, Jean-Marie Téno's documentary *Afrique, je te plumerai* (1992) offers a historical and very much critical lens toward the school. Interestingly, Téno also interrogates libraries, publishing houses, and African media as epistemic sites that can be read for de/coloniality. Representations of these other institutions could also provide ample room for decolonial projects. Finally, Djibril Diop Mambety's *La Petite vendeuse de Soleil* (1999) portrays a little Senegalese girl, Sili who assumes herself through means other than schooling: she decides to sell newspapers to earn money for herself and her family, a job mostly done by boys. Sili also befriends Badou Seck, who carries with him a collection of West African oral tales published in written form throughout the film. Although the stories are translated into French and into written text, they are anchored in orature, and the book's presence in the film evokes an education of orality. We learn that neither Badou Seck nor Sili can read, yet Sili gives voice to the text by recounting a tale she learned from her grandmother. This scene in particular presents an-other definition of literacy. Even more than Salie's, Sili's experience may offer an example decolonial resistance and re-existence outside of the Western-model of education.

Francophone comics also provide avenues through which to analyze education, the visual intersecting with textual and spatial to construct the school, its pedagogies, and its architectures. Take for example the episode in Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* (1946) where Tintin is ushered into a classroom by a missionary to teach a group of Congolese pupils. In this particular school scene, the original 1931 publication had Tintin pointing to the blackboard and declaring "Je vais vous parler aujourd'hui de votre patrie: La Belgique!" However, this frame was changed in the 1946 publication to an arithmetic lesson where " $2 + 2$ " is written on the blackboard. While this text has been widely studied for its coloniality, this particular edit demonstrates an important cognizance about the role school played/plays in perpetuating Western-centric values. Future

research could observe how sub-Saharan and Caribbean *BDistes* are employing the ninth art to portray the schooling experience. In short, these other mediums provide new ways to represent, critique, or offer options beyond the school that would in turn expand the framework for reading this institution and learning processes in various cultural production.

Future scholarship could also explore how de/colonial epistemologies materialize in the metropole. A quintessential machine in the formation of La République, the school manifests regularly in France-based literary and cinematic works.<sup>1</sup> In frameworks of colorblindness, *laïcité*, and universalism, how do marginalized, migrant, Black and Arab French subjectivities enact decolonial resistance and re-existence within these complicated French structures? Exploring pathways of knowledge transmission and new patterns of decolonial re-existence that flow across transatlantic networks would expand our understanding and framework for reading the school.

This dissertation presents opportunities for literature to contribute to the field of education studies and schooling practices as well. Educationists such as Abdi (2012; 2021), Cossa (2018; 2021), Waghid (2014) and countless practitioners teaching from the decolonial cracks have been investigating and advocating for decolonial options in education, yet their engagement with literary representations are small. We can take heed of those scholars who engage *L'Aventure ambiguë* in their studies of education. For instance, Abdi names Kane among the “scholars of educational and related weltanschauung reconstructions” and his novel among “critical readings of education” on par with Fanon’s *Black skin, white masks* (Abdi 2021, 5).

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<sup>1</sup> In film, Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* (2009), and more recently Uda Benyamina’s *Divines* (2017) and Maïmouna Doucouré’s *Mignonnes* (2020) come to mind. In the case of *Entre les murs*, it would be important to study the trope of the white savior—so common in United States-based representations of teachers—that arises in the context of the *banlieues* of Paris. Benyamina and Doucouré’s films present more explicit subversion of the school spaces and rules, although whether or not the young female characters’ subversion leads to their re-existence is worthy of deeper exploration.

While Kane's novel and the rest of the classic representations of the school still ring meaningfully in their engagement with schooling, this dissertation provided an updated portraiture of the education question in sub-Saharan African francophone literature and additional perspectives to contribute to the critical conversation. For practitioners, may these readings of the school help us denormalize its structures of domination and inspire decolonial practices within our classrooms and beyond.

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