

Towards a Foreign Likeness Bent: Representing Difference in Calixthe Beyala's *Les honneurs perdus*

Patricia Lorraine Price

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By: Patricia Lorraine Price

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Deborah Folaron Chair

Jill Didur Examiner

Christine York Examiner

Paul Bandia Supervisor

Approved by

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____ 20 _____

Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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Patricia Lorraine Price

Traditionally a translation has been deemed successful if it adheres to traditions of fluency and transparency. These traditions encourage concepts of the translator as invisible, transferring literature seamlessly from one language and culture to another. The result of such practices is the wholesale acclimation of the “foreign” and the complete invisibility of the translator throughout the translation process. When translating literature from the margins or the “in-between” new strategies are required in order to ensure that markers of difference are preserved as such markers are central to the work’s literary significance. These include resistant and “foreignizing” strategies, which point to the translator as a visible presence, as an intervenient being in the transfer of literary texts between languages and cultures.

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To and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close,
once turned away from gently part again
beckoned back and forth and turned away
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other
unheard footfalls only sound
till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
then no sound
then gently light unfading on the unheeded neither
unspeakable home

Samuel Beckett, *Neither*

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Statement of Purpose

This thesis consists of a translation and commentary of Calixthe Beyala's novel, *Les honneurs perdus*, positioning Beyala as a writer whose work arises from and articulates the "in-between" nature of postcolonial migrant fiction. In order to render the "in-between" nature of Beyala's text, this thesis employs the use of creative and "resistant" translation strategies, seeking to explore moments in the translation that destabilize the notion of the translator as invisible, pointing to the translator's role as writer and "intervenient being" (Maier 2007). Though the translation theory applied concerns strategies of resistance and foreignization, the translation itself does not adopt an exclusively "foreignizing" approach. This thesis does, however, examine how difference may be represented at appropriate points in the translation. As such, the translation is neither "foreignizing" nor "domesticating", but a combination of the two. The commentary is an examination of how and why translation choices were made in light of a mandate to consider an ethics of difference in the translation process (Venuti 2008).

This thesis follows the nomadic wandering of *Les honneurs perdus* – as it mimics Beyala's own trajectory from Cameroon to France – by translating sections from Part One and Part Two of the novel. Part One, set in New-Bell, Cameroon, centers on the plight of postcolonial Africa while Part Two focuses primarily on questions of immigrant identity in the *banlieue* of Belleville, France. By translating excerpts from both parts of

the text the novel's entire literary significance is taken into account thus producing a more informed translation.

1.2 Biography

Ce qui compte c'est l'écrit. C'est le cri.

Calixthe Beyala

Calixthe Beyala was born in 1961 in Douala, just one year after Cameroon (République du Cameroun) achieved independence and the last of three colonial powers (Germany, England and France) left the country known as 'Africa's crossroads'. For the first few years of her life Beyala lived with her Cameroonian mother and Central African stepfather in the Central African Republic, but at the age of five she was separated from her parents and moved to New-Bell, a poverty stricken quarter of Douala, Cameroon's economic capital. Though Beyala's grandmother and aunt were also in New-Bell the role of primary caretaker fell on the shoulders of Beyala's sister, no more than four years her senior. Despite being raised in a patriarchal society, Beyala claims to have grown up in a 'woman's world', one in which her aunt and grandmother were powerful and important figures. According to Beyala, the women in her family were self-assertive to the point of divorcing their husbands at their own prerogative (Parekh 75).

Within this 'woman's world' it was Beyala's grandmother (and namesake) who proved the most influential. Beyala recalls that as a little girl, she would often stand outdoors at the end of the day waiting for the sun to set and the first star to appear in the sky. Her grandmother claimed that telling tales was an activity reserved for nighttime as

telling stories during the day would anger evil spirits – a rather clever way of keeping her granddaughter out of her hair until evening. Beyala waited and when the stars came out, to her delight the storytelling began. Storytelling – the oral tradition of African literature – was a significant part of Beyala’s upbringing and would become an integral part of her literary work.

Unlike most children who grew up in the shantytown of New-Bell, Beyala received a thorough education. She attended primary school at the École Principale du Camp Mboppi in Douala and high school at both the Lycée des Rapides à Bangui in the Central African Republic and the Lycée Polyvalent de Douala. In her twenties Beyala migrated from Africa to Paris where she married (Beyala and her husband would go on to have two daughters but their marriage would eventually end in divorce) and wrote her *baccalauréat*. This trajectory – from Francophone Africa to Paris – would prove to obsess Beyala’s prolific pen; several of her heroines would plot a similar course, following in their author’s footsteps. Once married Beyala moved to Spain for six years, but returned to France to complete a B.A. in Letters after which she worked a handful of odd jobs including a position as a florist and a minor career as a model, gradually embarking on her career as one of the most widely read and controversial writers on the contemporary African literary scene. To date, she has written a total of 13 novels and two essays at a rate of nearly a novel per year, several of which have received a considerable amount of literary acclaim. *Assèze l’Africaine* won both the Prix François Mauriac de l’Académie Française and the Prix Tropic. *Maman a un amant* won the Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Afrique Noir. *La petite fille du réverbère* garnered the Grand Prix L’UNICEF and *Les honneurs perdus* – the subject of this thesis – laid claim to Le Grand

Prix de l'Académie Française, made the short-list for the highly esteemed Prix Goncourt and was ranked eighth on the *Nouvel Observateur's* bestseller list in 1996. Two book-length studies of Beyala's work have been published (one in English and one in French) and most Beyala scholarship tends to position her as an African writer as opposed to an immigrant writer though she has lived in Paris for over half her life and published all her books on French soil. This is not to say that positioning Beyala as an African writer is in any way wrong, but it is incomplete, as Beyala's immigrant identity is essential to her profile as an author and a central theme of several of her works including *Les honneurs perdus*. As Nicki Hitchcott states, "switching as it does between Africa and France and back again, Beyala's oeuvre straddles the two geographical spaces she inhabits just as the migrant writer simultaneously experiences two cultural spheres" (Hitchcott, *Performances* 9-10). As a well-established immigrant writer, Beyala is at once exotic and familiar, incorporated and marginalized in France, yet also inside and outside her geographical home in Africa. This slippery identity, characteristic of the immigrant experience, as well as the provocative nature of much of Beyala's writing is, perhaps, the reason why she has been ambivalently received by critics and scholars on both continents.

Regardless of her literary success, Beyala is far from universally appreciated. Her writing is known for its contentious depictions of race and nationality, gender identity, mother-daughter relationships, sexuality, immigration and eroticism. In an interview conducted by Emmanuel Matateyou for *The French Review* in April 1996, she is described as "un écrivain très controversé. Elle choque, dérange, inquiète, trouble, provoque et nargue à la limite de ses détracteurs" (605). In response to such criticism,

Beyala obdurately responds, “...si je me mets à flatter ces imbéciles d’hier, ces escrocs d’aujourd’hui, que pourrais-je apporter à l’Afrique à partir de ce moment?” (Matateyou 606). According to her harshest critics, Beyala is guilty of pornographic content, hatred towards men, estrangement from her African roots, pandering to Western audiences and – perhaps the most serious charge of all – plagiarism. Her supporters, however, praise her scathing depictions of “an agonizing postcolonial Africa, coupled with a virulent and often uncompromising critique of African gender politics” (Coly 26). On a social level, Beyala has long been involved in the defense of women’s rights. In Luxembourg, at the first international conference of Francophone Women, which took place in 2000, Beyala campaigned tirelessly for international support of women who are victims of AIDS. None other than Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General of Francophonie, threw his weight behind her campaign in a show of support. As of July 2010, Beyala declared her candidacy for the post of Secretary General of the International Organization of the Francophonie (IOF), challenging the incumbent Secretary General, Abdou Diouf, who is in his second four-year mandate. Since its inception in 1970 no woman has held the post.

Beyala’s reputation in France is multidimensional. She is known, on the one hand, as a loudmouth lacking a sense of propriety and on the other as a postcolonial celebrity, TV personality and icon of black femininity. Beyala is also a founding member and president of the *Collectif Égalité*, an organization dedicated to the equal representation of visible minorities in French television and film. The *Collectif* is perhaps best known for having crashed the 25th annual César ceremony in 2000. Beyala, accompanied by Guadeloupian director/actor Luc Saint-Eloi, marched onto the stage and read a public statement addressed to Catherine Trautmann, then acting Minister of Culture, concerning

the lack of black actors in French cinema. Part of said text would later reappear in Beyala's *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriotes* published that same year.

In Africa, by contrast, Beyala remains relatively unknown. Some Africanist critics argue that her unpopularity is due to the stereotypical and exotic representations of Africa and Africans in her novels (Coly 47). Fellow Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti has joined the ranks of Beyala's critics, accusing her of selling out, abandoning her African roots and perpetuating representations of Africa as a backwards continent. When asked to respond to her African critics, Beyala simply states, "Je choque certains Africains, j'en suis consciente. Mais cela m'intéresse pas...je choque beaucoup les Africains puisque ce message s'adresse d'abord à eux" (Matateyou 606).

In 1996, an already notorious Beyala was twice charged with plagiarism. The first incident involved her 1992 novel *Le petit prince de Belleville* and American writer Howard Buten's work *Burt*, for which Beyala was found guilty in the High Court in Paris. She and her publisher, Albin Michel, were ordered to pay Buten and his publishing house a hefty sum in reparation. Later that same year, her seventh novel *Les honneurs perdus* also faced allegations of plagiarism, this time for copying passages from the French translation of Ben Okri's Booker prize-winning novel, *The Famished Road*. A lengthy row ensued and Beyala was caught in the center of a media storm of controversy popularly referred to as 'l'Affaire Beyala'. Beyala never made an outright public statement denying her guilt, but she did adopt several defense strategies as the controversy played out. These included alternately accusing her accusers of racism and sexism, illustrated, she argued, by their inability to accept a Black African woman as the

recipient of prestigious French literary prizes, and claiming that Ben Okri was himself guilty of plagiarizing some of her earlier work. In defense of her authenticity as a writer, she invoked the intertextual and oral aspects of the African literary tradition, implying that borrowings are common and even acceptable in Africa. In the end, Ben Okri's French publisher, Éditions Julliard, decided against legal action. Julliard's spokesperson issued a public statement confirming that while there were undeniable similarities between *Les honneurs perdus* and *The Famished Road* and that at least two sentences had been copied word for word, it was their conclusion that Beyala had not plagiarized Okri's novel and that legal prosecution was unnecessary. Ultimately, with each of her novels selling over 300,000 copies, including paperback and book club editions (not to mention the impressive hundred thousand dollars she receives in advance for each impending publication), Beyala has become at once a "consecrated, bestselling 'authentic' African writer and a proven literary 'fake'" (Hitchcott, *Prizes* 1).

Whether despite or because of her notoriety, Beyala continues to stand alone as the only bestselling African woman author in France. Other Francophone African women's works published by small African publishing houses such as Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines or specialist publishers in Paris such as l'Harmattan and Présence Africaine suffer from short print runs and limited marketing. Beyala on the other hand, published by Albin Michel, has all the resources of a publishing giant behind her and thus the means to promote and market her works effectively on an international scale. To date, three of Beyala's thirteen novels have been translated into English: *Your Name Shall be Tanga*, *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, and *Loukoum: the 'Little Prince' of Belleville*.

All three were translated by Marjolijn de Jager and published by Heinemann in the prestigious, though now sadly extinct, African Writers' Series.

1.3 Literary Context

Il faut déstabiliser pour reconstruire.

Calixthe Beyala

Though Sub-Saharan Francophone literature began to take shape in the 1920's, it would take another fifty years for African women writers to appear on the literary scene. The first texts penned by Sub-Saharan African women in the 1970's were characterized by autobiographical realism, didactic overtones, ideological discourse and are largely written in response to representations of African women in texts written by men. Take Buchi Emecheta, whose novels published in the 70's (*The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood* to name a few) depict the lives of women in Nigerian society and their experiences as wives and mothers negotiating the shifting values of traditional Igbo society. Or Mariama Bâ, the Senegalese teacher and writer whose novel *Une si longue lettre*, which depicts male-female relationships in patriarchal society and the effects of polygamy on the contemporary African family, is still considered by some as the quintessential statement of the female condition in Africa. The French African novel of the 1980's and 1990's articulates a state of "general disillusionment with a postcolonial Africa marred by abusive regimes, widespread indecision and corruption, civil wars, intergenerational power struggles, the collapse of the economic system, and hardships within the educational systems" (Cazenave 1). By the late 1990's, however, a

second development was underway and a new wave of female novelists began to emerge. One of the major features of francophone African literature would come to be the presence of female writers whose major goal was to highlight the plight of women. Calixthe Beyala and the revolutionary quality of her writing is emblematic of this new wave of women writers.

This second development in literature by Sub-Saharan African women breaks from the testimonial nature of their earlier work adopting a feminine speech that is aggressive, rebellious, and insistent, with an emphasis on difference, multiplicity and heterogeneity. A vital feature of this new wave of postcolonial women's writing is "the intermingling of forms derived from indigenous, nationalist and European literary traditions. Coming from very different cultural contexts themselves, [these] writers emphasize the need for a lively heterogeneity of styles and speaking positions in their work" (Boehmer 219). Take the recent publication of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which explores the Nigerian-Biafran war; each chapter is narrated from the perspective of a different character, from the first-person account of Ugwu a rural born houseboy who struggles with basic English, to Olanna the educated daughter of a wealthy Igbo family who speaks with a flawless English accent (both characters use greetings and expressions from their native Igbo pointing to the fact that English is not the only language spoken in Nigeria). Beyala too is well known for combining a cacophony of registers and speaking positions in her novels ranging from the slang spoken by prostitutes in the *bidonvilles* of Cameroon to the French spoken by immigrants in the *banlieues* of Paris. In *Le petit prince de Belleville*, Beyala consistently interrupts Loukoum's first person narrative with italicized monologues in which his

father speaks, momentarily taking over the novel and interrupting the narrative flow. In this way, Beyala offers the reader multiple perspectives, that of a first-generation African immigrant in Paris and that of his son, the second generation, born in France and – again, much like the author herself – of France but not of France. Like the work of fellow Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking, Beyala’s novels resist “monovocal narrative patterns...and move towards a mosaic of voices and points of view” (Hitchcott, *Voices* 129). Oral storytelling is also always a prominent feature of Beyala’s fiction, contributing to the “intermingling of forms” that is an essential feature of this new wave. In *Les honneurs perdus*, there is a parallel focus on both storytelling and narrative – both are presented through the voice of the narrator, but sometimes through the voices of other characters. Fête Nat’ tells the story of how she received her name, Fatima tells the story of how she must care for the son and sole heir her husband conceived with a prostitute, Marcel Pignon Marcel tells the story of how his wife left and divorced him, and Ngaremba tells the story of her sister’s tragic death from pneumonia because her family could not afford to pay medical fees. This emphasis on storytelling is characteristic of Beyala’s work, narration functioning as a path to self-liberation and agency.

Beyala has little interest in offering an easy and comfortable read, which is perhaps why her work lends itself so well to the purposes of this thesis. She will often introduce terms from her native Eton into a French text without offering any explanation or additional contextualization, saying, “Chaque fois qu’il m’arrive d’introduire un mot en eton, je n’hésite pas. Le lecteur essayera de comprendre à tout prix mon texte et ce n’est pas rien...Si on la traduit, on affaiblirait le message qui ne sera pas bien transmis” (Matateyou 608). Beyala’s rebellious language and provocative style, which has been

characterized by some as ‘crude’, results in a strong, unapologetic body of work. It is the unconventional qualities of her fiction that are responsible for making her such an exciting representative of this new wave of African women writers.

Born into an independent Africa, Beyala and her contemporaries write from a postcolonial perspective that clearly distinguishes them from their predecessors: the Negritude writers. While the Negritude movement was formed in order to assert a collective Black identity in the face of colonial racism, for writers born after independence, the oppressor is no longer White, but the Black brother next door (Parekh 1998). As an African Francophone author, Beyala cannot overlook Negritude’s influence on the formation of African identity; though she acknowledges its historical importance in her writing, she also undermines Negritude’s ideological basis, demoting the concept of an African ‘essence’ to that of a constructed authenticity that fastens Africa and its peoples in a mythological past and refuses to address the ways in which identity is now subject to constant renegotiation, reinvention and recreation in an increasingly globalized world (Hitchcott, 2006). Beyala states:

If one asks me to speak about Africa, I can’t talk about the Africa of traditions, so-called beauty, lyricism and pastoralism. I was born in a bidonville. That was my world. For me, that’s Africa....For me, Africa is also the Africa of tomorrow where cultures mix and blend. It’s the Africa where children make toys from the refuse of civilization. That’s my Africa – the Africa where I was born, and that has made an impression on me (Jules-Rosette 203).

The Cameroon Beyala aims to depict is one of the most diverse countries in Africa. The country’s cultural diversity is not only a result of its wide-ranging ethnic

groups and languages, but is also due to the influence of European colonialism, Christianity, Islam and more recently, globalization. Cameroon stands alone as the only African country to have passed through the hands of three colonial powers – Germany, Britain and France. As a result, it bears the indelible marks of colonial history at the hands of three different governing powers. In 1960, after a brief but violent opposition by the *Unions des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) in response to the way Cameroon was being “decolonized” in the 1950’s, French West Cameroon gained independence from the French and officially became the *République du Cameroun* under the governance of President Ahmadou Ahidjo (the Southern section of English East Cameroon would later opt to join the newly independent Cameroon). In 1972, President Ahidjo abolished the country’s federal constitution and instituted a new constitution called the “Constitution of the United Republic of Cameroon” which he drew up in secret without consulting the people or their representatives and which ultimately turned Cameroon into a one-man state. Though both French and English make up a significant part of Cameroon’s linguistic landscape today, French is the dominant language causing an increasing amount of friction between the Anglophone minority and Francophone majority in Cameroon.

Religion also had its part to play in producing Cameroon’s collage of cultures, the most common of which is Christianity. Though Islam is most prominent in the northern Cameroon, there are significant Muslim populations in city centers such as Douala and Yaoundé. Interestingly, even after converting to a non-traditional religion, i.e. Christianity or Islam, many Cameroonians continue to practice their traditional beliefs without a sense of conflict, with the conviction that this “merging of religions actually

enhances and deepens their overall faith” (Mbaku 39). This is the Cameroon that Beyala describes when she speaks of the *bidonville* of her childhood where cultures ‘mix and blend’, the Cameroon so vividly portrayed in the first half of *Les honneurs perdus*; the hybrid nature of Cameroon’s cultural landscape is why Beyala resists polarities of identity and the notion of an ‘African essence’ drawing instead on notions of interculturality.

Beyala’s writing is emblematic of what Elleke Boehmer (2005) calls the writing of the ‘not quite’ and ‘in between’ born out of the immigrant experience. She states that while most post-independence writers identified with nationalist narratives and supported the need for communal solidarity, from the late 1980’s into the twenty-first century, the cultural and geographic affiliations of writers have become increasingly divided, displaced and uncertain. If, Boehmer argues, the postcolonial text is generally a hybrid object, then the migrant text is that hybridity “writ large and in color”. Furthermore, cultural formations such as the novel, hybridized on the colonial periphery have been even more hybridized upon returning to the post-imperial western city. It too has been irreversibly transformed. In the western academy and liberal literary establishments, polycultural ‘translated writing’ as Salman Rushdie puts it is now widely accepted as one of “*the* oppositional, anti-authoritarian literatures or textual strategies of our time” (Boehmer 229). Thus, just like its creators, “the migrant novel is capable of drawing attention to the regenerative experience of straddling worlds. Grown fat on their different cultural riches, it brings into prominence the translations and migrations of which it is itself a product” (Boehmer 235).

Yet another undeniable feature of Beyala's fiction is her relentless rebellion against female oppression. Her protagonists are more often than not young girls and women who are poverty stricken, uneducated, sometimes driven to prostitution and often victims of rape. It is her graphic depictions and condemnation of female oppression in both Africa and African immigrant communities in France that have contributed to her reputation as an uncompromising feminist, whose fiction is nothing short of a battle cry against patriarchy and female subjugation. Relationships between women rather than relationships between men and women dominate her novels and are clearly central to her agenda as a writer. In an interview conducted by Bennetta Jules-Rosette in 1997, Beyala is asked to explain her apparent fascination with the mother-daughter relationship in particular, a recurrent theme throughout her body of work. Beyala responds by saying:

...First of all you must admit that Africa is a feminine continent, completely dominated by women. That is, women hold the economy together even if it's not always evident. The thoughts and spirits of women guide men. So, in my novels, women emerge as very strong characters. The mother-daughter relationship is part of this matrix...the mother-daughter relationship is an essential element because mothers transmit values to their daughters and their sons. On the African continent, the father is often absent, and the task of educating children falls on the mother's shoulders. The mother is always there. Even when the father is present, the mother assumes full responsibility for the children. As far as I know, Africa was originally a matrilineal and matriarchal continent. The interactions across the sexes that appear today result from external religions and civilizations – the influence of Islam and Christianity...Even so, women still

dominate everyday life. And that's why I give women a central place in my novels (202-203).

In *Les honneurs perdus*, Beyala's feminist agenda plays itself out differently in parts One and Two of the novel. In the first half Beyala critiques Cameroon's patriarchal society through her humorous yet cutting depictions of gender politics in the *bidonville* of New-Bell. There, the novel's narrator is undervalued and limited because she is a woman. In New-Bell, "female identity is marked by an inability to move outward into the world, an absence of movement, whereas male identity carries no prohibition of movement whatsoever" (Oscherwitz 175). Saïda's only value/hope lies in the possibility of marriage (which never comes to pass because of certain mysterious circumstances surrounding her sex at the time of her birth) and her most prized possession is her virginity for which she will eventually receive – upon immigrating to France as a middle-aged woman – a certificate signed by the village pharmacist guaranteeing her 'purity' for the next ten years. The sheer ridiculousness of this certificate and the simultaneously tragic and comical note it rings is typical of Beyala's writing style and what some call her 'Afro-pessimism'. In the second half of the novel, Beyala's preoccupation with relationships between women is represented largely in the interactions between Saïda and Ngaremba, as both women struggle to understand themselves as African immigrant women in France, juggling their African identities under the influence of European feminism. For Ngaremba, who has been in France considerably longer than Saïda, Saïda's traditional values are backward and out of date. Ngaremba takes it upon herself to educate Saïda and turn her into a 'modern woman'. Though Ngaremba has embraced European feminism – she has a daughter outside of marriage, a French boyfriend, her own business as a scribe

for the immigrant community – by the end of the novel, she begins to question her identity as an immigrant, a woman and an African. These questions ultimately lead to her suicide. In typical Beyala fashion, the author refuses to pigeon-hole her female characters; they are complex and constantly in a state of flux, their identities are a series of interrogation points rather than facts: this, it is worth noting, is particularly true of those characters that go through the migrant experience in her fiction. Beyala has even gone so far as to coin a term to define the articulation of femininity in her work, calling it “féminitude”, which, in her own words, is “très proche du féminisme mais divergente dans la mesure où elle ne prône pas l’égalité entre l’homme et la femme, mais la difference-égalitaire entre l’homme et la femme” (Hitchcott, *Voices* 129). Nicki Hitchcott writes:

Beyala’s fiction is marked by a search for ‘la femme originelle’. However, it suggests that this figure is not singular, but plural, and will only be reached through communication between women. This ‘original woman’ also represents Beyala’s feminism, or ‘féminitude’, as Gallimore explains: ‘Dans ces romans, elle [Beyala] semble nous avertir que l’avenir d’un féminisme africain ne réside que dans un dialogue franc avec les femmes du monde’. This call for an international dialogue challenges those African traditionalists who dismiss feminism as a Western individualist phenomenon...(*Voices* 146)

In this way, Beyala’s concept of “féminitude” ultimately connects with the immigrant experience as it reflects a shift towards an understanding of contemporary African femininity that is not bound to the binaries of tradition and modernity or Africa and the

West. It is an identity that is neither here nor there, but constantly hovering somewhere “in-between”.

As has been mentioned, however, criticism of Beyala’s work for the most part neglects to address her position as a well-established immigrant author in France, perhaps because to do so would further contribute to an already slippery literary identity. Her reception in France is inconsistent – on the one hand she has been incorporated into French culture as a bestselling, prize-winning author and on the other she has been marginalized as exotic and denounced as illegitimate. Like the author herself, Beyala’s texts and characters are located in the space “in-between” – caught in the hither and thither of Bhabha’s staircase, the liminal space between the designations of identity (Bhabha, 1995). According to Elleke Boehmer (2006), the suspended nature of Beyala’s work accounts for much of her success; postcolonial writers who do not straddle worlds and who retain a more national focus meet with less success in the West than their migrant counterparts. The migrant text is appealing in that it can hold all the attractions of the exotic, the magical, the Other, while still participating reassuringly in a familiar language.

To date, six of Beyala’s novels have followed the author’s own trajectory from Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa to France: *Le petit prince de Belleville*, *Maman a un amant*, *Assèze l’Africaine*, *Amours sauvage*, *Comment cuisiner son mari à l’Africaine* and *Les honneurs perdus*. In these novels Beyala gives voice to the psychological and cultural effects of migration through her characters as they renegotiate their identities across “what emerges as a constantly shifting border space between Africa and Paris” (Hitchcott, *Performances* 23).

1.4 Introduction to *Les honneurs perdus*

Moi l'immigré, l'étoile exilée, j'avance la tête renversée.
Calixthe Beyala

The truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision.
Homi Bhabha

Les honneurs perdus is told in the first person by the novel's Arabic heroine, Saïda. Typical of Franco-African literature, the novel is essentially divided into two parts, beginning in the *bidonville* of New-Bell, or as the narrator calls it – Couscous – and ending in Belleville, a *banlieue* on the outskirts of Paris. The first part of the novel follows the protagonist as she comes of age in her African context, exploring the day-to-day lives of New-Bell's residents with Beyala's particular brand of irony, humor and cynicism. In the opening pages of the novel, all of New-Bell – prostitutes, children, soya merchants, neighbors, family and friends – converge, mob-like and enthused, on the narrator's hut, egged on by her Muslim father who boasts that his wife is giving birth to a son. What ensues is a tragic and comic scene in which her father discovers his newborn child is a girl (her birth is no longer cause for celebration as a female child is of small value to either her father or community); shortly after, a funny reversal of gender roles takes place as the town pharmacist is roughly manhandled and publicly humiliated by his obese wife, who twists his testicles and slams him into the dust to the shock and surprise of the entire gathering. The sad truth of a patriarchal society in which male children are

more valuable than female children, the ridiculous depiction of the patriarch/narrator's father – sporting a French blazer held together with buttons up the sides, a yellow kepi cap, heaving gut, wild hair and flashing gold teeth, almost childlike in his heightened emotional state – and the aforementioned gender reversal, sets the stage for Beyala's gallows humor which permeates the first part of her novel. Though the New-Bell of Beyala's childhood is clearly a source of inspiration for her writing, its depiction in *Les honneurs perdus* is stark. New-Bell is described as an 'inferno' where homes are pieced together from trash; a rotting pile of rubbish permanently covers the town square – men and women pick through it delighting in the discovery of a putrid tomato. Children are snout nosed and balloon bellied; the government only acknowledging their existence through violent police raids or food handouts intended to secure votes. Ultimately the district of New-Bell “comes to symbolize the excessive political and economic gluttony of postcolonial African regimes that left half of the population living in the most indecent conditions” (Coly 43).

Beyala's Couscous is a colorful universe peopled with grotesque characters and carnivalesque scenes. These characters range from the slovenly 'big-boss', watching from his two story hut as Couscousters rummage through the garbage for something to eat and exclaiming how wonderful it is that nothing goes to waste, to Madame Kimoto with her heaving bosom and garrison of young prostitutes, from emaciated boys and girls, reeking of chocolate from the nearby chocolate factory while their stomachs rumble with hunger, to the news-journalist Ndongué and his manipulative and opportunistic reportage, to the narrator's father, the patriarch, and his selfish, spiteful and childlike nature. The carnivalesque scene in which all of Couscous converges on Bénéfafa's hut is one of

several such scenes that take place throughout the novel. Like many of Beyala's previous texts, the focus on the lower classes is meant to illustrate social injustices and inequalities. As Saïda moves from one margin to the next i.e. Couscous to Belleville, it becomes clear that these two spaces echo each other and "merge into a transnational periphery" (Coly 52). Beyala explores these neighborhoods through the use of strong images and carnivalesque descriptions, ultimately engaging in cutting subversive socio-political criticism. As Coly writes that in offering her readers a grotesque universe,

[Beyala] seemingly makes fun of her characters. But...the aim of the author is to give her African readers a shaking-up and to push them into action...the trivialization of the crisis of the continent forces the artist to invent a new vocabulary and imagery that can remedy the torpor and blasé attitudes. In this respect, the grotesque and the carnivalesque infuse a new force to images...(52)

The first part of *Les honneurs perdus* ends with the death of Saïda's father, after which her mother 'offers her freedom' in the form of a plane ticket to Paris. In France, her mother tells her, she will be free to think and say what she pleases without anyone telling her what to do. The implication here is that France will provide the opportunity for Saïda to negotiate her identity in ways that are unavailable to her in Africa. Indeed, what some have termed Beyala's 'Afro-pessimism' is a common feature of migrant literatures, which "represent a geographic, cultural and political retreat by writers from the new but ailing nations of the postcolonial world back to the metropolis. The literatures are a product of that retreat; they are marked by disillusionment" (Boehmer 222). Exile, it would seem – and the distance that comes with it – almost inevitably provokes a more critical assessment of 'home'.

In the second half of *Les honneurs perdus* the narrative voice undergoes a moderate change as Saïda joins the Parisian immigrant society of Belleville, eventually enrolling in night classes to become literate. As soon as she arrives in France, Saïda is caught between two poles of identity and must choose whether to allow herself to be dominated by one or to negotiate and mediate the two. In the beginning she clings to the identity she has transported with her from Cameroon, but gradually she “awakens to the potential for individuation, and moves towards a position of her own” (Oscherwitz 177). In Belleville, Saïda is hired as a live-in housekeeper and nanny by the Senegalese ‘princess-Negress-and-dignitary, Ngaremba’, also an immigrant, who is plagued by the fate of an Africa she feels disconnected from. To compensate, Ngaremba works as a scribe for the immigrant community by day, and plays the concerned intellectual by night, hosting regular gatherings of other like-minded African immigrants where they eat traditional African dishes, drink excessively and discuss the plight of Africa. None of this of course, does anything to affect real change, and it is this that ultimately leads Ngaremba to sink into depression, become bulimic and commit suicide by leaping off the balcony of her apartment. The scene in which Ngaremba leaps to her death is perhaps the strongest example of the grotesque and carnivalesque in Part Two of the novel. The entire community of Belleville gathers beneath the window Ngaremba is perched on. The onlookers include a man wearing a boubou and standing on stilts who grabs a guitar and begins to play and sing, an obese Black woman brandishing a sign that declares suicide a mortal sin, a Black man with twisted shoulders like the broken wings of a vulture, the building’s wrinkled and insensitive and racist French concierge, Ngaremba’s boyfriend, who is screaming and tearing out his hair and Ngaremba’s traumatized daughter,

Loulouze, moaning for her mother in the corner. Eventually, after Ngaremba has died and the show is over, the crowd disperses. Saïda then climbs the stairs to Ngaremba's apartment with the dead woman's weeping daughter in her arms.

In Part Two, Ngaremba's character represents among other things, a new and unfamiliar standard of 'femininity' for Saïda as she has embraced ideas of Western feminism that Saïda continues to struggle with. Ngaremba sleeps with her French boyfriend, Frédéric Feuchoux, out of wedlock, has a daughter by another man, straightens her hair, buys all her clothes from Europe and rejects the patriarchal societal norms with which Saïda was raised in Cameroon. Though she represents the possibility for the renegotiation of identity, she is not exempt from Beyala's grotesque descriptions. As Ngaremba's mental health declines she begins to binge eat and her weight gain is described in vicious detail, as is her fragile mental state and her increasingly jealous nature. Saïda herself is represented as a grotesque product of Muslim traditionalism until she is able to shake off the traditions that encumber her personal growth and define herself in a new way that does not adhere to monolithic categories of identity. France is ultimately presented as a more viable alternative for Beyala's narrator as after a failed relationship with a Muslim man, Ibrahim – who rejects her when he discovers she is still a virgin at fifty years old – Saïda falls in love and loses her virginity to a French man, Marcel Pignon Marcel. Nicki Hitchcott (2001) argues that Saïda must undergo a cross-cultural sexual initiation in order to assert her agency and individuality. Losing her virginity to Marcel solidifies her hybridity. Homi Bhabha explains:

If...the act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture, then we see

that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity...(*The Third Space* 211)

By negotiating the “in-between” space she has come to occupy, Saïda translates herself into the plurality of her migrant condition. The second half of *Les honneurs perdus* is clearly devoted to questions of what it means to be an African immigrant woman living in France and though France is presented as a positive alternative for Beyala’s narrator, the experience of the “in-between” – the very hybrid nature of the migrant identity – is one of profound alienation, isolation and confusion, as Ngaremba’s fate implies. The final pages of the novel present us with a narrator who has successfully moved from prescribed female, religious and national identities to a “willful displacement of those identities in the accomplishment of an act of individuation” (Oscherwitz 179). *Les honneurs perdus* is not an autobiography, as the narrator states, because it is not simply the act of storytelling. It is, as she claims, a struggle, because Saïda’s narration is the “trajectory towards agency, and it is literally not until [she] has finished telling her story that her story is finished, that she has become a speaking subject” (Oscherwitz 179).

Beyala’s work is notorious for its crude language, exoticism and sexually explicit content. *Les honneurs perdus*, however, does not exemplify these aspects of her fiction. In comparison to her other texts it is rather tame; there are very few sexually explicit passages and there are no scenes of rape or violation. *Les honneurs perdus* is written in a relatively standardized French, and though sometimes rebellious and contentious in tone, the language itself is far from provocative. On the contrary, the language is rarely jarring and largely accessible, leading some to speculate on the small coincidence that it should

be the least provocative of Beyala's texts that garnered the Grand Prix de l'Académie Française.

Stylistically, *Les honneurs perdus* poses some interesting challenges in translation regarding how to capture Beyala's gallows humor, that tragic yet comedic voice that stalks the first half of the novel as it depicts Beyala's critical assessment of postcolonial Cameroon, the grotesque and carnivalesque that is so essential to her socio-political critique, her feminist agenda which lurks within almost every scene, and the moderate change in tone as the novel begins to downplay gallows humor and looks more pointedly at the psychological effects of immigration on African migrants in France. Other challenges include the transfer of foreign cultural elements such as customs, modes of dress, terms and expressions, all of which will be unfamiliar to the English language reader. Our translation negotiates these challenges by alternating between 'fluency' and 'resistance', and "domesticating" and "foreignizing" practices, thus producing a text that is accessible and readable, without giving in to the natural assimilative tendencies of translation.

Chapter 2: Translation

2.1 Lost Honors

Part 1: Birth of a Myth

Chapter 1

To be clear, my name is Saïda Bénérafa. Until I was forty and some years old I had never set foot outside of New-Bell, Douala, n° 5. Now, a young woman of fifty, I am the talk of Belleville. But then, from the beginning I have always been the subject of gossip and hearsay.

This is why. I was born in the last years before independence, somewhere between 1940 and 1945; precise dates are not important. I drew my first breath in one of Africa's shining beacons, a shantytown at the navel of the universe. In New-Bell, man's imagination and resourcefulness surpass fiction. The instinct to survive abolishes all notions of time and space. Urban planners and scientists watch dumbfounded as homes pieced together from odds and ends, knick-knacks and trash, shoot up from the ground like mushrooms, each one with a private turret from which to view the surrounding inferno. Faced with this – the relentless human capacity for improvisation – there is nothing left for the observer to do but applaud.

This is the Republic of Cameroon. There is, of course, Douala-Ville wedged between forest and ocean, where small palaces decorate the streets and Whitey-Negroes lounge in their rocking chairs finding in this lethargic state their reason for living. There are also the national public schools where children shout proudly, “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois!” and the universities where a few European intellectuals sit and contemplate for

millions of Negro minds. There are research centers where Black intellectuals criticize one another and cluck like chickens, tripping over their own incompetence, the cannibalistic national banks and crooked administrative bodies embezzling public funds, ostentatious Cameroonian theater-café's obsessed with the grandiose style of old Parisian boulevards, courses on 'good morals' and 'proper conduct' where the wives of the wealthy White administrators screw around on their husbands, there are phony coups d'états and genuine bedroom scandals, handfuls of Général de Gaulle avenues, Félix-Faure squares, and countless brothels where for a modest price, a man can enlist an entire garrison of whores to do his bidding. I will not speak of what comes after.

Tucked away and indicated by a single arrow on the city map, at the precise point where the road begins to crumble is New-Bell, a place the authorities look on with shame. It is home to strange beings, those who can neither enjoy the advantages of a rural life that has been lost nor reap the benefits of the city.

The main road, pieced together with rocks the size of chocolate bars and riddled with gaping holes, leads in two directions, one end toward the market and the other into the bush. Along the road, houses spring up, glued to each other as if their closeness might somehow overcome their fragile foundations and protect them from the millions of termites nibbling at their insides. These dwellings have been shaped by the regurgitations of civilization: old plaques stolen from monuments commemorating the dead, slap-dash parpen (three quarters sand and the rest cement), crooked spears (village souvenirs), rusted scrap metal (once part of luxurious French automobiles), mismatched tiles fused artistically to walls of undulating iron or straw, and various relics from wars that did not concern our part of the world; old German blankets, G.I. helmets and canteens, empty tin

cans and milk boxes with Russian labels, a bit of blood, a lot of sweat and countless dreams. Electricity does not reach New-Bell, nor does it reach the chandeliers made of Bohemian crystal that dangle from the ceilings of our mismatched houses, causing whole structures to teeter and sway from the sheer effort of supporting their weight.

There are also the stores whose signs read, 'Chez Maxime!' or 'Chez Dior!' where a person can buy a French baguette sandwich, a spoonful of tomato paste, a lump of sugar or a cup of rice. New-Bell's wholesalers advertise their dubious products on posters rife with spelling mistakes. Hack tailors, their shop floors concealed by carpets and rows of 'quality assured, custom made djellabas' (made in Hong Kong or Paris) sit and wait for Channel to waltz through the front door.

It is a district of mixed people and mixed cultures: Muslim-Arabs, Negro-Christian-Animists, Fulani and Foulbé people from the North, Beti and Bassa from the South, Bamiléké or Bamoun from the West, most of whom fled the misery of their villages only to end up here. It is a district of immature toughs, looking for diamonds where there are no mines. Once in New-Bell, they become peanut merchants, pousse-pousse drivers, antique dealers selling their wares in the open air, lottery vendors hollering on street corners, or salesmen in pince-nez spectacles, their heads swollen to the brim with words ending in 'ism'.

More than anyone else, New-Bell belongs to Madame Kimoto, proprietor of the district's one and only, whorehouse with red and yellow beaded curtains, which also doubles as a restaurant. On the menu: crocodile meunière, monkey à la provençale, and Negro whores with bleached hair, chock-full of diseases, executing their tasks with well-honed aggressive delicacy. First, a Kimoto girl plies her Mister with aphrodisiac cocktails

– one part palm wine, one part cheap table wine – to loosen him up. Then she bats her eyelashes and leans forward slightly to give a peek at all that lies tucked away in the depths of her corset. When she sits, a Kimoto girl sways her hips all the way to her chair and when finally seated, crosses and uncrosses her legs some thirty-six times, all the while smoking cigarettes from a bamboo cigarette holder à la Parisienne. At her Mister’s signal – a meaty hand on her buttocks perhaps, a grand gesture from the man in charge – she disappears with him into the recesses of a dark alcove.

In New-Bell – which I also call Couscous – people are not encumbered by metaphysics. They give the impression of constantly working, but in reality, it’s almost impossible to get ahead. Some surrender themselves to a few derisory jobs and spend the rest of their time wasting what’s left of their existence. They can be found sitting on upturned gas tanks, empty water cisterns or beer crates, quibbling over working conditions and complaining about their employers. “ The next time he bosses me around I’m going to punch him! Right in the face!” or “This is exploitation, pure and simple! The bastard is exploiting me!” Then there are those who work themselves to exhaustion without a word of complaint. There is, after all, no job in Couscous that could fulfill them.

At dusk, the good daughters of New-Bell fasten their pagne wraps above their bosoms and watch in envy from their windows as the local doudous head off to work their corners. In bedrooms shared by three generations of family members, grandparents feign sleep in one corner while across the room, the legs of their sons and daughters spread and quiver. Meanwhile, porno magazines elicit blushes from the cheeks of pimple-faced adolescents and naughty children tucked into bed in their red underpants giggle into

their sheets to the sound of their parents' creaking bed. In prayer corners, Muslim prayer rugs share their sacred space with ancestral totems and carvings of Jesus on the cross, because in Couscous, we are everything and we are nothing, Muslim-Animist, Christian-Fetishist, and Catholic-Buddhist alike. All God's earthly representatives look on our misery with dry eyes.

Then there is the constant stench from the rubbish left to rot in the square and awaiting the annual Christmas Eve visit from the garbage collectors. Should you happen to pass by someday around noon you would surely see some of my compatriots rummaging through the trash under the glaring afternoon sun. You may even hear a man exclaim, as his hand extracts a tomato, its skin covered in white spots and showing the first stages of decomposition, "Who threw this out? It's still good!" Observing this, the district's big-boss, a large thick-lipped Negro – who comes by his title by way of his two-story hut, which is the only one in Couscous to claim a plunging view of the square – will cross his squat legs, rest his chimpanzee head lazily against the back of his rocking chair and sigh, "What a wonderful place to live! Nothing goes to waste!"

Along the outskirts of the district runs the railroad and coal-powered trains roar along it night and day – *choo choo! choo choo!* – they flatten any absentminded Couscousters in their tracks – *splat!* – and spew out long trails of blackish smoke. Yet another contribution to an already extraordinary level of well-being. The dust from the sawmill located on the edge of Douala-Ville floats down and covers all Couscousters in a fine layer of dust so that we bear an uncanny resemblance to American Indians and because of the intoxicating smell emanating from the chocolate factory, we walk around starving and reeking of Chococam Tête-de-nègre desert cakes and chocolate bars – a very

comfortable way to spend the day. I tell you this, because you should know that despite it all, no one utters a single word of complaint. We Couscousters accept these minor grievances with the self-righteous dignity of those who have abandoned their village without regret and who await the great and final submersion in the brilliant waters of civilization.

It is into this part of the Republic of reunited Camerouns, this frenzied and chaotic world of colors, sounds and smells, that I was born.

My birth was an event that set all of Couscouster in motion. It began towards the evening. A gentle wind blew through the skies. The stars prepared to shine their great pearl eyes in the sky. On the ground, the stones still burned from baking all day in the heat. The air was thick and as it breathed in and out it stank as though in its depths there lay the rotting corpse of some dead animal or man.

All of a sudden, from a veranda at the very core of New-Bell, there came a high-pitched cry like a heart ripping in two. "Allah, I have a son! God Almighty, I have a son!"

This was my father. I would never know the true nature of his position in society. My mother did not tell me and so I cannot tell you. All I know is that before I was born, my parents were well off in their village in the North of Cameroon, but when the desert closed in, burning everything in its path, from the bones of the dead to the roots of the trees, they fled and eventually just like everyone else, they ended up in New-Bell. My father was a White-Muslim-Couscouster. For work, he was a foreman and carried bags of sawdust on his back for the wood processing plant that dealt in Cameroonian timber. He was a happy man with round and twinkling eyes. On the evening of my birth, one hand

placed on his hip and the other clutching a yellow kepi cap, his white hair disheveled, my father roused all of New-Bell from her lethargy with his shouting, “I have a son! My son is born!” His enormous gut heaved, stinking of raw wood. As he shouted, his gold teeth flashed. He had risen to a higher plane of existence; he was like Saint John receiving visions of the apocalypse heralded by the trumpets of angels.

I had yet to be born. At that very instant, the unpleasant time that is the moment of our birth, my head was stuck somewhere between my mother’s uterus and her birth canal. She lay moaning, stretched out on a mat on the floor. Agony and sweat had glued her raven-like hair to her temple. Her body thrashed from the pain, hands holding onto her swollen belly, head twisting from side to side. The midwife, an enormous bejeweled Negress, dressed like the last of the Arab princesses, in a huge pink djellaba, earrings, and Turkish slippers, stood fretting between my mother’s spread legs. “Push! Push, I tell you!” From time to time she would grab my mother’s blood drained cheeks between her chubby hands. “Are you trying to kill this child? Push, I tell you, push!” She rested her fists on her hips “If the child dies, you are the only one to blame,” and then leaned in resolutely and dealt a few slaps to my mother’s thighs. “ Push!”

Out on the veranda my father continued to shout, “I have a son! God has blessed Jerusalem with a son!”

The neighborhood dogs took fright at the incessant uproar and began to howl. Women, alarmed by the commotion, allowed the laundry they’d been removing from clotheslines to drop into their wicker baskets. Every Couscouisier in New-Bell got to their feet and moved as one in the direction of my father’s hut. They came in typical African fashion: men at the front of the procession and the women at the back. The soya

merchant, a tall and lanky Foulbé man, dressed in a ripped T-shirt that must have been white at one point in time, raised his eyes from the pieces of meat he was grilling.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Bénérafa,” someone told him. “He has a son!”

“Is that so!” He replied, his old-man eyes widening. And dropping his knife, which gleamed in the last rays of sunlight as it fell to the ground, he wiped his hands on his greasy apron and joined the procession.

The evening was hot and humid. A gentle wind blew in from the north, but Couscous still pulsed with the residue of the day’s heat as the procession passed in front of the pharmacist-doctor Sallam and his pharmacy. The pharmacist’s squirrelish face emerged from behind a white sign on which, in bright red ink and huge lettering, were written the words: SYPHILIS – VAGINAL DISCHARGE – SMALL POX – TUBERCULOSIS – BURNING URINE – SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES – DISCOUNT CONSULTATIONS – ON THE SPOT CURES. The pharmacist straightened his emaciated figure and wiped his frameless spectacles, which clung miraculously to his enormous nose. “What’s this? A demonstration?”

“Sort of,” replied the soya merchant.

“Very good,” said the pharmacist, lowering the blinds of his shop and joining the soya merchant. “It’s about time. How can we expect the government to listen to our demands without a large scale demonstration?”

“What demands are those?” the soya merchant asked.

“Why, demands that the organizations run by the Minister of Health concerning hygiene services and social safety provide that which has been lacking in the

implementation of their statutes and assume their role in the facilitation of all Cameroonians free from foreign domination to liberally treat themselves for the numerous ailments affecting their bodies! Ailments, which, by the way, engender as much poverty as they do ignorance.”

“I don’t know about any of that, boss. But I do know that Bénérafa has been given a son.”

“That’s what all this is about? Is that all?”

“Shut up!” said the soya merchant. “This is a day for celebration!”

The pharmacist was quieted, but he did not relinquish his spot in the procession as it continued its route between the lines of miserable shacks whose wood floors sat rotting and collapsing in the heat of the setting sun. Along the footpaths the Couscouisiers walked, their ragged, sans-confiance sandals sinking into the soft ground and becoming prisoners of the mud. From time to time a furious voice could be heard, yelling, “Shit! You stepped on my shoe and now it’s broken!” The man on the receiving end of this abuse would bare his crooked teeth and reply, “Sorry brother, it’s these stupid sans-confiances.” And he would take a few moments to try and repair the broken strap with the help of a bent iron wire. Afterwards they would continue on to mutterings of, “Stupid Whitey shoes. Stupid stupid Whitey shoes.”

As the procession passed in front of Madame Kimoto’s sex-shop-restaurant, the girls, hearing the commotion, abandoned their posts and the groping fingers of their clients that were busily searching for some hidden, non-evanescent aspect of the merchandise. “One minute, brother!” They threw open the red beaded curtains and humbly inquired of the passers by, “What happens?”

“Bénérafa has been given a son!” came the reply.

“YipYip!” the girls cried, eyes gleaming, hands clapping, and for a moment they recovered some of their forgotten youthful charm: the belief that things are not as bad as they seem. It took all the strength Madame Kimoto could muster to calm down her horde. “I will not have this kind of disorder in my place!” Her breasts heaved as she bellowed, hoisted up as they were in a French-made black push-up bra. Her squinty eyes rolled in their sockets and her face, bloated from too much couscous, shook with anger. “This is exactly the kind of behavior that prevents progress and keeps Africa down on her knees!” She threw herself down in a chair and turned her back on everyone, “God of Israel, what sins have we committed to merit your displeasure?” At this the girls grew silent and did not utter a word, even to each other. Madame Bida, an elderly woman long ago come to terms with the ups and downs of life, and whose job it was to survey the entrance to Madame Kimoto’s and warn patrons of the impromptu arrival of police, approached Madame Kimoto with caution and said, “An hour’s distraction is a blessing, Madame.” Madame Kimoto, whose eyes had lost their sparkle long ago, thought this over for a few seconds and then her voice sang out. “Take a break, my children, but don’t be foolish!”

In the end, the procession was so large and so impressive that even the migratory birds in mid flight over Couscous came to a stop, saying to one another, “Halt! Look, there’s been a miracle!”

It wasn’t long before a mob stood outside our door. Negroes, Arabs, Catholics, Animists, Muslims, women and children with nothing better to do – all had come to celebrate the event of my birth. To see my father, standing tall in the light of the dying

day, haloed in his glory by the setting sun, the onlookers couldn't help but wonder how so much hope could have come to so much misery. Without warning he tossed his kepi cap into the air and threw open his arms. His feet left the ground, "I have a son!" He stumbled forward and rearranged the coattails of his red French suit jacket, which was held together at the side by a series of bronze buttons. "I have a son," he said again, and the gathering of Couscouisiers put their hands together in applause, "Bravo, my brother!" they cried, grabbing one another by the shoulders, tall and short alike, repeating, "Bravo, brother!" From time to time, a guttural scream followed by the voice of the enormous midwife could be heard. "Push, I tell you, push!" Outside, to the cadence of the words push-I-tell-you-push coming from one woman and the moaning and groaning coming from the other, the Couscouisiers continued to congratulate my father. "Bravo, brother!" they said, ruffling his hair, "You're a man, a real man!" My father accepted their praise with pride, as though he were the conquering hero of a thousand battles and come to exemplify his entire sex. "Thank you. Yes, that's right. Thank you very much."

Then, as if from nowhere, a sharp cry pierced the air. In the sky, a star appeared in the East like a blazing fire. On the ground there was a deep and hollow silence. I had arrived. I emerged, red, prunish and ridiculous, with a wicked look, my skull dented by the midwife's forceps. And I cried relentlessly, as though I was born with the full knowledge of all that I would suffer.

My father made his way to a nearby mango tree, turned towards a bush at its base and pissed a heavy stream. When he had readjusted his pants he took his face in his hands and broke into tears. "I was beginning to doubt..." he said, baring the three gold teeth in

his upper mouth. “Two women I’ve been forced to give up because they were barren. I was beginning to doubt.”

“You must never lose hope,” an old man chewing tobacco said, spitting on the ground. “Everything comes in its own time.”

“You don’t understand,” my father told him. “I had dreams. I was going to be a mechanic, I was going to be rich, I was going to have many sons and...”

“But your dreams are coming true, Bénérafa,” someone said. “You must celebrate.”

“Yes!” confirmed a small, emaciated Negro woman. “When destiny takes shape you must celebrate and be grateful or else...”

“If it were me, I would drink nothing but Johnny Walker,” a woman who worked as a housekeeper for some Whiteys told him. And to assert her superiority over the gathering of Couscouisiers she rotated her generous backside three times, saying loudly, “I’m warning you, Bénérafa, if I had a son, I would eat nothing but pepper smoked green beans, York ham salad and gingerbread sausage!”

The Couscouisiers’ mouths salivated at her words and to distract themselves from the anticipation of eating the housekeeper’s extraordinary meal they began to chitchat. One man picked up an empty Beaufort beer bottle and with a spoon, tapped against the glass to create a rhythm. A group of women near him clapped their hands and began to sing. A decrepit, loony old man, lifted his cane and recited an impromptu and imaginary genealogy: “So it is said that God created Abraham who fathered a son in his likeness and his name was Adam, and Adam it was that fathered Seth and Seth begot Qénâm who lived six hundred years and sired many children, boys and girls, and numbered among

them was Bénérafa, who fathered..." the old man's brow furrowed. "What will you name your son, Bénérafa?" But there was such a racket from all the excitement at the thought of eating the housekeeper's extraordinary meal that no one heard him.

It was then that the door to our hut opened and the midwife emerged. So great was the anticipation that no one noticed the stench of the crowd's mingled breath – six hundred lungs inhaling and exhaling in sync. No one noticed the effluvia emanating from nearby kitchens, the smell of cheap perfume worn by the widowed Mrs. So and So's and company or the more expensive brands that adorned Madame Kimoto's girls. The swallows themselves were silent with expectation. There stood the midwife, her moment of grandeur engulfed in a tepid sea of stinking human bodies. Postponing her moment a while longer, she wrung her chubby hands and tactfully but resolutely approached my father. "I have to speak with you," she said.

"Can't you see you're interrupting me?"

"It's urgent, Mr. Bénérafa."

"Oh, well. If it's urgent."

My father led her a safe distance away from the crowd. The midwife stood on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear.

"No!" my father exclaimed and six hundred pairs of interested eyes swerved in his direction. Men and boy's eyes alike gleamed in the looming darkness. From behind their black veils women's downcast eyes spied no less than the rest; everyone watched and waited for a sign from my father's distorted face to signal the flood of tears.

"It's impossible!"

"What's impossible?" the Couscouisiers asked.

In his disappointment, my father slumped against the enormous trunk of the mango tree. “It’s not possible.”

“Is he dead?” asked the big chief, adjusting the folds of his blue boubou robe about his shoulders.

“Don’t worry,” the carpenter Couscousier, a shriveled man with a catlike face, told my father. “There hasn’t been a burial for over three days. I’ll cut you a deal on a coffin. A friendly discount between friends.”

“What’s going on?” the Couscousiers asked the midwife.

“I am not at liberty to inform you,” she said.

“Was there an accident?”

“I’ll cut you a very good deal on the coffin,” reiterated the carpenter.

“Why won’t you just tell us?”

The women grew agitated. The men could not contain their exasperation. Madame Kimoto’s girls began to slap discretely at the roving hands of their neighbors while checking that the florid chouchous at the ends of their braids remained in place, tightly wound at the nape of their necks, slimy with sweat.

The midwife shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not up to me to say,” she said throwing my father, whose face was growing increasingly pathetic, a knowing look. Then she continued, “All I can tell you is that I did my job and I did it well. I haven’t had a single mishap in thirty years.” And she proceeded to enumerate the two hundred babies that had been birthed at the end of her forceps – each with just the acceptable amount of cranial deformation – and the three hundred parturient surgeries with infants in the advanced stages of death, all of which were successfully birthed. As the midwife rattled off a litany

of birthing techniques – relaxation exercises for the perineal musculature, tenseness in the jaw, and, of course, the enema syringe used to extract phlegm accidentally swallowed by the newborn during the birth – my father began to weep. His despair was too profound to be observed in silence for very long. Madame Kimoto approached him, batting her eyelashes furiously. When she got close enough she pinched his nose and let loose her rhetoric. “Why, whatever is the matter, darling? The child is born, no?” And in hushed tones, “Come and see me later, Bénérifa. I’ll make it all better,” then loud enough for all to hear, “Don’t be sad! Not on a day like today!”

“Yes.” my father said without conviction.

“What a pity!” the carpenter said. “Deals like these don’t come along every day, you know.”

At these words my father burst into hysterical laughter. “Now that is funny!”

“What’s funny?” Madame Kimoto asked.

“Death.” my father said. “I would rather my son were dead than transformed into a girl!”

“Oh?” an old man inquired from the crowd.

“My son has been transformed into a girl. It’s true.”

“What horrible luck!” cried the mob, not bothering to hide their disappointment.

“It’s the evil eye!” yelled the old man.

“Rotten luck,” another man added. “Now there’ll be nothing but palm wine for the celebration.”

“It was a boy,” my father said. “Only a boy could cause his mother so much pain. The child has been tearing her womb in two since last night!”

“You’re not thinking straight,” the pharmacist-doctor told him. “The child’s sex is determined the moment it is conceived.”

“Shut up you parrot!” the old man said. “Life is impenetrable. The same thing almost happened to my son, but I did what I had to do and things turned out just right in the end.”

“What did you do?” the Couscouisiers asked him.

“I prayed.”

“We also prayed.” my father told him.

And to demonstrate to his compatriots the extent of his sufferings, my father told them that by the time my mother was three months pregnant, both my parents’ knees were rubbed raw from kneeling and reciting incantations that I might be a boy. He took his head in his hands before continuing. “At six months my wife made decoctions of boiled henna every day.” He sighed and wiped a few liters of sweat from his brow. “At seven months we visited the cemetery and burned candles made of CFA francs beside the graves of the unidentified dead so that they might intercede with Allah on our behalf.” My father burst again into tears before concluding. “What didn’t we do? We did everything!”

My compatriots were too impressed to utter a single word in response. But the ill-timed audacity of the pharmacist-doctor soon breathed life back where there appeared to be none.

“It’s not so bad,” he said. “Another woman in the household brings more warmth into the home. As it is written in the psalms of Salomon, without the queen of Saba, Solomon would have perished.”

“No Jewish talk in my home!” My father cried. “I won’t stand for it!”

“Yeah!” agreed my compatriots. “ True! We don’t want that Jewish talk here. Can’t you see where it got them?”

“Dragged through the mud!” cried a young boy, pushing his round face to the front of the crowd.

The gathering turned an accusatory gaze towards the pharmacist, Sallam.

“I have always taken good care of you, have I not?” he asked in his defense. “As an active member of the scientific community I have provided you, on a daily basis, with the budding conclusions drawn from the exploitation of science.”

“Traitor!” proclaimed my compatriots.

The pharmacist’s black skin turned a lighter shade of grey. He shook his bald head and his glasses tumbled into the dust at his feet. “This I cannot bear. I fought in the war of 1914. I killed three Germans man to man. I can’t bear it. I cannot.” As he spoke he grew more agitated and stomping his feet, his eyes popping out of their sockets, he cried, “Corruption of public opinion! Is this the thanks I am given for serving my country? Why, this is a call to rebellion!”

“Calm down, little papa,” said his obese wife, coming quickly to his side. “Think of your heart.”

“My heart?” the pharmacist asked, looking at his wife in disbelief. “What’s wrong with my heart?”

“I said calm down.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me!” he snapped.

But the pharmacist's wife was no longer listening. She had grabbed him by the pants and was dragging him away. The pharmacist squirmed, attempting to free himself from her iron grip, which, in addition to his pants, also had a rather firm hold on his testicles.

Having tried a thousand different ways to free himself from the clutches of his obese wife, the pharmacist, filled with rage, rattled off a list of convoluted insults, none of which made any sense to anyone. "Ignoramus! Cretin! Microbe with a coefficient of three!" And then, to everyone's surprise, he finished by slapping his wife in the face. A few men hastened to her rescue but the pharmacist's wife moved faster and in the blink of an eye she twisted her grip on his crotch. He yelped and, without allowing him a second to react, she hefted her husband onto her shoulders and slammed him down in the dust. The pharmacist was too dazed to utter a word at first, but in a few moments he opened his mouth and muttered, "A woman's warmth is like a puddle. If the sun shines, the water heats and millions of microbes and viruses proliferate and thrive. The puddle becomes a source of life. Why do we – the old, the flowers, the Four O'clock's –love that ray of sunshine so, eh? Why?" There was only his own shame to answer him. Perceiving this, the pharmacist rallied his spirits and jabbed a vengeful finger at the crowd. "I have been good to you!"

"Ooooooo!" mocked the assembly.

Between cries and vociferations, he managed to add, "I have cured six thousand three hundred cases of syphilis thanks to my permanganate, eighteen thousand nine hundred and twenty-six cases of malaria owe me their lives thanks to my extraordinary quinquina root, I've calmed the burning of ten thousand eight hundred menopausal

ovaries and quelled eighty-seven thousand cases of gonorrhoea. Not to mention the trifling illnesses: the measles, chickenpox, ascaris and pinworms, all of which have been fought off thanks to my genetic genius. You owe me your lives!”

“Who cares!” shouted someone from within the crowd.

The pharmacist picked up his glasses, squealed like a wounded dog and fled to the four walls of his Pharmacy, which he would never stray far from again. The crowd, still stupefied by his wife’s behavior, could do no more than stare at her for quite some time. The pharmacist’s wife simply pivoted her great buttocks, turning around to face my father and said, as if nothing had happened at all, “You should be looking after your wife.”

My father stood there stunned, like a deer in headlights. Before he could free himself from the spell he had fallen under, a man came crashing towards him through the crowd. One of the man’s hands was fully occupied with holding up his pants, which were a few sizes too large about the waist, his face was so black that it glowed and three deep wrinkles fell over one another on his forehead. In his hurry the man elbowed a pregnant woman in the belly and knocked a small snot-nosed child to the ground. He planted himself in the middle of the crowd and took out an old rusty tape recorder held together by some iron wire and strips from an old pagne. Lifting the microphone up to his big lips he said, “Nobody move! By the order of Ndongué news-journalist of New-Bell!”

“You’re too late,” my father said. “He who is late is always in the wrong.”

“I was sleeping. I was in a deep sleep and then when I woke up...well, you’ve seen the rest, I beg you, be generous and tell me, in detail, everything that happened here without omitting a single word.”

“The show’s over!” my father yelled. “Go home!”

“I’m working for the sake of posterity, sir.”

“Well, today is not your day. You failed,” my father told him. “Some days you succeed, some days you fail. Now, everyone, go home!”

A few Couscousters trailed after the pharmacist’s wife in order to further digest the details that make up the birth of a myth. Others turned in different directions taking with them flowery and glorified versions of the most strange and exotic event in which they would ever participate. Friends of the family, close on my father’s heels, shuffled after him into the hut. As for me, that night was the beginning of my celebrity. I was born as all myths are born, by word of mouth, by hearsay.

My story would eventually be told as follows: In actuality my sex was male, but through a process of cellular transmutation, carried out by the pharmacist while I was still in my mother’s womb and consisting of multiple punctures to her ovaries and several transplantations, I was robbed of all my male forces, which were in turn, bestowed upon the pharmacist’s obese wife. From then on, whenever they spoke of us it was in hushed tones. This legend, which would give rise to far worse fantasies in the imaginative minds of my compatriots, I tell you, was nothing more than a lie.

Chapter 2

Inside our hut, all was darkness. Night had fallen and the first lamps were being lit throughout Couscous. Birds tucked their heads under their wings and fell fast asleep as their nocturnal brothers awoke to hunt.

My father paid no attention to the small group of neighbors that had formed a single file and were following close on his heels. He crossed the clay floor of our hut in a few great strides and flung open the enormous army blanket that divided the living room from my parent's bedroom.

My mother lay on a brightly colored blanket. Her hair was spread out over a white pillowcase like a spider web. Exhausted from the birth, her skin was pale and even, much like her way of speaking, which was always smooth-tongued and well suited to her cat-like nature. Seeing my father, she sat up and smiled feebly at him.

“Are you happy?” my father asked, hands on his hips, legs wide apart. “Why can't you make a boy?”

His eyes were squinted into tiny slits and it was impossible to tell if he intended to be malicious or mocking. My mother did not respond. Her thin white hands, covered in thick blue veins, fingered the edge of the pillowcase and she remained distant.

“Nothing good can come from you, I see,” he said, his manner cold, detached.

My mother bowed her head. She knew her humiliation was justified and her honor required that she accept my father's reprimands without complaint. My father, for his part, tapped his foot three times as if to create a beat and then spun around and returned to the living room where the other Couscouisiers had lit a lamp. Three chairs, a table, and

all my family's casseroles and plates were piled into a far corner, leaving the centre of the room completely empty except for a rug. The Couscouisiers sat down in the chairs. My father threw himself down in his swivel chair. It was missing its feet and only managed to stand upright with the help of some large stones. A couple of rats scurried across the floor of the hut and a moth began to circle the lamp. My father's eyes scanned the room, pausing briefly on the black-wood table before settling on the family photo that hung on the wall. It was taken on the day of my parent's third marriage anniversary. My mother sat on a small footstool wearing a white djellaba. Her eyes were sunken and self-effacing. My father looked like a monkey in disguise. They were smiling, but their faces were tense, like a British couple that had argued just before the picture was taken, but managed to smile as the shutter snapped.

My father was very proud of this photograph. After picking it up from the shop, he showed it to all of Couscouis, smiling, gold teeth gleaming. "I look like a prince of Monaco."

My father clapped his hands and my mother entered the living room with the help of two elephantine women. Her breasts, swollen with milk, bobbed in her orange polyester nightgown. The women lowered her onto the rug and laid me on top of her stomach. My father breathed deeply as if the day's labor had been particularly hard on him. He recited some proverbs and raised his hand in the air. When he let it drop the entire gathering burst into tears. My father wept with them, but he wept with modesty, as a man does. He allowed phlegm to dribble from his mouth and from time to time he cried, "Oh, God, forgive me for my sins! I cheated on my wife, I broke the legs of a chicken that was devouring my grain, I betrayed my fellow man, I..." So began the hour

of my father's confession. He confessed his hatred, his greed, his disobedience: "thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt love thy God." He passed himself under the scrutiny of the Ten Commandments, while my mother wailed, tore at her clothes and rolled herself into a ball. By the end, she looked like a complete lunatic. I wept too. My bedding was damp, I needed to nurse, and no one would listen to me. This you see, is how I learned to feel hunger.

My compatriots, having regrouped for the night according to age, sex and religion, bore witness to our cries, and were deeply impressed. The soya merchant, from his spot on New-Bell's main road, paused between slicing the chunks of lamb fat and cow guts he held squished between his fingers, lifted his prunish face under the light of the street lamp and exclaimed, "The Bénérafas, now there's a family that knows how to shed some tears! Extraordinary!" Many Couscouisiers lingered in the streets in order to comment on my family's cries.

"How beautiful!" an obese woman said, clutching at her breast to demonstrate how deeply she was affected.

"Incredible!" cried another, amazed in the face of our sorrow. "How can God ignore their tears? I am sure he will give them a son now!"

Mr. Ndongué, Couscouisier-news-journalist, hoisted up his oversized pants with the help of some liana vines, picked up his tape recorder and slung it across his back. Sighing deeply he turned, his torso nude, and left to record people's reactions about town. He stopped first on the main road, where women street vendors squatted along the edge of the sidewalk.

"What do you make of the Bénérafas' reaction?"

“A man with no son is like a tree without fruit,” replied the women vendors from behind their puff-puff and red bean stew carts.

“They are right to cry! You know very well that since the beginning of time the unequal distribution between the sexes...” the cigarette vendors told him.

“Without a son, who will be his heir?” Came the unanimous reply from the street-idlers, those men who lurk half in the shadows with no other purpose than to watch the time pass.

When the news-journalist felt he had recorded enough, he returned to our house, broke out his equipment and approached my family once more, his rabbit-like face commanding us, “Louder! Louder!” And we wailed. The tape recorder wound around and around, creaking like the stiff bones of an ancient elephant. Not even the mice closed their eyes that night. They chased each other between the three-legged standing pots, around the tables and under the benches where the sound of their swallowing could be heard. Only the carpenter profited from the evening of my birth, so rich in unusual events, by planing planks of wood. After all, you never know...

On certain mornings the wind blew strong enough that the smell of Chococam chocolate went unnoticed, it wafted under the foliage, between the trees, thinned out as it reached the sidewalks and houses, gradually weakened, and was lost completely near the outskirts of Douala-Ville. On days like this, Couscousters rise from their beds like it's Easter morning. The dawn following my birth was such a morning. By the first cockcrow the Couscousters had begun to congregate outside our hut, gathering to witness a real live

sexual transmutation. Some of them had already rehearsed their versions of the miraculous event for the national press – what newspaper would possibly pass up an opportunity to cover such an important historical event?! Others were busy perfecting their outfits so they could be sure to catch the eye of the photographer for the *Cameroon Tribune*. Even the large blue flies shook the sleep from their wings. Inside our hut a cream colored lizard dropped from the ceiling and landed on my head.

“Stop!” My father cried, raising his arms in the air.

Our hearts leapt and the sudden silence deepened. Mosquitoes bit at my mother’s face, but she made no move to chase them away.

“The time has come. Let us see if God has answered our prayers.” He said.

My father and the Couscouisiers, their hearts pounding, eyes bulging, formed a circle around my mother in order to witness the miracle of my sexual transmutation. Slowly, she undid the cord that held up my diaper-rag. It was so big and bulky that it engulfed my entire backside.

“Hurry up!” My father said, impatiently. His hands were moist, a trickle of sweat slid down his chin and landed on my mother’s breast. My mother was trembling so hard that her fingers grew clumsy and she blushed like a teenager. “Let me do it!” my father said, and he grabbed my feet, hoisted them up into the air and whipped the diaper off in one motion.

“Ugh!” cried the small assembly, at the sight of my little pink butt cheeks speckled with leek-colored turds.

“So?” the Couscouisiers inquired, not daring to look any closer.

“Nothing.” my father said.

“What do you mean, nothing?” they asked him.

“Nothing means exactly that: nothing! Are you deaf?”

“God has not answered our prayers?” inquired a Couscousier named Ali, shaking his head and pursing his lips tight like a chicken’s bum. “Maybe...”

“Speak your mind,” my father ordered.

“Well, the mysteries of existence are unknowable,” he said.

“You speak, Ali, but your words say nothing.”

“Life’s paradoxes are unfathomable.”

“That’s enough from you,” my father told him.

“I’ll say it. You are so stubborn, Bénérafa, God refuses to pardon you.”

My father roared and threw himself on Ali, but the bystanders overpowered him and dragged him off almost instantly.

The news-journalist, Ndongué, approached them, clucked his tongue and asked, “Excuse me, do you think you could start the fight over? From the top?”

“You’re not serious,” my father said.

“The equipment malfunctioned just as you were...with your permission, of course. For posterity’s sake.”

My father thought this over for a moment.

“It won’t be the same.”

“Yes it will! Yes it will! What distinguishes the fake from the real? We live our lives seduced by the promise of a brilliant future, but we hunger for it with the gaze of men doomed to a life of suffering. What a charming and tragic contradiction we already are! You said it yourself, Bénérafa, your son was changed into a girl. I’m giving you an

opportunity to go down in history. History with a capital H! But if you'd rather not, well, it's your loss."

Ndongué made as if to gather his things. My father looked from the ground to the journalist's face as though searching either one for some evidence of the truth.

"Well, alright then," he said. "If you say so."

"I'm all for progress!" my father's adversary chimed in.

They began the scene again, but this time no one intervened. They grappled and the Couscouisiers yelled encouragement from the sidelines. "Go, Bénérafa! Give it to him!" A few snot-nosed children climbed into the trees for a better view of the spectacle and the betting venter opened for business. "Two to one!" he hollered. The carpenter stopped at the sight of the spectacle, "I have a coffin ready! I'll cut you a deal! A coffin!" The news-journalist held out his microphone, angling it from left to right and right to left, all the while gripping his vine suspenders with one hand and pausing to catch his breath only in order to add commentary – worthy of a truly talented reporter – to the spectacle. "The rivals gaze murderously into each other's eyes. First round: a left hook from Mr. Bénérafa knocks his opponent to the floor. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5! A knock out! But wait! Ali isn't finished yet. He's on his feet! Oh! He lands a sucker punch, Mr. Bénérafa staggers and he's down! Amazing! An equal match ladies and gentleman!"

In the general excitement, no one noticed my father snatching up piece of bamboo, but everyone heard the sudden mewling that came shortly after. It was no cat, but Mr. Ali howling as his eye was gauged out.

Chapter 3

For the next few days, not long after dawn, the Couscouisiers continued to converge on our hut. “Where’s your husband?” they asked my mother. “Out,” came her reply. “He has to compensate for the eye, you know,” they told her, and without requesting permission they sat down, slumped on a rug or an empty tin can. Others chose to remain on their feet, standing around the room with their arms folded across their chests. As they waited, they chitchatted to pass the time. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, that’s what the Bible says.” The big-boss, having installed himself in my father’s swivel chair, exclaimed, “What a story, eh?” which made my mother’s blood boil. “Stop judging him!” she snapped. “It was an accident, he wasn’t trying to...” The big-boss put his feet up on the table. “I will pass judgment when all the evidence is in,” he said. My mother shrugged her shoulders and left to draw water from the well. She cooked, cleaned, nursed and wet the tip of her thread with saliva before threading her sewing needle. From time to time my father’s creditors took it upon themselves to remind her, “You know, there really must be compensation for the eye. It’s the natural order of things,” and proceeded to quibble for hours on end over the details of events, but always arrived at the same conclusion: justice must be served. The big-boss, wearing a chéchia hat on his head, nodded sagely, removed a kola nut from the folds of his djellaba and ate it all on his own. As he ate, his lips became stained with red.

Mr. Ali was also in attendance. To highlight our guilt, he contented himself with sitting, chewing blades of grass and patting, from time to time, the white bandage wrapped around his head.

The instant the light grew dark enough that one could no longer distinguish sky from tree line, my mother shut all the windows and doors. “I think it’s time you went home,” she said, turning towards Mr. Ali. “It’s midnight,” she added handing him a calabasse of corn beer.

“Let’s go, Ali.” The big-boss told him.

“God is my witness.” Ali said.

“Time to go.” The big-boss said again.

“No rush,” my mother told them. “You can leave whenever you’d like. I have nothing to fear from educated gentlemen such as yourselves.”

The Couscouisiers filed out. “See you tomorrow,” they told her.

My father returned once the Couscouisiers had gone to bed. His clothes were in tatters and his pants were crumpled and covered in mud. My mother opened the door for him gently. “They’re gone.”

“ I knew the Gods had some special punishment in store for me!” He moved around the hut as though he was on stage, even citing Saint John. “Lo, this is the hour of my atonement, never again shall I see the light of day. The ten-horned, seven-headed beast has come and now she will gauge out my eyes! All that is beautiful and sweet will be lost to me forever! Though I fear the fury of the gods embrace me my dear sweet wife!”

My father showed her his aching feet where chiggers had burrowed under the skin, he pointed to his legs caked with mud, and his lacerated skin. “Your husband spent the day in the swamp, darling wife.”

My mother left the room and returned with a basin of water, in which she had placed the leaves of medicinal plants, for my father to soak his feet. “Men are so cruel,” she sighed, plucking the chiggers out with a needle she had heated over hot coals, “and life is so hard.” She set about disinfecting my father’s cuts and struggled with the twigs tangled in his hair. “What has become of our dreams, husband?” she said before hurrying to the bathroom. She proceeded to mix hot and cold water in a copper basin. She stayed there for a few minutes after the basin was full, her eyes fixed on the humid bathroom wall where hundreds of tiny centipedes scurried. A cloud of nostalgia flitted across her face. “I wanted so much to have a real bathroom,” she said under her breath, and then loud enough for my father to hear, “Husband, your bath is ready!”

My father, a cloth tied around his waist and a towel thrown over his shoulder, was ready to take his bath. He grabbed my mother by the waist, murmuring sweet nothings into her neck and ear. “They didn’t harm you did they, darling wife?” His darling wife swiveled her hips, smiled and replied, “No, my husband. And the child is well.”

“I don’t care!” My father said, tearing himself away.

When he had finished, a plate of couscous and a steaming bowl of soup were waiting for him on the table. He ate voraciously, burped, and let his arms fall to his sides with the peaceful look of a traveler before his own hearth at long last. “Hiding out is worse than cutting wood,” he sighed.

“Husband, there is no more milk.”

My father fixed his gaze intensely on my mother’s breasts. “You have more milk than necessary.”

“There’s no more sugar.”

“That’s not so bad, it causes diabetes.”

“There’s no more flour either.”

“Borrow some money from Madame Kimoto then.”

“I’ll think it over, husband. But there is nothing left to buy the meat with.”

“I’m so tired.”

Exhausted, my father stretched himself out on a rug on the floor. My mother climbed onto his back and with her bare feet, cracked his vertebrae one by one.

“There isn’t any more corn for couscous either.”

“Register with the U.P.C. then,” he told her.

“My husband is right, of course, but if my husband would consent to take back his job at the mill that would be even better.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. If they catch me, that band of savages will scratch out my eyes! Would you rather have a blind man for a husband?”

“My husband is right, of course.”

“Yes, I’m always right, but right now, I’m tired.”

A few minutes later, his mouth was agape and expelling regular gusts of air. My mother stretched out beside him. When she awoke, my father was gone. He had left at the sound of the first cockcrow.

2.2 Lost Honors

Part 2: A Rainy Summer

Chapter 11

The night school was located in a green building on Belleville Boulevard. I made my way there reluctantly. The first day, I was too nervous to enter the classroom. I stayed outside the door listening to the street noises and the vendors stationed along the sidewalk outshouting each other like it was every man for himself, “two pineapples for ten francs!”

Mademoiselle Julie was no longer a young woman. Her face was wrinkled and strongly marked by time. She was tall and she stood up straight despite her age. Her black hair, which she wore permed, shone like charcoal and her beige blouse, nicely but not excessively embroidered, was just the kind *les ladies* wore. Her skirt was a decent length, but varicose veins showed through her clear pantyhose. Her hands, also covered in big blue veins, motioned as she spoke. “Possessive pronouns are as follows: in the masculine, *le mien, le tien, le sien*, and in the feminine, *la mienne, la tienne, and la sienne*. French adverbs have no agreement rules...”

Mademoiselle Julie’s class was like the United Nations of Belleville – there were Negresses wound in brightly colored cloths decorated with fluttering birds, boisterous Spanish women, Chinese women more discreet than death itself, and Arabic women whose jewelry inevitably jingled every time they raised their hands to answer a question. Every woman was a mother, married or not, and each one was peculiar in her own way. When Mademoiselle Julie pronounced certain words like *conjunctioncoordination*, their jaws would drop like it was a word from the 18th century. Confronted with the blank stares that these terms elicited in her students, Mademoiselle Julie responded with a colorful French – a fusion of French à la Wolof with a pinch of Arabic.

I was so impressed that my eyes dried up like the desert and my breath grew short. Even after the last student had filed out of the classroom, I stood a few minutes longer, waiting for my heart to return from my throat to my chest.

On the second day, Mademoiselle Julie caught me off guard. “Come in, come in! Don’t be shy!”

I went inside and took a seat next to a large Maghrebian woman as massive and voluptuous as Mount Cameroon. “My name is Fatima,” she said. “I’m married and I have three daughters.” She seemed pleased to be meeting a lost lamb like me and I thanked her for introducing herself. The next day Fatima sent her jewelry tinkling and asked if I was married. “I’m a virgin,” I said. Fatima shook her head and looked away.

On the third day she asked, “Where do you live?”

“With a Negress-princess-and-dignitary. She’s a writer.”

“Ah. She must be stinking rich.”

“Maybe she is. But I’m not.”

“Why would you want to be a housekeeper for someone who wasn’t loaded?”

“For comfort,” said a Senegalese woman sitting behind us. “For comfort and for vice.”

“You’re not serious,” said Fatima, feigning consternation. “You expect me to believe that she’s there, working as a housekeeper for nothing more than comfort and vice? She’d be better off in a whore house, for Christ’s sake!”

“No, no,” replied the Senegalese woman, “It’s hidden vice she works for. That way she can keep telling everyone she’s a virgin!”

“Shut up!” I yelled.

Mademoiselle Julie intervened straight away. “Calm down girls, calm down.”

For the first few weeks I had a hard time writing the letter *i* and distinguishing between the letters *j* and *g*. At times, I was so discouraged that my brain shut off completely and I threw down my pen.

“I can’t do it,” I would say, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’ll never get it right. I give up.”

The mother-students got up to have a look at my scribbler. They clucked over my work and then each of them proceeded to try and teach me a little trick to help me remember. “*J* is like *si* and *g* is like *gueuler*.” But I couldn’t figure it out. I didn’t understand. I sat there, stuck in my frustration like a sulky child.

The mother-students turned away from me saying, “All it takes is a little will power,” or “It’s all that luxury she’s living in. It’s rotting her brain.”

Mademoiselle Julie strutted towards me like a Madam through her brothel. She stood in front of my desk, stiff as a rod.

“What is it you’re trying to do?”

“I quit. I’m not getting anywhere.”

According to Mademoiselle Julie, I should rejoice in my little pile of *i*’s and *y*’s. I couldn’t help but wonder at her expectation that I should feel uplifted by this struggle when life had handed me nothing but hopelessness since the day I was born.

Mademoiselle Julie was a woman who could allow for those kinds of feelings because she had been born with privilege, with a sense of security, intelligence. She insisted that education was the key to everything without realizing that it is a luxury that can only be

afforded by people who already have enough to eat, people who live decently. The starving-hungry cannot fill their bellies with education.

“You’re toying with your freedom, Saïda,” she said.

“All I want is enough food to eat and a warm place to sleep. That’s all I ask from life.” I replied.

Then Mademoiselle Julie looked at me strangely. Her gaze was delicious. She wasn’t staring at me. She was drinking me in. Her eyes studied my skin and my hair as though they had the same texture as her own and she loved them. I was so moved by the look in her eyes that I blurted out, “I’ll keep trying!” despite myself.

Little by little my thoughts began to fall back into place, but my life, no way. I practiced writing minuscule *i*’s and capital *U*’s, double-spaced, over and over in my scribbler. I had not seen Ibrahim again. In Belleville, the celebrity status that my physiological state garnered me had begun to fade and be forgotten. Only Marcel Pignon Marcel persevered.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Saïda, you know that?”

He offered me little presents that he thought would please me, ‘Roger Gallet’ soaps, lingerie, ‘His and Hers’ towels, face creams – ‘become younger than young, with L’Oreal!’, ‘love’ scented perfumes, and lipsticks that poked out from their tubes like little dog peckers, red and inflamed. After, Marcel’s eyes would search my face, full of dread, “Do you like it?”

As for flowers, it wasn’t just single roses anymore, but any flower that bloomed under the heavens and had the misfortune of crossing his path: rhododendrons, tulips, apple blossoms, white roses, red roses, and azaleas. Marcel’s flowers were primitive

remedies, the cure to all suffering. They had the power to shock an epileptic from a seizure, they were like ndolé stew for stomach pains, like Psalm XXIV, his gifts could ward off toothaches, they were menstrual blood used to treat acne, the waters of Jordan that cured blindness, Lourdes for the paralytic, garlic against the evil eye, the blood of a coq sacrificed to the gods for wealth.

I held Marcel's flowers to my heart, "It's very nice of you to think of me, Marcel."

He took my hand, tilted his head and looked thoughtfully up at the sun. "It's a beautiful day, the sun is magnificent. Would you like to take a walk? Walking is very good exercise. Unless you would rather go back to my place. I'm renting an apartment not far from here."

"No. No, Thank you."

He hobbled along after me. "What did he do to you? What was Ibrahim's penis like, huh? Was it long or wide? I don't believe you! He's not a Negro so..."

"You can think whatever you want."

"Just because one man refuses you, it doesn't mean that...Look, I'm sorry it's just that it's been years....and the thought of round, white thighs...I haven't slept since we met, Saïda. Saïda, my sweet virgin of Jerusalem."

He embraced me. I gently disengaged myself and he stood there, arms dangling by his sides.

"I'm going then. I have to go to the Metro."

That was a blow to my ego. I spun around, "I guess you've had enough, Marcel," and then I begged him, "Are you giving up so easily?"

Marcel took advantage of my weakness and grabbed hold of my hand, “Oh Saïda, my virgin flower waiting to be plucked, my sweet cherry to be popped.”

“You’re such a pig! You’re always thinking dirty thoughts.”

At home, I wiped the floors with a floor cloth, I scrubbed the kitchen tiles until I got a cramp and yelped from the sharp pain. I ironed the sheets as if I was expecting a lover. Then I ran a bath and put flowers in the water, floating on the surface. I submerged myself in the flowered water, stretched out and closed my eyes. I could be happy spending the rest of my life surrounded by these things and their suggestion of wealth, I thought.

Later, I put on my cotton negligee and examined my face in the vanity mirror.

“Mirrors will bring you sadness and nothing more,” I sighed.

“Don’t look in the mirror then,” Loulouze suggested.

“I’m getting old, little one. What will become of me?”

“Don’t worry, Saïda. In 2000 you can come and live with me. It’s not so far away. Madame Maman says it will be here very soon.”

“I’ll raise your children. I’ll be older than death.”

Loulouze’s eyes scanned my face, the two deep folds that separated my nostrils curving at the corners of my mouth like hooks, the wrinkles that spread out from my eyes in intricate networks. She put a hand on my arm. Her hands were soft and the color of honey.

“You can always go back to the way you were before,” the child suggested. “Like old people on TV. They go into a hospital old and come back out brand new.”

She watched as I sprayed my face with age defying lotions and covered my wrinkles with illuminating powder. When I had finished the rejuvenation of my face, I gave her a bath in the remaining water. I combed her hair, kissed her forehead and each of her eyes, then kissed her breasts and the tip of each finger. I did this because she loved me and because I wanted to show her tenderness so she could build herself a world from it. Then I helped her into her pajamas, the ones with the little red hearts on them, and lifted her up in front of the mirror.

“Imagination,” I told her, “is like memory. It can transform lies into truths.”

“Like TV?” she asked.

“Sort of. My body doesn’t follow the rules of nature anymore. The doctors say I can’t have children.”

She kissed my cheeks and said, “I have enough rules for both of us, Saïda. I can give you some of mine if you like.”

I was still sad and Ngaremba knew it. She put on a show of happiness in my presence despite any repugnance she might have felt for me. She had a sharp mind and was aware of the many different kinds of suffering that can affect a person. She avoided anything remotely related to my engagement. She knew that for me to regain my joie de vivre and forget that bastard, Ibrahim, no drastic measures were required. No surgical mutilation or weeding of major organs would be necessary. She brought me little gifts like a scarf from Tati, and paid me small considerations – “Saïda, would you mind preparing some couscous?” and once we were seated at the table, “This is excellent! You

truly are an extraordinary cook, Saïda” – and she was right to do so. These little compliments were enough to bring a smile to my lips for a few hours at least.

But Ngaremba’s favorite moment to sing my praises was when her friends had gathered at her house and dessert was being served. One night, surveying the chattering throng of Whites and Negroes, she smiled her chocolate-caramel smile and with her mouth full, eyes wide, she announced, as though suddenly struck with the realization that she’d neglected to mention something very important, “Saïda knows how to read, you know! Did you know that? She can READ.”

“Oh?”

Ngaremba was like a mother, bragging to her girlfriends – “Did you know Jacques learned how to speak at six months old!” or “He walked before he even crawled!” She was delighted. You would have thought I had learned to read and write in three days. You would have thought I was a genius.

Embarrassed, I replied, “Don’t exaggerate, Ngaremba. I can barely tell one letter from another.”

“Don’t be so modest, my dear!” Ngaremba rummaged around in her desk and resurfaced holding a piece of paper and a pen, determined to justify her allegations.

“They don’t believe me, Saïda. Show them.”

Forced to demonstrate my intellectual abilities, I took dictation from the Negress-princess-and-dignitary. I wrote: *Tête. Papa. Maman. Manger. Dormir.* And the auditorium erupted in applause. Ngaremba sank back into her chair, and clicking her tongue, she exclaimed, “I told you! Send me your dimwits and hussies and I’ll transform them into monkey savants!”

That was Ngaremba. Praising me as a virgin of Sodom and crucifying me as a whore of Gomorrah, all in one breath.

One night, we arrived in class to find the chairs pushed into a corner and stacked on top of each other. One would have thought we were gathering for a surprise party instead of school. Mademoiselle Julie was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room. She was *Gol*, pitiful. There were deep bags under her eyes and bruises bloomed on her cheeks underneath the make-up she had applied for work. She invited us to join her and we sat down on the tile floor in a circle.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve removed your chairs,” She began. “Well, the fact is, I need to learn from you as much as you need to learn from me. Every one of you has inherited wisdom from your ancestors. It’s a part of you, rooted in your souls. I would like for us to go around in a circle and give everyone a chance to share something from their culture, a piece of folklore maybe or a traditional story, the histories that have been taught to us, that we have learned and digested without ever really knowing all the details, without questioning their significance.”

She stood up quickly, looked around the class and then held up one of her thin little arms and with her finger, pointed to an obese woman named New Ye’ from the Ivory Coast. New Ye’ was wearing a boubou decorated with flowers, her hair, which she wore in braids, curled around her shoulders like the leaves of a great fern. New Ye’ tried

to stand up, but her weight made it a complicated task. Two of the other students held her arms and helped her to her feet. “Tsk tsk tsk,” the women clucked. “Diet! Diet!” They yelled, clapping their hands. New Ye’ s feet got tangled in her boubou as she rose and she teetered forwards and backwards before finding her balance.

“My husband is a good Negro,” she said, daring us to contradict her, “ and he likes big women.”

“Isn’t that wonderful, New Ye,” said Mademoiselle Julie. “We’re listening now. Go ahead.”

New Ye’ rearranged the shoulders of her boubou, fidgeting like a centipede. I pitied her and dreaded the moment when my turn would come. Zoubida, an African with a jaw that protruded like a dog's snout, was sitting beside me. She was so anxious that she began to gnaw on her nails. Mademoiselle Julie asked New Ye’ to stand in the middle of the circle, as this is how it was traditionally done, she said, when villagers gathered to tell stories under the baobab trees in Africa.

New Ye’ took a deep breath and began. “My name is New Ye’ because one day, when my mother was sixteen years old, on the way home from the bayou, she met a white missionary named Durand. He was walking from village to village converting Africans. His eyes were strange colors, green with grey spots. He had a big purple birthmark on his forehead and a red beard on his chin like a patch of fur. When my mother met him, his skin was burnt and peeling off his face in chunks. The missionary rubbed his beard and looked into my mother’s eyes.

Then he said, “Are you looking for the righteous path?”

“Where is that?” my mother asked.

“In Christ,” he said. “Come with me to the mission.”

My mother had seen Europeans driving their powerful cars through the streets, running over dogs and splashing villagers. From far off, she watched Bastille Day parades and the military shining with decorations, walking through the streets waving their tri-colored flags. My mother had also seen the Western ladies, bunched together, enjoying the parade from a platform under their parasols, wearing pretty lace dresses, hats and gloves. My mother set down her calabash in the middle of the path and followed the missionary. It wasn't hard to admit her to the mission. She helped with the cooking and the cleaning. The sisters told her stories of paradise and eternal life, stories that had the power to change her soul from something dark and filthy into something better, ethereal and pure, like a white dove. If she was skeptical, they would give her a spanking and once, even a pair of shoes. The shoes were so small and beautiful that she balanced them on the top of her head as she walked. They baptized her Christianly and Apostely and then gave her a big cross. My mother waited for Christ to whisper in her ear and tell her where to find the righteous path, but he was silent. When she became pregnant, she fasted for three days in the Savannah desert with the sun beating down, the wind blowing and twigs tangling in her hair. But even then, Christ was silent. Still my mother waited. She watched the hares run and the does graze. A lion approached her and stood three feet away, but she did not move. She waited. Three times the moon rose, lighting up the vastness of the Savannah and still she waited for Christ to whisper the child's name in her ear, the way any totem would, yet Christ was always silent. But before her eyes she saw all the wonders of this new god. So my mother still had hope.

I was born on January first. The calendar said this was a New Year. My mother called me New Ye' because the White god was not like African gods, he was not immaterial. He was visible. My mother called me New Ye' because it was Christ's will. Later, she realized that the White God was not made for Negroes. He only answered the prayers of White people. But she never dared tell Father Durand because in our culture, it would be very rude to speak to an elder that way. That is all."

The class sat with their heads bowed. Our stillness was so complete that not a single hair stirred on our heads. Even the arms of the mother-students, which never stood still, had fallen along side their bodies like heavy pieces of wood. It took all of Mademoiselle Julie's skill as a teacher to revive the classroom.

"But Madame New Ye'," she exclaimed, "That is not a piece of folklore or a traditional story!"

"I'm sorry Mademoiselle Julie, but after colonization and slavery, the life of every African is a story."

Mademoiselle Julie did her best to persuade New Ye' to try again, to tell a tale or sing a lullaby, but her efforts were met with nothing but resistance. New Ye's refusal was like a flood; Mademoiselle Julie could not alter the direction the water was moving. Not even the other students could sway her. Furious, Mademoiselle Julie stood up and stuck her hands in her pockets, "Who's next then?"

She scanned the room and settled on Zoubida, who was wearing an old ladies' dress a few sizes too small and a homemade sweater. Mini poppies decorated her squat and layered figure. Zoubida crossed her arms hiding her stubby fingernails.

"We're listening," said Mademoiselle Julie.

“I, uh, I...”

“Take your time, Zoubida.”

When Zoubida finally spoke her voice rose like rolling thunder, deep, hoarse and slightly sensual. Her story was simple and familiar to many Africans: The Bone. It was the story of an orphan girl who is mistreated by her father’s second wife, and runs away from home. Along the way she comes to the aid of several creatures. She displays such kindness and wisdom and the creatures are so grateful and pleased with her that they shower her with riches. The orphan girl returns to her village triumphant. As Zoubida spoke, I thought of Ngaremba and wondered if she would transform me into something magnificent. But I was also preparing for what I would say. Legends full of magic spells and great conquests ran through my mind – the woman who was half spider, the man who was half hyena, but I settled on the story of the wife that the gods turned to stone for cheating on her husband. “Once upon a time there was a woman...” That’s a good way to start, I thought.

When Zoubida had finished, Mademoiselle Julie exclaimed, “That’s exactly what I was looking for. Well done, Zoubida!”

One by one, the mother-students got to their feet. I heard the story of *mamiwater*, who stole the souls of beautiful children, the star-woman who was transformed into a river of tears, the stubborn child whose head exploded and cucumber soup came out. When it was my turn, I stood and laced my fingers behind my back. I felt empty. The backs of my legs were itchy so I bent over to scratch my calves and noticed that my stockings were ripped. I was uncomfortable and couldn’t keep still. To my surprise, when I opened my mouth, these words fell out:

“What is the point of this circus, Mademoiselle?”

Mademoiselle Julie, caught off guard by my question, was silent, but her electric blue eyes shot daggers and she curled her hands into fists, resting them on her hips like stones.

“You don’t think it’s important, Saïda, that I try to see the world through your eyes?”

“It’s pointless,” I said. “You’ll always be a stranger in our world, just like we are strangers in yours.”

“But we’re part of a whole, Saïda,” Mademoiselle Julie protested. “I give to you, but you also give to me.”

“Well, you can take back what you gave me if that makes any difference,” I replied.

Mademoiselle Julie trembled. I thought she would burst into tears and then I thought that maybe the water would wash away her melancholy. A voice in my heart whispered, “ she is a woman, Saïda, you are inseparable in joy and in sadness, whether you like it or not.”

“I’m sorry, Mademoiselle Julie,” I said. “I was raised in an oral culture, but I can’t simulate a village gathering for you for the simple reason that here the conditions are not the same. There are no children and no elders sitting around a fire, no griot or nvet player, there is no clear moon and no stars in the sky.”

Mademoiselle Julie threw her head back and she must have thrown her sadness back there too, because a wide smile began to tug at the wrinkles on her face.

“It’s quite alright, Saïda. I’ve often asked myself why I want so badly to teach women like you. Now I think it’s because I want to know about your cultures, I want to understand. Your people have kept a kind of magic alive that modern day societies have lost. I admire you. Just as you are.”

“I hope you hit him back,” Zoubida said, looking pointedly at the cut that ran from Mademoiselle Julie’s left temple down to the bottom of her cheek.

“Oh!” She said, laughing. “It’s nothing. I fell.”

“I suppose you scratched your face on the way back up,” I said, mockingly.

Mademoiselle Julie looked from left to right, found the strength to speak and said, “You must understand, he’s a man of color. Life hasn’t always been easy for him, you know.””

We shrugged our shoulders. It’s all we could do. But later, when I found myself alone, walking slowly down the length of the Boulevard, I started to ask myself questions. They rattled in my brain like cowry shells. How could Mademoiselle Julie just accept being hit? Why not file a report against her Black boyfriend? Was it because he was Black and therefore superior or because he was Black and therefore inferior? Also, it shocked me that in France no one dared say the word Negro, it was always ‘people of color’. And everywhere I looked, dirty little Africans, men that no Black woman would allow to set foot in their house – not even as a shoe shiner – had the most beautiful White women for girlfriends. I couldn’t help myself. I had to ask. Something was happening to me. All I could do was wait and see what it was. What these questions would do.

“Ngaremba? Madame Ngaremba?” I said, opening the front door.

“What is it, Saïda?” She asked.

“I don’t know where I am anymore.”

I collapsed onto the sofa next to her and grabbed the edge of her skirt. It was a good thing I held on because as soon as I sat down, Ngaremba got to her feet.

“Where are you going?”

“What’s wrong with you, Saïda? Are you not well?”

I stared at the wall. “Look,” I said, pointing to the shadows rippling and intersecting across the ceiling.

“I don’t see anything,” she said. “You’re right, you know. Africa has been crying for so long that now, she doesn’t have eyes left to see. Brothers are gutting each other in Rwanda. They are dying of hunger in Somalia. In Central Africa, the police have no salary so they bleed the civilians dry for their own survival. There isn’t even a president in Cameroon anymore!”

I lowered my finger. I was full of questions and hope, hope that she who seemed to know everything would have some answers for me. The Negress-princess-and-dignitary watched as I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around them, rocked back and forth and began to hum. I stared ahead, but saw nothing. My whimpering was so feeble, that Ngaremba could barely make it out. She put a hand over mine and squeezed. Together, we watched the shadows dance across the ceiling, our hands clasped together, breath suspended. I couldn’t help but notice the softness of her palms compared to the roughness of my own after so many years of housework.

“These are our honors,” she said, motioning to the flickering shadows.

“What honors?”

“The honors we have lost, Saïda.”

“I had a sister once,” she began, pivoting around to face me. She paused for a moment and stroked the hem of her skirt before continuing, “Her name was Sidone, which means “what the earth gives”, but she was so beautiful, so soft and plump that everyone called her ‘Bébé’. She had big legs, her long hair was as black as midnight and her eyes were so deep that our mother used to say they were the meeting point between life and beyond. She was four years older than me. I loved her no more than I had to and no less than I should. Our family had very little money. At dinner, I would save her the best pieces of meat. At school I defended her, because she was incapable of defending herself. Not because she was weak, but because she could do no harm. She liked for me to tell her stories that I made up. Before bed, she would say, ‘ Tell me a story, Nga’.”

Ngaremba was quiet for a moment. She took a deep breath and continued. “Later, when our parents could no longer afford to send us to school and I was upset that I would not continue my studies, Sidone sat me on her knee and said, ‘I will work so that you can go to school.’ She started to make beignets and sold them at worksites. Then one day, after spending the entire day out in the rain, she came home in shivers. She had pneumonia. We had no means of calling a doctor so I carried her to the hospital on my back. But the doctor refused to examine her because we had no money to pay the hospital fees. Two days later, she was dead.”

She rested her head on my shoulder before continuing. “My parents were overcome with grief. My mother kept screaming that she could not survive Bébé. I found myself in a very strange state. I missed Bébé, but I couldn’t bring myself to shed a single tear. When we brought her body to the cemetery, I reached down and picked up a handful of red soil. I held the clay that would cover the body, the smile, of my beloved sister. I

raised my hands to the sky, my fingers spread out like the leaves of a clover and I swore, ‘I promise you Sidone, that never again on this earth will any woman or child die from a lack of doctors or medicine.’ I’ve tried so hard to be true to my word, but it’s no use. Africa is worse and worse. Now they’re talking about AIDS and the Ebola virus. What will become of us?”

I wrapped my arms around her and all in one breath, I said, “I am so sorry I misjudged you, Ngaremba. I forgive you. Do you forgive me?”

She bowed her head and murmured, “Yes, I forgive you.” Then moved away, freeing herself from my arms. “It’s myself that I cannot seem to forgive. If I don’t fulfill my promise, I think the earth will split open. Then tongues of fire will wrap around my feet and pull me down.”

“You’re just imagining things,” I told her. “There are so many questions I could ask you, but I see now that you don’t have the answers either. We are like two seeds, going whichever way the wind blows until it lets us drop. No matter where we land – desert, solid earth, on a volcano or a bed of stones – we manage to survive.”

Chapter 12

Little by little, new questions began to haunt me. As the days came and went, these questions would overrun my brain, move down to my heart, settle in my stomach and plug up my arteries. Then one morning, finding there was no more space on the

inside, they burst out on the surface of my skin in the form of eczema. Or acne. I'm not sure which. My face was like the skin of corrossol fruit, covered in oozing lumps. The hideous protuberances appeared on my arms and leaked puss out of lesions on my hands. Even the bottoms of my feet were covered in horrible protrusions. Ngaremba took me to see the doctor. He wouldn't touch me, but he wrote me a prescription for antibiotics.

The protuberances disappeared, but Ngaremba's words were engraved in my memory. They were like the beaks of a million kingfishers pecking away at her mind and disrupting the tranquility of everyone around her. I saw her situation all too clearly and even found myself wishing that some skin disease would afflict her so she too could be healed. But her skin remained free of all infection. The gods were not listening. I grew convinced that Ngaremba had involved herself in things that were better left alone and that as a result of her meddling, huge gaping holes were opening up in the ground beneath my feet. I had to be careful not to fall in.

The hours I devoted to working as Ngaremba's apprentice brought me little happiness, but they did allow me to live for a few hours in a world that was not full of her anxiety, desires and secrets. I did not understand these parts of her and they would have been difficult for me to grasp had I lived to be a hundred and seven. I only wanted to feel my own present, my own reality – upper and lowercase *Y's*, *W's* and *I's*, the beauty of the letters that constituted my name S A Ĭ D A = Saïda, $9 + 10 = 19$, these things brought me such joy that it was as though all the smiles of all the little girls in all the world were written on my face. Because of the hardships that Ngaremba and the mother-students suffered – “I can't come tomorrow, there's no one to watch the children” or “my husband is too jealous, he doesn't want me to study anymore” – I began to appreciate the

advantages of having remained as pure as I was the day I left my mother's belly. Even Mademoiselle Julie, who had often witnessed me devouring the pages of a book or muttering the rules of mathematics and grammar under my breath must have suspected that I was a bit of an idiot, seeing me so content and innocent, sitting there with my eyes wide and my tongue hanging out of my mouth.

One day Fatima could no longer stand to see the dreamy look on my face. She took me by the hand and, as I was incapable of doing anything on my own aside from sitting and smiling, she pulled so that I was forced to lean towards her.

“You're going to have to learn to behave yourself,” she said.

Silence.

“You don't have to act like a child for people to know you're studying. It makes you look dumber than you are.”

I had no idea how to explain myself to her, so I told her the most important thing that was on my mind.

“I want to know love, Fatima.”

“Go and find it then.”

“But where?”

She looked at me intently, as if she was studying my features to paint my portrait. When she had finished, she said, “Come closer.”

I drew so close that her 'Joli Soir' perfume filled my nostrils. She grabbed my face in her hands. I could feel her eyes piercing my skin like fishhooks. My mouth opened like a fat carp gasping for air. I crossed my eyes and saw the tip of my nose, the meeting point between two opposing universes.

“Love is here,” she said, placing a finger on my temple. Her fingers moved down to my heart, “and here,” then my stomach, “and here. Love,” she concluded, “is in you.”

“I wish it was that simple,” I retorted.

“Nobody said it was simple.”

Fatima was quiet for a moment. She placed her hands flat on the desk in front of her and stayed like that for several minutes, contemplating the surface of her lacquered nails, shining like tiny mirrors.

“All of my children are girls,” she said. “About a year ago, my husband came home with a six month old baby. His son. The mother was a whore. Once she was pregnant, she wanted nothing more than to expel the child from her body and her thoughts. My husband considers this boy my child. My mother in law thinks the same. I take the boy in my arms before he even starts to cry because the piercing sound reminds me that no matter what, this boy is my husband’s heir and my children will always live in his shadow. Every day I fight these shameful thoughts. This is why I am loved and admired.”

Three days later, arriving in class, I found a white envelope sitting on my desk. On the envelope, in big clumsy letters were the words: *For Saïda*. I opened it. At the top of the page in large letters were the words: The Intimate Life of a Woman. What followed was an explanation of what goes on between your legs. It told how for centuries such things were smothered by religious morality and the bourgeoisie. The next day, another envelope, explaining how babies are conceived. The contents of another pertained to female genitalia and body heat. One night, an envelope of condoms

appeared and below, in tiny letters, the name *Sabrina*. I approached her after class, a Spanish woman in her second year of language studies.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied.

In the weeks that followed, more signatures would appear on pages underneath friendly tips. That way I would be sure to know which woman had generously offered her advice or at least have the grounds for striking up a conversation. Everyone had some experience to share. One woman’s grandmother was subjected to genital mutilation. Another to infibulation. Still another was given the ‘egg test’ every month for nineteen years until her wedding day. One woman told the story of caring for her crippled sister who had lost her virginity before marriage and had her feet broken as punishment.

Maybe they really wanted to help me. Or maybe this was their way of exorcizing the demons left behind by years of sexual harassment. Whatever their reasons, they never mocked me. They whispered, grew inquisitive and nodded their heads. Some outright giggled at my prudishness, but that didn’t stop them from wanting me to know love and took nothing away from the pleasure they felt at my timid ‘thank you’.

Strangely, as my social life improved, Ngaremba’s began to deteriorate. She stopped entertaining altogether. Her house was no longer the place where Negroes gathered and, with their mouths full of ngombo, oxtail stew, or pépé soup, discussed solutions to Africa’s misery and commented on its evolution. All of that had disappeared, dead somewhere in the past. There were no more nights out on the town, no more joyous dinner parties. Gone were the sometimes peaceful, sometimes agitated discussions on the equality of the sexes, whether to vote yes or no for free abortion, debates on the benefits

of Marxism and Leninism for the harmonious construction of modern-day societies and countless other questions that had kept them up until all hours of the night. The Negress-princess-and-dignitary, the woman capable of transforming me from the old Couscouisière that I was into a modern intellectual woman who wore mini-skirts and tight pants, was at her lowest point.

And she was losing sleep. In the middle of the night she would get up and snack on whatever was in the kitchen – strawberry cakes, honeyed brioche, round bread, crystallized sugar, icing sugar, white chocolate, black chocolate, fruit yogurt, bilberry cakes, glazed madeleines. Her bulimia overpowered her. Satiated, she would walk around the living room, pacing back and forth between the baby baobab trees, the miniature jacarandas and ancestral portraits. Sometimes I would get out of bed and watch her, wondering what kind of demon could possibly keep her pupils open, when she didn't seem to have any pupils at all. One night, I stuck my face in hers, I interrogated, implored her, threatened her, but her eyes were unresponsive and full of terror. As I backed away, my whole being trembled. I had seen the poverty of rural Africa, the bare backs, balloon bellies and the rotting teeth. I used to think that eating and making love was the meaning of Ngaremba's life. Now I saw that it was the manifestation of her despair.

One night, I surprised her.

“You can't sleep?”

“Too much on my mind.”

“But, Ngaremba, you have a beautiful home, a wonderful daughter and a man who loves you.”

“I’m fighting.”

“Who? Who are you fighting?”

“I don’t know. I’m just fighting.”

She set upon the cakes in front of her, making muffled noises like a feral dog gnawing on a bone.

“An African cannot be happy,” she said when she had finished. “Our history is millions of kilometers long and yet we cannot manage a single step towards the future.”

Despite her handsome speeches, despite the fact that she had spent hours encouraging me to read and write, had taught me to express my thoughts in basic French until I was able to employ terms just as complicated as the Negress herself, I refused to sink into her Africa full of sorrow.

“Come,” I said, motioning for her to lie down on the sofa.

I straddled her back and rubbed the palms of my hands into her knotted muscles, releasing the tension.

“We’re friends now,” I said, massaging her spine and shoulders. “ And I have more inner peace than I need. Here. I will transfer some into your veins by massaging your back. Can you feel it?”

I kneaded her neck with my bony hands and Ngaremba bowed her head in enjoyment, as the heat swept over her. I felt certain to have found the way into her heart and to illuminate her path with the purifying flame of Allah.

“From now on, you will never be alone,” I cooed. “I am with you now, whether you like it or not.”

She dozed off. I stayed there for a while, watching her chest slowly rise and fall, rise and fall. I was fascinated by the dark color of the skin on her shoulder, like the shadowy depths of eternity. I had the sudden urge to pinch her and vibrate her unique trembling note. It would be better for her stability, I told myself, if she slept next to me instead of having wild sexual experiences with Frédéric Feuchoux. Then, ashamed of my indecent thoughts, I went to my room and prayed. I was so focused on my prayers, my hands clasped together, that I didn't hear Ngaremba get up off the couch and compose a letter to Frédéric. Part of a series of letters he would not know existed until much later.

Letters from the Negress-princess-and-dignitary to Frédéric Feuchoux, winter 1993 – summer 1994:

My darling Frédéric,

I wake in the darkness of the night to see your sleeping body. I think of others who, like myself, have difficulty sleeping, insomniacs, whores, thieves, the homeless, abandoned women, women whose children have been murdered by the depraved. I watch the sun rise with its collection of memories and I ready myself for another day. At dusk my heart aches at the thought that the earth has died in some small way.

My darling Frédéric,

I think of your hands, heavy and large, yet so delicate. I think sometimes that you could catch a butterfly by the wings without causing it any pain. Yet, these hands, I am sure, are also capable of undoing the blouse of a whore without any respect or hesitation, of ripping it open, in one gesture. What a tragic contradiction. Your love weighs on me. I adore you.

My darling Frédéric,

I'm pregnant.

My darling Frédéric,

A giant baobab tree is growing inside of me. It has planted its roots in my belly, its trunk coils up the length of my spine. I feel its branches extend down my arms and legs. My veins are compressed and bursting. My senses are ready to explode. I reel through the days like a buoy adrift in the sea. It is cold this year and there is no respite. I wear my socks to bed. I hope to die in a sauna.

If it is a girl, I will have an abortion. I will walk to Africa on foot.

To you.

My darling Frédéric,

The doctor tried to convince me to keep this thing growing in my belly. How preposterous! Keep a girl? Do you know what I told him? I told him that my uterus eats little girls. Ha! Or transforms them into medusas. Then he asked me, “What about Loulouze?” I told him that Loulouze was an accident. A happy accident to be sure, but an accident nonetheless, so here’s to the happy accident! What kind of life could this baby have? The life of a house cat. The life of a bitch in heat. I imagine all of life’s miseries and tell myself that what is rotten can still smell sweet.

Your Ngaremba.

When Ngaremba had completed a letter, she ate. “To regain some strength,” she would say. She devoured slices of cake, stuffed pastries, almond croissants. As she ate, the flesh on her hips and buttocks grew thicker and expanded, it swallowed up the angles of her bones, gathered on her thighs, merged over her knees. She gained twenty pounds without caring because the eyes of passing Negroes devoured her curves. “My doudou,” Frédéric would say, mesmerized, placing a hand on each of her butt cheeks. Ngaremba would turn around, grab him by the pants and pull him into the bedroom.

One day, I surprised them doing it standing up in the kitchen. Ngaremba’s hands were gripping the edge of the sink. The tap was dripping – *drip, drop, drip, drop* – and they were doing it, violently, unabashedly, indecently, but very quietly. I didn’t know that this was possible. No one had told me, not my mother or any other woman in

Couscous. No one had told me you could do it like that. Though I found the scene vulgar, it was I who excused myself and went to my room and proceeded to test my ability to erase unwanted images from my memory.

I was concerned for my patroness and her troubles, but living with her from then on was like sharing the destiny of a person who never turns to face you. And as one can see nothing with their back turned, Ngaremba took no notice of me or my empathy. I understood what she was going through. I too had experimented with that kind of lucid agony. Once you are in it, it is impossible to experience anything other than your own emotions, naked and absolute.

One night, while we were eating, Ngaremba cupped each of her breasts and said, “I had a nice pair of these once.”

“Your breasts are still very nice, Ngaremba.”

But I could not reassure her.

“Next to go will be my hair,” she said running a hand through her disheveled mop, “Then my fingers and my toes. Pieces of me will fall like leaves carried away by the wind.” She smiled before continuing, “Time has taken everything I ever had or dreamed of having and broken my heart. Time is the most unfortunate thing in the world, Saïda.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, Madame? Look at me!”

“I’m going to be thirty-one. My land is still not developed. I have done nothing.”

“Be patient, Madame,” I said. “It will come.”

“I’m still not married.”

“But you’re not interested in marriage!”

“Do you think that Frédéric will marry me?”

“Ask him and then you’ll have your answer.”

“He wants to love freely and without constraints. The feminists, you know? Men are so messed up.”

“To each his own culture, Madame.”

“Why does life have to be like this for us Africans?”

“Like what?”

“A series. An endless series of questions. Where should we go? Tomorrow? Ha! And how exactly? Should it be small, quick blows or prolonged strikes? I mean we’re all going to become schizophrenic!”

“You shouldn’t think like that, Madame.”

“Since you’ve been in my life, Saïda, you’ve grown more and more beautiful while I...”

She’s jealous of me, I thought, but Ngaremba grabbed a hold of herself almost immediately. “You know what, Saïda, I’m glad you know how to read and write. Giving you this was a gift to my sister. Can you understand that? It’s as though you are an extension of her. I love you. In my way.”

I was so surprised by her words that I spent several minutes staring at her spine. Nowadays I like to think of it as the straight trunk of a small mango tree that will soon give fruit. I got up, went to the bathroom and came back with a comb. I ran it carefully through her hair. She was completely silent as I did this and I could see that she was enjoying it. She closed her eyes and the lines of distress that had collected around her lips softened as I ran the comb, a hundred times through her hair, caressing her scalp.

“Should I put it in a bun?” I asked.

“Please.”

“I’m not very good at buns,” I said, “But if you tell me how...”

She was moved by my kindness and forced herself to explain how it was done.

With plenty of instruction, a few minutes later her great mass of tangled hair was transformed into a sculptural crown.

“Everything will be alright, Ngaremba,” I murmured.

I turned my head so that she wouldn’t see my tears and my eyes fell on a pot of azaleas, the only witness to our little scene. The plant seemed to gesticulate in my direction, its petals opened like little arms, its green leaves covered in deep wrinkles. I grew suddenly anxious and gripped Ngaremba’s back.

“Saïda,” she moaned.

“Hush now, Ngaremba. We are not alone. Even the flowers have ears. Hush now, for the love of God.”

Chapter 13

It was the beginning of summer and the gardens of Paris were blooming with lovely things to breathe in, the leaves on the trees, lilies, rose buds of all colors, white red and yellow. In the *banlieues* – where the French drift aimlessly through life searching for ways to pay for their broken-down houses – lettuce, carrots, endives had begun to grow in the kitchen gardens. The workday was coming to an end for me and I was full of excitement. I had not felt this way since Ibrahim. I wiped the pearls of sweat from my

forehead and was putting the dish soap, scrub brush, and cleaning rag under the sink when Monsieur the ex-officer told me that I was not as efficient as I had been before.

“Before what?” I asked

“Before you started thinking about men other than me,” he said.

“I will try to apply myself better, Monsieur,” I replied.

When I left work it was five thirty and the city was bustling with activity as though it were noon. My whole body was sticky with sweat and every crevice of my body needed to be washed with a plentitude of water. Café terraces were crowded with people, sweating in the heat and rolling up the cuffs of their shorts. The Belleville Boulevard was crammed with immigrants selling and exchanging old shoes, broken watches, patched socks, pots and pans, hats, anything and everything that civilization had no further use for. I walked slowly through the throng of people and despite being run into by a stroller and knocked over by a man, I found I was smiling. I smiled at the memory of my mother and father now millions of kilometers away. I felt nostalgia for Couscous though I had moved heaven and earth to get away. My mother and father’s plan had always been to have a home and children to care for. But if my mother had never married, I wondered, would she really have accepted an entire life deprived of sex? Fifty years without love would have affected her too. It would have caused her pain. And if, in my father’s life, a woman had dared to tell him, “You will live and move among women, but not touch them,” what would he have done? He would never have accepted such a thing. And the cult of Christ, of Mohammad and even the angels, were these not official proofs that God loves the body? With every step I felt more uneasy. I had been taught that discipline and mastering the self were signs of maturity, that these virtues required

the individual to suppress their cravings. I tried to stifle my feelings, to bury them in my guts, but my secret longing washed over me. I was in the uterus of my desires. A song seeped into my soul. It was a haunting melody drawn from the flute that widows use in mourning. My spirit shook with pain and anger as I began to understand that I had been a victim of absolute faith. I continued to place one foot in front of the other, attempting to fill the gaping holes that had opened before me, when someone grabbed me by the forearm...

“If only I had a woman like you...”

“Marcel!” I said, surprised.

“Yes, it’s Marcel. Or what’s left of him.” The sun shone golden rays on his face and he squinted his eyes in order to see me. “Would it be alright...may I buy you a drink?”

We headed to Monsieur Michel’s café, to live what there was left to live. Marcel Pignon Marcel walked with his hands shoved deep in his deformed pockets. With his head bowed, he looked like a child that had been caught doing something naughty. I could only wonder why. Marcel kicked at a piece of paper on the ground and stared at the film of dust that was gradually covering his Adidas.

Monsieur Michel was behind the counter, cutting slices of lemons and limes and then placing them on the rims of glasses. “Hello, Marcel! Hey, Jojo, Ginette, look who’s here!”

Marcel’s friends averted their eyes. We made our way through the sonar chaos to sit at the very back of the café. Underneath the table, Marcel took my hand and held it. Our fingers laced together this way meant that something very serious was happening.

Serious, but good, as it made us both very happy. It was not something that we could express, it could not be described.

“You look happy, Saïda. What’s made you so happy?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re smiling at nothing?”

“I didn’t realize I was smiling.”

Then it was Marcel’s turn to laugh. We looked at each other as if lost in some great emotion. By the time we stood up to leave, I had surrendered.

We walked in the direction of his home, dragging our heels, hesitant, caught in one of those miserable moments when the spirit and the body diverge onto different paths. We walked slowly with our heads bowed and we did not speak a word.

Marcel’s house consisted of one room the size of a small attic. There were shutters on either side and a locked door at the far end. It was like the office of a stationmaster in a tiny village of three hundred. A small bed took up three quarters of the space. In a corner where the paint was peeling off the wall in strips like flower petals was a chair. Marcel asked me to take a seat. He paced across the room three times, hands behind his back, and crushed the butt of his cigarette into an empty tin can that had once held green beans. He stubbed it out so violently that I began to doubt the trust I had placed in him. I squirmed in my chair, shifting from one butt cheek to the other.

“It’s been ten years...” he began, blushing.

“It’s okay.” I said, cutting him off.

“What I mean is...”

“I don’t want to know,” I told him.

Marcel was gentle, careful. He approached me like a wild animal. He spent several minutes trying to kiss me and when our lips brushed against each other, his eyes opened wide, ready for my disgust.

“It’s okay,” I told him.

I ran my fingers over his head, playing with the hairs that had begun to spring up like ears of wheat. Then, slowly, I undid the buttons of his shirt. His belt fell to the floor and made a metal clinking sound. Outside, the wind rose, the footsteps of passers-by slapped against the tarmac, the sound of screeching tires disappeared down the street and around the bend, and I discovered the body of Marcel Pignon Marcel. I discovered the bend of his wrist, the inside of his elbow, the indentation between his clavicles, the stubbly hairs of his beard and the hairs that grew under his clothes, all over his body.

Ibrahim surfaced in my mind from out of nowhere. He must, I thought, have come to help me with this next step. My body shook from top to bottom with the same willing submission to this natural need as it would to the act of eating, drinking or sleeping. I released the pent up passion of the thirty years that I had lost and then some. In that one moment I made up for all that I had missed: everything from sex in silk to sex in cow dung, the holy and unholy, sweet love worthy of the mosque’s blessing, and aggressive, illegal, outlawed fornication. It was all the same in the end, whether in Couscous or Paris, life is life: an eternal cycle of renewal.

After, our faces were frozen in smiles and our cheeks were raw from rubbing against one another. There was nothing else for me to do but close my eyes.

“Are you thirsty, darling?” he asked.

“I’m alright, thank you.”

I got dressed and gave Marcel a long kiss to make up for my abrupt departure. It was time for me to tell my patroness that the prophecy had come true. I was going to lose myself, either in Marcel's room or at least far enough away that she and her dark thoughts could no longer place my equilibrium in danger. I was a new woman. I wanted desperately to run into someone I knew, to stop anyone or anything at all, a cat, a dog, and tell them I was in love. That I had traveled through this life for the sole purpose of meeting Marcel. Like someone who had been buried alive and dug up, I was in shock, everywhere all at once. Everything was new. I observed the new me. Sad little Saïda had disappeared. The bad spells I had been powerless against had vanished. Like all Africans, I had carried a piece of that continent with me, a piece I needed to forget. Slavery? Over! Colonization? Abolished! Neo-colonization? Done! Shame and misery were like coats in a closet, to be shook off and hung up. History was coming to an end. I looked at the steeples of the Notre-Dame-de-Lorette cathedral, the bronze and black doorways of the Compagnie Française d'Assurances. I was strong. I had no children and no husband yet, but I was indestructible. It was the end of an epidemic. The dead were buried and I was one of the few remaining survivors who throw their hats in the air at the joy of having been spared. I was resurrected and all the happiness in the world lay before me.

It was nine o'clock at night when I turned down the rue de Tourtille and walked straight into a crowd of squawking Negroes. They moved as one entity, as though their legs had been tied together. Like a hand, the sun washed their dirty faces as they hollered up at the sky.

“Don't do it!”

“Come down from there!”

“Don’t give up!”

A tall Black man, whose shoulders were so twisted he resembled a vulture with a pair of broken wings, said, “It’s all for show. She loves the attention, that’s all. Stop embarrassing yourself and come down from there!”

Another Black man wearing a djudjukalaba mask, a pink boubou and a pair of stilts, began to strum a guitar and sing:

If there were no women

What would become of us poor mortals...

The concierge, running from left to right as though she couldn’t remember which errand she had to run, lifted her arms toward the sky, “Why couldn’t she just kill herself somewhere else?” she moaned.

“Who’s dead?” I asked.

“See for yourself!”

I looked up. My ears tore apart. Ngaremba was perched on the edge of a windowsill. She had wrapped a translucent blue veil around her body that left nothing to the imagination. A crown of orange tree flowers circled her head of stringy hair. Her big white teeth were bared in a smile as she peered down at the skulls of her clients. She was not sad. Not even a little. Her gold jewelry – all of it fake – quivered around her ankles and wrists. I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. The sun covered my mouth, ran up my nose and into my eyes. “Don’t do it!” I yelled, goose bumps crawling up my arms and legs, “I love you!” But my voice was lost in the noise of the crowd.

From nearby windows, French neighbors who had been watching the growing spectacle and taking it for some Negro celebration, came down to join in the fun. An obese Negress, dressed in a huge flowered boubou arrived with a poster that read SUICIDE IS A MORTAL SIN, which she shook as she scanned the crowd, screaming, “No! No!”

A group of day care children passed by, “Will she really jump?” one of them asked.

“Who knows,” their teacher said. “Come along now, hurry up.”

Meanwhile, the Negro on stilts continued to sing and strum his guitar.

Do not rise up into the clear

Bright waters above us all

I am too small to catch you

Should you fall

“Why?” I asked. “Why is she doing this?”

The concierge shrugged her shoulders. “She says she left a letter. She locked herself in real good. She could have done it somewhere else. I hate dead bodies.”

I looked at her prunish face and its millions of wrinkles. I was surprised that she could detest corpses to such an extent, seeing as she was already in an advanced state of decomposition herself. I will never understand why Whites are always so afraid of death, while Negroes toy with it, like children playing with dolls. Maybe the why isn’t even important. Maybe it doesn’t matter at all.

The voice of the Negro singer was suddenly drowned out by the arrival of screeching sirens. The entire gaggle turned their ears towards the direction of the noise. We stayed that way for several seconds, absorbed by the sound of the fire truck's arrival. The second the crowd turned back around, Ngaremba's body fell from above like a five-pointed star. It spun in the sky and then smashed into the dust.

Frédéric appeared beside me, desperate and full of grief. "She should have told me she wanted to get married. I would have married her. I'm not an asshole!" The crowd simply listened. No one interrupted him. From a corner nearby, Loulouze began to moan, "Maman! I want maman!" I had gone numb. I could not pity myself. No good would come of opening my eyes and ears to the scene before me. It was a scene of lost horrors. That is all.

Frédéric began to speak of all the kindness he had shown Ngaremba, and of his proper and lawful qualities as her lover, as a stepfather, as a husband. He blubbered, scratched his skin raw, grabbed his foppish hair in his hands and tore at it. After a few minutes of rumination, the crowd of Negroes became immersed in his grief, "It's not your fault, Monsieur Frédéric," they cooed. The firemen, cleaning what was left to clean, agreed, "She was in too much of a rush for marriage and that's all there is to it."

I took Loulouze in my arms and brought her back up to the apartment.

I told stories to distract her from the sadness. I taught her how to play *pousse-qui-vise*, *cailloux lance-main* and *cochon pendu*. When games were not enough, and ceased to wipe the scars of grief from her face, I brought out all her old toys from when she was young. I waved a Barbie doll in front of her face, "Cuddle the baby, Loulouze." I put the doll in her arms, "Give her a hug, little one." To this scene I added the songs and

melodies that had been sung to me, years ago, in Couscous. I sang cheerful songs and even some naughty rhymes. When her suffering seemed to be at its worst, I sang *sassa-modé sassa ma pororo*. She was too overcome to speak. She stuffed a hand in her mouth as if to smother her grief on its way out. I felt the urge to keep her, to inherit her as if she were my daughter.

“I’m here, Loulouze. I will be your mother now, if you’ll have me.”

She bowed her head and cried softly. I wrapped my arms around her. I knew I couldn’t take away the pain, but I tried anyway. “You will always have a home with me,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too, maman.”

I shivered at her words and for a moment, it was as though I had torn Ngaremba’s destiny from her shoulders and draped it over my own. I squeezed her tighter and all the maternal love that had laid dormant inside me the last thirty years burst from my pores in a poetic eruption. I cradled her. I praised her beauty and her intelligence. I smiled a million smiles and sang her lullabies. I was so happy that my happiness filled me with sorrow.

The house was dark and I had almost lost my voice when I heard the doorbell ring.

“I’m coming!” I called, my voice hoarse.

At the door, stood a tall blonde man, so blond he could have been Swedish. It wasn’t hair that grew on his head, but stalks of corn. He had a nice face, fine features, and freckles. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. When he smiled dimples dented his cheeks.

“My name is Didier. The police phoned. I’m here to pick up my daughter.”

“She’s had quite a shock,” I said. “Give me a couple of days before...”

“She’ll feel better with me.”

He left me absolutely no time to react. Before I knew it, he had crossed the doorway, gone straight to her room and was gathering her things. I couldn’t move. I could only watch him. The veins in my neck were swollen and my throat was burning. I felt I was becoming ashes, dust, something primitive and from the very beginning of time. I was still singing a lullaby under my breath when I heard the buckle on the suitcase click into place. Then I shouted, “Get out of here!”

“Calm down,” he reproached me, “I know it’s hard, but try to get a hold of yourself.”

“Get out!” I screamed. My voice was hoarse and hard. Whole sentences seemed to flay the inside of my throat and tears burned my pupils. “Please, just take her and go.”

Without a word, Didier leaned over his daughter. “Come, Loulouze,” he said, “we’re going for a walk.”

His voice was tender. So tender in comparison to my ferocity, that my arms fell powerless to my sides. He grabbed a coat, draped it over his daughter and left the house.

I wanted to cry out, “Come back!” but I would have had to feel incredibly alone or invincibly strong to do such a thing. And I felt neither. I had Marcel Pignon Marcel, after all.

This book is not an autobiography. It is my struggle, as it was handed down to me from my mother and father. Because it took me much longer to believe in myself than in any god.

I have pieced my crooked life together as all immigrants do. Our worlds have been torn apart. We reconnect the pieces when and where we can.

Time has passed and I have transformed Marcel's little room. I have put a table in one corner and covered it with a white cloth. On the table I have placed a bouquet of dried flowers. This is where we receive our guests. "Your house is very pretty!" they say.

I often think of Loulouze. I wonder if she remembers our promises.

Sometimes my mind will wander towards Ngaremba, whom I miss dearly. Sitting all alone in my kitchen I think of this woman, public scribe, who had just as much right to her portion of happiness, who fought her whole life for joy, as we were taught to do as women, with our bodies, with our spirit. She had vanquished her demons. But not the desire to build a home, not the desire to develop her land and help Africa find her place in the world. But this does not justify depriving oneself of a future. Leaping from a fourth floor window in divine ecstasy. Dying with a full head of black hair. So young...do they?

One night, I had a very strange dream. Ngaremba was sitting cross-legged in a clearing and the sun was playing hide and seek in her hair. As her lips parted in a smile, orbs of fire came out. They grew like the crests of great waves and swelled until they had swallowed everything. They set fire to the clearing, burned the trees, dried out the oceans, engulfed entire mountains and reduced them to cinders. The earth exploded into a million particles that then mutated into equally as many minuscule Ngarembas. I sat up in bed,

drenched in sweat and turned on the light. Marcel rolled over in his sleep, “You can’t sleep, my darling?” he asked, in a tired voice.

“No,” I said.

He yawned, turned towards the wall and soon after his body began to expel gusts regular gusts of air. I sat for a while and eventually a feeling of tenderness washed over me.

“I loved you, Ngarembe,” I murmured. “Forgive me.”

“It’s not your fault,” her voice whispered in my ear. “I loved you too. There was nothing you could have done.”

I got up and put on my shawl. Marcel shifted, rolling over into the warmth I had left behind in the bed. Looking out the window, I saw a cloud dance across the face of the moon.

The front door closed softly behind me and I stood there, still, listening to the noise with my hands balled into fists as if they might stifle the sound.

As I walked down the stairs, step by step, I came to understand that Ngarembe was not dead. She was a woman who had been called elsewhere her entire life. Hers was a different story and it had swept her away. Slowly, I sat down on the steps. In my hands I held the lucky charm Loulouze had given me and I smiled into the darkness.

Chapter 3: Analysis

3.1 Commentary

...only this remains: the infinite enjoyment of language as it unfolds...Language is the only Wonderland; what I have been doing is knocking at the garden door
Jean-Jacques Lecercle

This thesis presents a translation that resists, in the words of Antoine Berman (1985) the wholesale acclimation and naturalization of the foreign. As such it is grounded in theories and approaches to translation that point to the translator at work in the translated text, theories that disrupt traditional notions of fidelity and homogeneity. These include Venuti's concept of "foreignizing translation" and "ethnocentric violence"; Jean-Jacques Lecercle's "remainder", which points to the non-standard and unfamiliar as unusual but comprehensible and part of what makes language alive; Phillip Lewis' "abusive fidelity"; and Horaldo de Campos' "Anthropofagia" as presented by Else Vieira, which likens the act of translation to an act of "recreation". It has been argued that "resistant" and/or "foreignizing" translation strategies often produce texts that are elitist and unintelligible, texts that contribute to the further marginalization of literature from outside the centre and amount to inaccessible intellectual exercises rather than readable works of fiction (Robinson 1997). Such texts, it is suspected, will only be read by a select group of experts interested in reading translations that require highly specialized knowledge. While it is certainly true that these are possible pitfalls of applying strategies and/or approaches described above, this thesis does not trade wholesale domestication for wholesale foreignization. This thesis demonstrates that, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues, an exception to a rule, that is to say, that which is non-standard, "...breaches the frontier

it marks. And beyond the frontier...there lies not the outer darkness of linguistic chaos, but language that is still intelligible” (23).

Translation is a process involving the transposition of meaning from one language/culture to another resulting in a struggle that is inevitable and cannot be overcome. Perfect homology between a source text and its translation is impossible, “choices must be made by the translator; there are additions and omissions in the process no matter how skilled the translator” (Tymoczko 23). Unchecked, the tendency of translation is to erase all traces of cultural difference, however, by exploring appropriate moments for “resistant” strategies one can begin to “bring readers face to face with the reality of difference, and call into question the supremacy of standard language (Bassnett, Trivedi 14). Though this translation aims to represent difference and suggest that behind the assimilative process of translation lies an autonomous text, the ultimate goal is to accomplish this without sacrificing a readable and accessible text. This is central to the translation approach.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994) draws our attention to the “in-between”; the borderline spaces that initiate new signs of identity and insurgent acts of cultural translation. National cultures, he argues, are increasingly produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities, which result in a new internationalism whose history is one of postcolonial migration, whose narrative is of cultural and political diaspora and whose poetics are of exile. The articulation of difference from a minority perspective is no longer a representation of fixed ethnic/cultural traits, but rather a continuous negotiation that aims to “authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (*Location* 3). Bhabha likens the “in-between”

designations of identity to a stairwell; the passage that the stairwell facilitates prevents identities at either end from settling into ‘primordial polarities’. In this way, he emphasizes that there is no essential way of being, that there is “overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities” (*Location 7*). Bhabha insists that the West must confront its postcolonial history as told by immigrants and refugees, because their experiences constitute a narrative now internal to Western national identity. There was a time when national traditions were the major theme of world literature, but it is the transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, the political refugees – those who are located on the frontier – that make up the geography of world literature today.

Elleke Boehmer (2006) proposes that the features of migrant fiction, stemming from a transnational – and translational – aesthetic, will inevitably produce a hotchpotch, a mosaic, a *bricolage* that is “increasingly regarded as representative, if not, iconic, of postcolonial writing in general” (215). Fiction by postcolonial women in particular, she argues, practices what Gyatri Spivak calls a ‘frontier style’ privileging cross-hatched, fragmented and choric forms, stressing the multiplicity of difference as well as the intermingling of forms derived from indigenous, nationalist and European literary traditions. To the more general postcolonial preoccupation with multiplicity, postcolonial women writers also add

the concept of women’s many-centered, constellated power, the emphasis being *at once* on the importance of diversity *and* on occupying an enabling position from which to articulate selfhood...Ex-colonial by-birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, [they work] within precincts of

the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic or regional background. (Boehmer 220-227)

Like Bhabha, Boehmer believes that postcolonial migration has led to a mass literary transplantation, transculturation and cross-fertilization that has/is fundamentally changing the nature of Western literature. Beyala's *Les honneurs perdus* is emblematic of this phenomenon. In terms of narration the novel is predominantly oral in tone and rhythm – as is the majority of Beyala's fiction. In addition, the novel resists monovocal narrative patterns and stresses the multiplicity of difference by allowing other characters to monopolize Saïda's first person narrative in order to voice their own experiences. Ngaremba's voice, for example, momentarily grabs the narrative reins as a series of letters that she has written and addressed to her boyfriend hijack the text for a good page and a half of Part Two. As has been mentioned, geographically speaking Beyala sets her novel in the 'border spaces' of Cameroon's *bidonvilles* and the *banlieues* of Paris, both of which are hotspots of today's postcolonial/transcultural reality, where cultures and traditions mix and blend, where identities are constantly shaped and reshaped. Like Bhabha, Beyala dismisses notions of 'primordial polarities' and seeks to explore how identity is subject to renegotiation in a postcolonial and transcultural world. In Part One this is demonstrated through the depiction of Cameroon's postcolonial condition in New-Bell, where cultures blend creating a hybrid and ever shifting cultural environment. In Part Two, it is represented through Saïda's struggle to negotiate her identity as an African migrant in France. For writers such as Beyala, whose fiction arises from the steps of Bhabha's stairwell, to erase the presence the 'foreign' in her work is to erase the literary significance of her fiction.

In order to translate the literature of the ‘not-quite’ or the “in-between” and avoid the assimilative tendencies of translation, the translator must go against the traditional notion of a successful translation attained through absolute “fluency”. In the past, the translator’s job has been to smooth over any stylistic or linguistic anomalies, to assure readability, maintain continuous syntax, remove unfamiliar terms which might interrupt the flow of the reading process and to fix meaning. Like magicians, translators have been in the business of smoke and mirrors; their job has been to create the illusion that the translation does not in fact exist, that it is the “original”. In order to accomplish this they must perform the greatest magic trick of all: make themselves transparent and disappear. Venuti defines fluent translation practices in the following terms:

A fluent translation is written in English that is current (“modern”) instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized (“jargonisation”), and that is standard instead of colloquial (“slangy”). Foreign words or English words and phrases imprinted by a foreign language (“pidgin”) are avoided...Fluency also depends on syntax that is not so “faithful” to the foreign text as to be “not quite idiomatic”, that unfolds continuously and easily (“breezes right along” instead of being “doughy”) to ensure semantic “precision” with some rhythmic definition, a sense of closure...(4)

The effect of wholesale transparency is that it denies the presence of the foreign privileging that which is standard in the target language. It obscures the conditions under which the original as well as the translation were created and conceals the intervention of the translator. In other words, transparency erases the very qualities that constitute literature of the “in-between” and then parades the translation as the original. For Venuti,

transparency ultimately amounts to a translative practice of “ethnocentric violence”. “Ethnocentric violence” refers to the inevitable and “forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text with a text that is intelligible to the translating-language reader” (Venuti 14). The very process of translating inevitably betrays or commits acts of “ethnocentric violence” against aspects of the original. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1990) points out, all language speakers are constrained by their language of communication, but Venuti suggests that by employing a translation strategy that prioritizes the features of the source culture, that curbs but does not claim to eliminate “ethnocentric violence”, the translator may begin to intervene in the unequal cultural exchanges that occur between those that occupy the centre and their cultural Others located on the margins. It is worth noting that the “foreign” in “resistant” translations cannot claim to be an exact representation of the “essence that resides in the foreign text...Foreignizing translation signifies the differences of the foreign text...only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the translating language” (Venuti 15).

Maria Tymoczko writes:

Many of the differences between source text and translation are inescapable, resulting from a shift from the obligatory features of one language to the obligatory features of another. Other shifts have a cultural basis; the translator must decide how to handle features of the source culture (e.g. objects, customs, historical and literary allusions) that are unfamiliar to the receiving audience...(23)

Traditionally, such features would be smoothed over in the name of transparency and replaced with words more familiar to the target language reader. This thesis argues

that the unfamiliar features of the foreign culture are essential markers of difference in *Les honneurs perdus* and to eliminate them all in the name of fluency is to engage in an unnecessary act of “ethnocentric violence”.

In the opening pages of *Les honneurs perdus* the narration winds its way through the urban streets of Douala-Ville to the crumbling outskirts of the city, finally arriving in the cramped and poverty stricken district of New-Bell.

C’est le quartier des cultures mêlées, Arabe-mohamétans et Nègres-catho-animistes, les peuples du Nord, Peuls, Foulbés, ceux du Sud, Bétis, Bassas, ceux de l’Ouest, Bamilékéés ou Bamouns...dans nos coins-prière, des tapis d’Allah cohabitent avec des christs crieux et des totems d’ancêtres. Parce que ici, on est tout et rien : musulman-animiste, chrétien-féticheur, bouddhiste-catholique et toutes ces représentation de Dieu gardent les yeux secs devant nos misères...C’était dans cette partie de la République des Camerouns réunis, cet enchevêtrement de vie, de couleurs, de bruits et d’odeurs que je suis née” (13-16).

What might appear to be a simple and descriptive passage on the part of Beyala’s narrator is indicative of the uniquely Cameroonian context at the heart of Part One. By referring to Cameroon as, ‘*la République des Camerouns réunis*’, as opposed to *la République du Cameroun*, the narrator points to the country’s divided colonial history at the hands of Germany, Britain and France, she refers to its postcolonial history under the rule of president Ahidjo and his calculated concentration of power after independence, she points to the cultural and religious diversity across the country – though perhaps most strikingly observed in urban areas such as New-Bell where cultures share such tight quarters that they become in her words, ‘everything and nothing’. It may even allude to the divide

between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon, which came about as a result of colonization. In terms of voice, it is suggestive of Beyala's gallows humor, mocking as it does, Cameroon's postcolonial condition. A translation that simply read, 'it was into this part of the United Republic of Cameroon that I was born' would locate the story geographically, but it would fail to capture the plurality of peoples, places, languages, identities and historical events that Beyala calls attention to by pluralizing Cameroon(s). Likewise, it would suffer a loss of tone, Beyala's dark humor falling by the wayside. A translation that retained the original French, which this translator was tempted to do, would certainly call the reader's attention to the fact that the cultural reality of Cameroon exists (for the most part) in a language other than English, thus pointing to cultural difference as well as the visibility of the translator, but it would run the risk of losing the significance behind the author's choice to pluralize Cameroon. Should the reader be so unfamiliar with French that they are unable to decipher that the author is emphasizing the hybridity of Cameroon's cultural condition, an entire layer of significance would be lost. The translation reads:

It is a district of mixed people and mixed cultures: Muslim-Arabs, Negro-Christian-Animists, Fulani and Foulbé people from the North, Beti and Bassa from the South, Bamiléké or Bamoun from the West... In prayer corners, Muslim prayer rugs share their sacred space with ancestral totems and carvings of Jesus on the cross, because in Couscous, we are all the same. Muslim-Animist, Christian-Fetishist, and Catholic-Buddhist alike. All God's earthly representatives look on our misery with dry eyes... It is into this part of the Republic of reunited

Cameroons, this frenzied and chaotic world of colors sounds and smells, that I was born.

The translation 'The Republic of reunited Cameroons' is suggestive of Beyala's original intent, playing as it does on the country's official title much as the original French. In this way, the translation takes into account the African context and history that is an indispensable part of the text's significance and renders it by retaining Beyala's gallows humor. This is not to say that the reader will glean the historical and cultural context that lies behind a plural Cameroon (no more so than would the French reader of the original who is unfamiliar with the cultural and historical context). But it is suggestive of the fact that a deliberate choice was made and that behind that choice lies the metatext of another culture. In addition, it interrupts the flow of the text enough to give pause, breaking with the traditional notion that transparency is the yardstick by which a successful translation ought to be measured.

As the narration weaves its way through the nooks and crannies of New-Bell – through the feeble walls of houses where termites mercilessly nibble, to the village square where garbage festers and rots in the sun all year round – Saïda's narration paints a bleak picture of the possibility for self-fulfillment in New-Bell let alone the possibility of putting food on the table. As the sun sets over the silhouettes of the street vendors and the mass of decrepit structures, the narrator peeks through the windows of her neighbors' houses and describes the women of Couscous:

Au crepuscule, nos filles de famille attachent des pagnes sur leur poitrine et, envieuses, regardent les doudous qui s'en vont tapiner (14).

When worn by women, a ‘pagne’ is a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the body from the breast area down to the ankles. The ‘pagne’ is the traditional dress of married Islamic Fulani women of Cameroon, but also exists in several different variations among Cameroon’s numerous ethnic groups. There are several potential translations here. The word ‘loincloth’ could be used, but a loincloth is typically wrapped around the loins and the ‘pagne’ in question is tied about the chest. ‘Loincloth’ would thus produce conflicting images in the mind of the reader. The words ‘cloth’, ‘wrap’ or ‘wrapper’ might be used instead, but these again, erase the presence of the foreign by replacing the unfamiliar with words that are recognizable to the Anglophone reader. Our translation is as follows:

At dusk, the good daughters of New-Bell fasten their pagne wraps above their bosoms and watch in envy from their windows as the doudous strut off to work their corners.

‘Pagne’ is retained and ‘wrap’ is tacked on afterwards to help the reader visualize what is being described: the women of New-Bell standing at their windows, tightening their traditional ‘pagnes’ about their chests and watching longingly as the local ‘doudous’, dressed much less modestly strut off into the night. This form of interlinear or in-text translation is often employed by postcolonial translators in order to clarify culture-specific terms without having to resort to footnotes or glossaries, which might further disrupt the reading process (Bandia, 2008). ‘Doudou’ is a Creole term, which appears several times throughout *Les honneurs perdus* (though this is the first) and is commonly used as an affectionate term for a young woman and/or designates a male’s companion. Using it here is indicative of Beyala’s gallows humor as the term of endearment ‘doudou’

is used to describe a prostitute. The French verb ‘tapiner’ – to prostitute – is translated as ‘to work a corner’, which is a turn of phrase well known in English. This passage is thus an example of striking a balance between resistance and fluency. The presence of the unfamiliar words ‘pagne’ and ‘doudou’ call attention to the foreign, while the turn of phrase ‘to work a corner’ is familiar and colloquial for the English speaking reader. Another possibility for in-text translation presents itself with the appearance of the neologism ‘sans-confiance’. A ‘sans-confiance’ is a cheaply made and cheaply bought plastic sandal, much like a flip flop, whose name arises from the fact that it cannot be trusted to survive much use and inspires little confidence in its wearer. The term first appears in the text as the residents of New-Bell form a procession leading to the narrator’s family hut on the evening of her birth. Roused by Saïda’s father from either work or lethargy, the Couscouisiers file between the shacks, converging on the Bénérafa’s hut to witness the birth of their son and heir. The passage reads:

Dans les sentiers, des sans-confiance rafistolés s’enfonçaient et restaient prisonniers de la boue. De temps à autre, une voix s’élevait, furibonde: «Merde, tu viens de marcher sure mes godasses et tu les as cassées!» L’homme ainsi invectivé montrait ses dents canailles: «Pardon, frère. C’est la faute des sans-confiance.» On s’arrêtait quelques secondes. A l’aide de fil de fer crochu, on essayait de fixer la cordelette arrachée des sandales. Puis on murmurait: «Ah les choses des Blancs! Ah, les choses des Blancs!» (19).

Again, there is more than one way to negotiate ‘sans-confiances’ in the translation of this paragraph. The translator could simply omit the term and put the familiar word ‘sandal’ in its place. But this would amount to erasing difference through the process of

translation, eradicating any indication that there are elements present in the text, which may fall outside the English speakers' immediate realm of understanding. It would also detract from the end of the paragraph, which implies that there is something about this particular type of sandal that is significant, that it is the butt of a running joke. The translator could also retain the term without offering any explanation, which might be considered a truly "foreignizing" translation, but could also lead to a considerable amount of confusion for the target language reader with no prior knowledge of this particular type of footwear. In the translation this paragraph reads:

Along the footpaths the Couscouisiers walked, their ragged, sans-confiance sandals sinking into the soft ground and becoming prisoners of the mud. From time to time a furious voice could be heard, yelling, "Shit! You stepped on my shoe and now it's broken!" The man on the receiving end of this abuse would bare his crooked teeth and reply, "Sorry brother, it's these stupid sans-confiance." And he would take a few moments to try and repair the broken strap with the help of some bent iron wire. Afterwards they would continue on, muttering, "Stupid Whitey shoes. Stupid stupid Whitey shoes."

By making a small addition to the text with the word 'sandal' after 'sans-confiance' the English reader is able to deduce that the sandal is of a particular type widely known in Cameroon for being cheap and impractical. The translator is also free, should the term crop up again, to use 'sans-confiance' without any additional explanation. 'Sans-confiance' may be an unfamiliar term to the reader of the English text and its presence may interrupt the reading process briefly, but the interruption is not severe enough to justify its removal as it is part of the cultural context of Cameroon.

For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, releasing the odd, the awkward, the unusual, the unfamiliar or the nonstandard in literature is something positive. He calls it the “remainder”. Lecercle writes:

The relationship of text and world is one not of absorption (the world is a text, the text is the world), but of paradox, a material mixture of word and world, which yet will allow language to belong to a different order of entities from the bodies that make up the world (225).

For Lecercle, the “remainder” is the essence of poetry and metaphor and therefore the essence of literature. Experiencing the “remainder”, he argues, is not so much to be in the realm of the unknown, as of the unpredictable, “ for we know where we are, and since, this is our language, the landscape is recognizable...”(55). The violence of language is unavoidable for Lecercle as all speakers are violently constrained in their use of language, restricted by distinct sets of social, cultural and psychological realities. And yet, he posits, we ultimately “enjoy sinning against language because the violence we impose on its structure is what makes it alive” (10). If we consider the “remainder” in terms of translation, as nonstandard and unfamiliar features of the source culture, then Lecercle’s argument can be used to support “resistant” translation strategies i.e. the presence of the foreign in the translated text. By making use of the “remainder”, the translator may emphasize cultural difference that would otherwise fall prey to the assimilative tendencies of translation. Such a translation cannot offer a direct and unmediated experience of the foreign, but it can aim to question the target culture by drawing on what is perceived as marginal, unusual, jarring or non-standard. It is emphasizing that by committing to “resistant” translation techniques, the translator does

not abandon the notion of fluency, but challenges the conventional notion of the translator's invisibility, thereby reinventing fluency in innovative ways and creating new conditions of readability (Venuti 1995).

As the procession leading to Saïda's hut on the night of her birth winds through Couscous, passing in front of Madame Kimoto's restaurant-sex-shop, the prostitutes free themselves from the hands of their 'Misters', poke their heads outside and ask in English, 'What happens?' of the Couscouisiers filing by. Here, Beyala has already released the "remainder" in her text, both for the reader of the original French text and the Anglophone reader of the translation. On a socio-cultural level, Beyala is poking fun at the fact that in this predominantly Francophone part of Cameroon – which of course is in contact with urban Anglophone communities – there is a tendency for Francophones who are not well educated, but who wish to appear sophisticated, to speak English though often grammatically incorrect. Prostitutes in *Les honneurs perdus* are represented as more worldly, but their worldliness carries a twinge of the pathetic as their imitations of European sophistication are poorly executed and only serve to reinforce their lack of education and poor economic standing. In order for the Kimoto girls' question to make grammatical 'sense' in English the pronoun 'what' must be followed by the intransitive verb 'is', finally by the noun 'happening' and punctuated by a question mark. Beyala's sentence is grammatically incorrect, nonstandard and odd, but it makes sense to the reader nonetheless, which is precisely what Lecercle argues when he states that the "remainder" does not abandon the reader in the realm of the unknowable, but of the unpredictable, creating a momentary interruption in the reading process rather than an insurmountable obstacle. It is, as he argues, the violence that we impose on the structure

of language that gives it life. In addition, if one were to alter the prostitutes' question and correct their grammar Beyala's humor and socio-cultural representation would be lost; their question indicating little else than an idle curiosity and thus losing an entire layer of significance.

Other terms found in Part One, which may be odd and unfamiliar to the receiving culture, but which have been retained in the text include certain modes of dress such as the djellaba – an Arab garment, consisting of a long, loose fitting robe, equipped with a 'cob' or hood; the boubou – a long, flowing, wide sleeved robe worn by men in West Africa; a chouchou – an elastic surrounded by fabric, much like a scrunchy; a kepi – a cap with a flat circular top and a visor/peak, formerly used as headgear by the French army; and a chéchia – a brimless Arab cap with straight sides and a tassel on top.

The foreign features of the source culture do, however, extend beyond objects, terms, neologisms etc, to include customs, traditions, gender relations and so on. As mentioned in the introduction, Cameroon is a patriarchal society, one which Beyala criticizes in grotesque and darkly comical prose. When Saïda's father and mother learn that they are expecting a child, they go to ridiculous lengths to try and assure that the child will be a boy. They rub their knees raw by kneeling and reciting incantations, Saïda's mother drinks daily decoctions of boiled henna and the couple burn candles made out of CFA francs beside the graves of the unidentified dead in the hopes that their spirits might intercede with Allah and that they be granted a son. Not only is this another example of the hybrid cultural reality of Cameroon, where traditions and religions bleed into one another – the Bénérakas are 'strict' Muslims yet they see no contradiction in making offerings to the spirits of the dead – but told as it is by Saïda's distraught and

childlike father, it pokes fun at the patriarch and the patriarchal society that gives birth to such silly endeavors.

The comedy continues to unfold as the crowd reaches the Bénérafas' hut, eagerly anticipating the birth of their son and heir. The crowd by this time consists of bony children bearing the marks of illness and malnutrition, veiled Arab women, Madame Kimoto and her garrison of prostitutes, the Black pharmacist Sallam and his wife, the soya merchant, the local carpenter and so on. In the midst of the hubbub a woman – who works as a housekeeper for the 'Whiteys' – steps forward, rotates her backside three times, asserting her superiority over the rest of the gathering and proudly lists the European delicacies (or what she believes to be European delicacies) that she would eat and the liquor she would drink if she were about to welcome a son into the world. The Couscouisiers' mouths begin to water as food of some kind is most likely on its way; it is tradition in Cameroon to mark nearly all life's transitions with some kind of ceremony often involving food and drink – including birth, the earliest of life's transitions (Mbaku 177). Should the new addition to the Bénérafa's household be male, the crowd is aware that there will be even more cause for celebration resulting in a more decadent spread. The Couscouisiers make no attempt to mask their disappointment when it is revealed that the child is female and they begin to selfishly lament the Bénérafa's terrible luck; a man from within the crowd even complains that there will be nothing but palm wine at the celebration of the baby girl's birth. To tone down the patriarchal structure into which Saïda is born – in order to create a cultural environment more familiar and comfortable to the Western reader – would irreparably diminish, if not abolish, the ironic and grotesque depictions of patriarchal figures which Beyala has so cleverly constructed; to remove the

rotation of the housekeeper's buttocks as she lists her ridiculous idea of Western culinary delicacies to the less worldly crowd of Couscouisiers would eliminate the fact that the rotation of the buttocks punctuates her rhetoric; and to alter the actions of the Bénérafas so that they adhere to a Western notion of what it means to be a 'strict' Muslim would result in the loss of an entire layer of cultural significance as Beyala takes pains to depict New-Bell as she experienced it herself – as a melting pot for religions, traditions and cultures, where polarities of identity are nothing more than a joke – any character who insists upon them is automatically surrounded by a general sense of hypocrisy and confusion, yet another level of Beyala's gallows humor. As stated earlier, it is all too clear that to erase the foreign cultural features of *Les honneurs perdus* is to erase the very significance of the novel itself.

Returning to where we left off in the translation, Saïda's father is speechless and shocked at the 'sexual transformation' of his son from male to female. His state is described as follows:

Papa resta évaporé comme fumée, et, bien avant qu'il pût sortir de son enchantement, un homme fendit la foule...(28).

The English translation transposes the passage in the following words:

My father stood there stunned, like a deer in headlights, and before he could free himself from the spell he had fallen under, a man came crashing towards him through the crowd...

In this instance it was deemed necessary to find a creative way of transposing the meaning behind "Papa resta évaporé comme fumée". What is most significant about the overall passage is the narrator's ridicule of the patriarchal figure; poking fun at the

father's devastation makes a mockery of male domination. The translator's task is therefore to replicate Beyala's humor, rather than her exact words, for the same "resistant" purpose that is present in the original. The translation may be the result of "domesticating" practice, but it also retains Saïda's humorous depiction of her father's psychological and physical state, thus producing the "resistant" purpose of the description in the original.

In his essay *The Measurement of Translation and its Effects* Philip Lewis remarks that "the real possibility of translation...points to a risk to be assumed: that of a strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match polyvancies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own" (41). Lewis, drawing from Derrida's statement, "une bonne traduction doit toujours abuser", calls for an "abusive fidelity", emphasizing that such an approach is not contradictory to the principles of conventional translation, i.e. the principles of fidelity and intelligibility, but that they remain intact, and that they are in a sense reinforced. What Lewis points to is the need for translators to come up with creative solutions to translation problems, to experiment and to be playful, in other words: to write. In so doing, Lewis' "abusive fidelity" shines a spotlight on the invisible translator; exposing his/her role as creator and writer directs our attention away from magic trick of transparency – never very convincing to begin with – and redirects it towards the magician instead.

Let us return briefly to the beginning of Part One as the narration winds its way through the streets of Douala-Ville. Our narrator states:

Il y a bien sûr Douala-ville, prise entre forêt et mer, ornée de palaces où des Nègres-blanchisés paressent sur des rocking-chairs et trouvent dans cet état leur raison d'être...(11)

It is the translation of 'Nègres-blanchisés' that is of interest here. What Saïda describes – with a considerable amount of disdain – are Africans who she considers 'wannabe' Europeans. These are Africans who have adopted the customs and the lifestyles of Europeans and have been 'whitened' by them though clearly not in a literal sense. A literal translation would indeed be something similar to 'whitened-Negroes', but this is misleading and too literal. The translation that was chosen stems from the fact that throughout *Les honneurs perdus* Saïda often creates nicknames for the characters she encounters. The residents of New-Bell – or Couscous as she calls it – are Couscouisiers, the reporter Ndongué is referred to as the news-journalist, the wealthiest man in Couscous is the big-boss, the women in her night class are called the mother-students, her patroness Ngaremba is the Negress-princess-and-dignitary, the man whose house she cleans in Belleville is the ex-officer and so on. It is not such a stretch therefore, to translate 'Nègres-blanchisés' as 'Whitey-Negroes', seeking as it does to match the 'expressive stresses of the original by creating its own'. There is indeed a caricature-like quality to the humorous ways in which characters in Part One are described, 'Whitey-Negroes' reproduces this same quality in the translation. It also creates a running joke as the housekeeper outside of the Bénérafa's hut is said to work for the 'Whiteys' and the Couscouisiers lamenting their frail sans-confiances, shake their heads and mutter, 'Stupid Whitey shoes'. In this way, the translator abuses the text by abandoning one level of fidelity for another, practicing an "abusive fidelity". The same may be said of the choice

to translate Madame Kimoto's fleet of prostitutes as 'Kimoto girls' or 'a Kimoto girl', reproducing the narrator's cynical tone and penchant for creating nicknames. In breaking with the traditions of fluency and transparency, the cloak of invisibility surrounding the translator begins to lift and the translator's role as writer, creator and "intervenant being" takes the stage.

In Part Two, Saïda has left her old life in Cameroon for new possibilities in France where, her mother tells her, "tu peux dire ce que tu veux, ce que tu penses, y aura plus personne pour te l'interdire...Liberté, ma fille! Démocratie! Plus de contraintes!" (177). Saïda transplants herself to the *banlieue* of Belleville, a working class multiethnic neighborhood on the outskirts of Paris. In Part Two the text itself becomes noticeably disjointed, the narrative less linear. The narrative continues to be oral in tone, but sequences of events read more like disconnected anecdotes, or very short stories than one continuous tale. This may be accounted for, however, if one draws an obvious parallel between the change in structure or flow of the narration and the narrator's experience as an immigrant, which is characterized by confusion, a sense of disconnect, the feeling of being "in-between" and out of sync. In the final pages of the novel Saïda states:

Ce livre n'est pas une autobiographie. C'est ma lutte, du moins celle que m'ont léguée mon père et ma mère...J'ai assemblé ma vie de travers comme tous les immigrés...notre monde à nous est désintégré et on recolle les morceaux comme on peut (403).

In this way the narration reflects the psychological state of the narrator. As Saïda breaks down and begins to think of her life as something that she experiences in ‘pieces’ so the narration itself breaks into pieces. Let us return to the beginning of Part Two, however, to further examine the translation.

Once in Belleville, a middle aged Saïda struggles to find work, is kicked out of her cousin’s apartment with whom she had arranged to stay and spends one night on the street before finding stable employment as a live-in nanny and housekeeper for Ngaremba, a Senegalese immigrant to France herself. At the encouragement of her patroness, Saïda eventually begins to attend night classes to become literate. Saïda describes her instructor, Mademoiselle Julie, a middle-aged French woman, in the following words:

...Son chemisier beige, joliment brodé, mais sans excès, avait exactement la même coupe que ceux des ladies (362).

The Anglicism ‘lady’ describes a woman who is elegant and distinguished, as in: *c’est une vraie lady* (she’s a real lady). The presence of the Anglicism in the text provides the translator with another opportunity to release the “remainder” and points to the fact that underneath the translation lies an autonomous text written in another language. The trouble lies in communicating the fact that ‘ladies’ is an Anglicism, as it will not appear to be in the English text. The English translation reads:

... her beige blouse, nicely but not excessively embroidered, was just the kind *les ladies* wore.

By placing the French definite article ‘les’ before ladies and changing the font to italics, *les ladies* indicates that some peculiarity is at work in the English text and points to the

French language that lies beneath the translation. Similarly, when Saïda and her classmates arrive one evening to find Mademoiselle Julie sitting cross-legged on the floor having pushed all the tables and chairs to the side of the room, she is described as ‘Gol, pitoyable’. Mademoiselle Julie has just sustained a beating from her Black boyfriend and though she has applied make-up for work, the bruising and scratching on her face is glaringly evident to the mother-students. To translate the adjective ‘gol’ – French slang for stupid, thick or moronic – would be to erase the foreign from the text and so it is retained. But unlike some terms already discussed, such as ‘pagne’ and ‘sans-confiance’ it does not require any in-text translation. The reader can glean from the word ‘pitiful’ and from the narrator’s tone that she is meant to appear rather foolish – as she paints the picture of Mademoiselle Julie sitting on the floor of a half-empty classroom, ushering in her immigrant students, trying to in vain to disguise her battered face with make-up. Her foolishness is further reinforced in the scene that follows, in which the well-intentioned Mademoiselle Julie invites her students to sit in a circle on the floor and share a traditional story or fable from their culture with the rest of the students. Because, she says, this is the way it is done in Africa when the villagers gather to tell stories under the baobab tree. The fact that Mademoiselle Julie is exoticising her students or ‘Othering’ them as it were, escapes her notice, but it is painfully apparent to the reader. And perhaps on some level even to her students, as the following excerpts will demonstrate.

A battered Mademoiselle Julie gets to her feet and points to an obese woman named Fête Nat’ from the Ivory Coast indicating her as the first student to begin the ‘sharing’. But instead of reciting a traditional piece of folklore as Mademoiselle Julie

requests, Fête Nat' tells the story of her name. A shortened version of her story is as follows:

Je m'appelle Fête Nat' parce que à seize ans, en revenant du marigot, le chemin de ma mère croisa celui d'un missionnaire blanc...Sa barbe rousse poussait sous son menton comme une épaisse bande de fourrure. Il y passa la main et la dévisagea. Les premières paroles qu'il lui adressa furent:

<< Cherches-tu le bien?
– Je ne sais pas où il se trouve, répondit ma mère.
– Dans le Christ. Suis-moi à la mission. >>

...Elle déposa sa calebasse par terre, en plein milieu du chemin, et suivit le missionnaire...Elle s'attendait que le Christ lui chuchote directement non seulement sa parole, mais qu'il lui indique où se trouvait le *bien*. Il demeura silencieux, et même quand elle tomba enceinte et qu'elle jeûna trois jours dans la savane...Elle attendait que le Christ lui souffle le nom de l'enfant comme l'aurait fait n'importe quelle totem. Celui-là se taisait toujours et elle espérait encore, car tous les biens de ce Dieu-là, elle les avait en permanence sous ses yeux. Je naquis le premier de l'an et c'était marqué dans le calendrier : Fête Nat'. Ma mère me donna ce nom parce que le Dieu des Blancs n'était pas immatériel comme les nôtres, mais visible. Elle m'appela ainsi parce que c'était la volonté du Christ...(371)

The fact that Fête Nat's young teenage mother misinterprets the abbreviation of Fête Nationale on the calendar square for January 1st as a material sign from Christ indicating the child's name, is yet another example of Beyala's notoriously well-honed gallows humor. But the name Fête Nat' poses a significant problem for the translator. If left in

French, the humor and the sadness of Fête Nat’s story will be lost; the Anglophone reader cannot be expected to understand the meaning of the words Fête Nationale nor their abbreviation. In order to translate the utter confusion of postcolonial Africa – which is at the heart of the story – the French must be replaced by a new name in English. ‘New Year’ was the first option that came to mind, but it runs the risk of prematurely giving away the punch line. In the French text the reader is aware that Fête Nat’ is an unusual name, but chances are the joke plays out before they realize that it is an abbreviation. The English name should succeed in doing the same. ‘Nat Hol’ was also explored as an option, but ‘Nat’ is sometimes used as a shortened form for Natasha or Natalie and furthermore, English calendars do not refer to New Year’s Day as a national holiday, nor is Nat. Hol. a standard abbreviation for National Holiday. In the end, Fête Nat’s name became ‘New Ye’. In this way the Anglophone reader is able to decipher that New Ye’ is a form of New Years, which was written on the calendar square for January 1st when Fête Nat’s mother receives her ‘sign from Christ’. In this way the translator abuses the original (in that Fête Nat’s name is changed completely) but it is an “abusive fidelity”, a creative solution designed ultimately to translate the significance of Fête Nat’s story.

When it is her turn to speak, Saïda nervously rises to her feet and surprises herself by blurting out:

“A quoi ça sert tout ce cirque, Mademoiselle?...J’ai grandi dans une civilisation orale mais je suis incapable de simuler une veillée pour la simple raison qu’ici les conditions ne sont pas réunies. Il faut un feu de bois, des vieillards et des enfants assis autour, le griot ou le jouer de nvet, mais aussi le clair lune et des étoiles dans le ciel” (374-375).

The word ‘nvet’, a traditional string instrument that is plucked, is of particular interest here (‘griot’ is now a more well known imported term, meaning story-teller, poet or bard, and is less relevant to our discussion). Rather than replace the traditional African word with a word that would be more familiar to the Western reader, which doesn’t actually exist, this thesis proposes to translate the passage as follows:

What’s the use of this circus, Mademoiselle? I was raised in an oral culture, but I can’t simulate a village gathering for the simple reason that here the conditions are not the same. There are no children and no elders sitting around a fire, no griot or nvet player, there is no clear moon and no stars in the sky.

This passage articulates Saïda’s position as one of Rushdie’s “translated peoples”. Her oral tradition is part of her culture, but it does not ‘translate’ into her host culture, because the surroundings are not the same. In other words, its home is in Africa and not in France. It remains an incontestable part of Saïda’s identity however, and is therefore a part of what positions her on Bhabha’s stairwell, on the steps “in-between”. This passage serves to illustrate the degree to which cultural translation permeates *Les honneurs perdus*.

Yet another way of positioning the translator lies in the concept of “Anthropofagia”. The term was first developed by the modernist poet Oswald de Andrade in 1928 and is today a central concept in Brazilian cultural discourse, the idea being that Brazil is a result of encounters between various cultures that have devoured one another and formed one culture, which is itself constantly in flux as it continues to consume and digest other cultures as a source of nourishment. “Anthropofagia” echoes Bhabha’s argument that monolithic categories of identity are imagined realities, as the concept is based on the transcultural/hybrid reality of culture and identity. In her article

Liberating Calibans: Readings of Anthropofagia and Haraldo de Campos' Poetics of Transcreation, Else Vieira explains that Haraldo De Campos' understanding of "Anthropofagia" or cultural cannibalism extends to translation, likening the process to a blood transfusion with the nourishment of the translator as the point of interest. For de Campos, translation is a reinvention, a project of "recreation", "transcreation", "reimagination", or "poetic reorchestration". Vieira writes, "The translation of creative texts, de Campos argues, is always recreation or parallel creation, the opposite of a literal translation...always reciprocal..."(105)

"Anthropofagia" in this sense "unsettles the primacy of origin, recast both as donor and receiver forms, and advances the role of the receiver as a giver in its own right, further pluralizing (in) fidelity" (Vieira 5). De Campos' "Anthropofagia" supports the notion of the translator as writer and creator. His concept of "Anthropofagia" thus allows us to question the traditional relationship between original (creation) and translation (copy). When one looks at the story of Fête Nat' (New Ye' in the English text) or the introduction of the playful noun "Whitey" which serves to caricaturize Europeans, the translator's role as a "recreator" and "reorchestrator" becomes evident. But let us examine another example. One evening, Saïda sits in front of the vanity mirror in Ngaremba's bathroom lamenting the signs of aging on her face. Loulouze, Ngaremba's young daughter, sits beside her, watching Saïda as she rubs her face with lotion and sprinkles it with illuminating powder to disguise her wrinkles. Saïda – pretending, the scene implies, that Loulouze is the daughter that she never had – kisses her from head to toe and then helps her into her pajamas saying,

– L'imagination comme la mémoire peuvent transformer les mensonges en vérités.

- Comme à la television alors? demandait-elle.
- Presque. Je n’ai plus mes règles. Et les médecins ont dit que j’aurais plus d’enfants.
- Elle m’embrassait sur les joues:
- J’en ai plein, moi, des règles. Je peut t’en donner (368).

The challenge here is to ensure that Loulouze’s misunderstanding of the word ‘règles’ is rendered in the translation. The word ‘règles’ in French can either mean “rules” or “period” and Loulouze has mistaken it for the former. ‘Je n’ai plus mes règles’ cannot be translated as ‘I don’t get my period anymore’ as to do so would also require Loulouze to change her response.

Our translation reads:

“Imagination,” I told her, “is like memory. It can transform lies into truths.”

“Like TV?” she asked.

“Sort of. My body doesn’t follow the rules of nature anymore. The doctors say I can’t have children.”

She kissed my cheeks and said, “I have enough rules for both of us, Saïda. I can give you some of mine if you like.”

By using ‘the rules of nature’, which implies that Saïda is referring to her menstrual cycle or menopause, “rules” is retained and Loulouze is free to misunderstand Saïda’s meaning just as she did in the original. In this way the role of the translator as a “recreator” or “reorchestrator” is visible and no longer a shadowy hand behind the translated text. The continued invisibility of the translator, Venuti argues, is partially due to the fact that translations are “defined as second-order representation[s]”; they are considered derivative, imitative, fake and potentially false copies of the original (6). Translators are expected to mask their work’s second-order status with transparency,

conjuring up the illusion of authorship so that the translation might pass for the original. But if one thinks of translation as a process by which the original text nourishes the translator with its tone, its narrative voice and idiosyncrasies – which the translator feeds on in order to inform their translation – then the translation is repositioned creation in its own right. As De Campos suggests, this cannibalistic interaction between translator and source text can be traced to a Brazilian Native belief in animism; the belief that other beings contain a strength that one wishes to combine with one's own self in order to increase vitality. The translator thus consumes the original, its context, language, structure, characters and so on, in order to produce or re-produce a powerful version/extension of it in the translation.

Our narrator arrives in France a middle-aged virgin, because of her strict adherence to the Islamic faith and the gender norms with which she was raised in Cameroon. As Part Two progresses Saïda begins to question the rigid identity that she has transported with her from Africa and looks for ways to renegotiate her concept of self as an immigrant in France. One day, returning from the ex-officer's home where she works as a housecleaner for pocket money, Saïda finds herself wandering along the Belleville Boulevard in the summer heat. The Boulevard is swarming with immigrants selling and/or exchanging pots and pans, old socks, watches, hats and so on. As Saïda stumbles through the crowd, she smiles and a wave of nostalgia for her hometown Couscous washes over her. She begins to reflect upon her father and mother, wondering if they would have been able to live the life of a virgin into middle age, if they would have made the sacrifices she was expected to make, and realizes that she has been

“victime d’une foi absolue” (393). This is a pivotal moment for our narrator. Walking through the swarming mass of Belleville’s transcultural immigrant population, Saïda has the sudden revelation that the inflexible identity that she has clung to and attempted to transplant must be seriously renegotiated. She must recreate herself in order to embrace the hybrid nature of the immigrant experience and explore her own individuality. Beyala insists that her female characters reflect the ways in which identity is subject to renegotiation, reinvention and recreation – just as the text itself must be translated, undergoing a process of re-creation and re-orchestration, so too must Saïda translate and recreate herself in France. Through transculturation Saïda becomes a ‘migrating subject’ (Boyce Davies 37). She even hears a mournful tune traditionally played by widows in Cameroon as though she is mourning the death of an ‘old self’ and ushering in the birth of a ‘new self’. Saïda’s physical migration provides her with the opportunity to reposition herself as a woman as that same day, Saïda loses her virginity to a French man, Marcel Pignon Marcel, taking a leap into the hybrid waters of the transcultural world – only moments before her patroness takes a final leap from her window ledge, unable to cope with her own conflicting experience of the ‘not-quite’ and the “in-between”. Thus *Les honneurs perdus* gives voice to the translations and migrations of which it is itself a product (Boehmer 235).

In the final pages of *les honneurs perdus*, Saïda ruminates on Ngaremba’s death saying,

Assise seule dans ma cuisine, je repense à cette femme...Elle avait vaincu tous les demons. Pas le désir de bâtir un foyer ou même celui de développer l’Afrique.

Mais ces absences justifiaient-elles que l'on se prive d'avenir et que l'on bondisse du quatrième étage dans une extase divine? (403-404)

I struggled significantly with this passage as it would seem that having committed suicide, Ngaremba succumbed to her demons rather than vanquishing them. Does Saïda refer here to Ngaremba's willingness to embrace European notions of feminism and break with those same gender norms that haunted Saïda for most of her life? What are the demons Saïda refers to exactly? It was tempting to alter this passage in some way that would reduce confusion and provide some kind of clarity for the reader. But this passage served as a final reminder of the need for an approach to translation that allows for the oddities of the source text to survive the translation process. Though the idea of leaving Saïda's statement so unclear was somewhat horrific and altering it would not erase an overtly 'foreign' element in the text, fixing its meaning would tamper with Saïda's narrative voice and a lack of clarity that was already present in the original text. As Venuti states, the tradition of transparency seeks to fix meaning and ensure semantic 'precision' and a sense of closure, while a "resistant" translation must look for opportunities to embrace the idiosyncracies of the original. The English translation thus remains vague and Saïda's meaning is unfixed.

3.2 Conclusion

In as much as the terms discussed in the preceding pages (the select few that have been chosen for discussion) disrupt syntax, call attention to linguistic anomalies and unfamiliar terms that might disrupt the flow of reading and call attention to the foreign, they can be considered “resistant” translation strategies at work in the English translation of *Les honneurs perdus*. By experimenting and exploring creative solutions the translator embraces his/her inherent role as an “intervenient being” and begins to lift the cloak of invisibility that has hidden his/her true nature for so long. Carol Maier (2007) points out that the term “intervenient” can be used as both an adjective and a noun. As “situated or occurring between different points or events and intermediary” or as “one who intervenes”. A translator is indeed suspended between two points. He/she is fundamentally a go-between. The translator of the postcolonial migrant text, with an interest in representing difference in translation through a creative “reorchestration” of the original text, has the potential to be ‘one who intervenes’ in the unequal power exchanges between those that occupy the centre and those located on the margins. Maier states:

...being intervenient, working from within language with the awareness that one is an intervention of sorts oneself, does not necessarily prevent one from altering the surface in ways that have more than ‘superficial’ impact (3).

This thesis demonstrates that “resistant/foreignizing” translation strategies are useful for translating postcolonial African migrant literature. Such narratives from the “in-between” inevitably articulate cultural difference and their translations should not fail

to recognize the linguistic and cultural differences that constitute their literary significance. The thesis has sought to curb the “ethnocentric violence” of translative practices as without them, “culture can lapse into an exclusionary or narcissistic complacency and become a fertile ground for ideological developments...that may also harden into another form of oppression” (Venuti 20). A certain degree of “violence” is inevitable as translation is by nature the replacement of linguistic and cultural difference with what is comprehensible to the target-language reader. But by adopting a strategy informed by the fact that translation is the means by which difference is perceived, preserved, projected and proscribed, this thesis has produced a translation that preserves cultural difference in the translation process (Tymoczko 1999).

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