

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

**IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO? THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRATION TO  
FRANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN NOVELS**

A Thesis in

French

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2007

UMI Number: 3266173

PREVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Literary criticism of recent novels about the theme of migration to France often fails to take into account both the reality and experiences of migrants. Worse, critics tend to minimize both the role of French imperialism and the strength of African cultures as they read these works. Their analyses raise the broad question of just how African migration literature can be interpreted to reflect the social realities which frame the action of the protagonists who are most vulnerable to France's contradictory immigration policies. Drawing on the concept of tragedy as both a genre and as a philosophical framework, I analyze four novels that convey the stories of francophone African immigrants to Europe. These are Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Bessora's *53 cm* and Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*.

The study reveals that the novels' characters, style and narrative progression indicate the authors' attempt to simultaneously articulate the suffering of poorer African migrants and appeal to the Republic to redress it. The search for a middle ground between Africa and France minimizes the Republic's pursuit of power at the cost of African lives. This result contradicts the tragic imperative that the powerful actors receive blame for the suffering of the most vulnerable members of society. The unsuccessful attempt at neutrality also reflects the paradoxical situation of Africans who use the French language to articulate the dilemmas in which the Republic is heavily implicated.

This study thus proposes a model of criticism that acknowledges the role of migrant experiences, African traditions and critics' personal inclinations in the experience of and narratives about migration to France. It complements works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and Lewis Gordon that call on intellectuals to accept their implication in pressing social issues and to situate events on a global stage. The study also emphasizes the need to include a range of social, historical and environmental factors in determining the causes of injustice. Above all, it presents reality based criticism as an alternative to literary criticism dominated by theoretical concerns that often minimize the challenges of every day life.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Penn State Department of French and Francophone Studies for patience during my journey that has culminated in this study. I am profoundly grateful to Thomas Hale for guiding me through my graduate studies and helping me navigate the different expectations and information that went into this work. I would also like to thank Christine Clark-Evans for her dedication to my professional and intellectual development for the duration of my stay at Penn State. I am grateful to Ambroise Kom, Pius Adesanmi and Jennifer Boittin for their valuable contributions and support. Pius Adesanmi has also been a wonderful ally in the social and intellectual arenas of academic life.

My heartfelt thanks go to Carol Toscano and Rebecca Bressler for their support. I appreciate their cheer as they guided me through the administrative aspects of student life and their hugs every time I passed a milestone of the doctoral program.

The Penn State Africana Research Center and the College of the Liberal Arts made a valuable contribution through a teaching release grant that enabled me to write the initial chapters of this work. The Africana Research Center also provided a summer grant that funded a trip to Paris to interview three authors. I am grateful for this financial and institutional support. I also owe my gratitude to The College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York, for the dissertation fellowship under the Center for Citizenship, Race and Ethnicity Studies that provided the boost I needed to complete this work.

I would like to thank Lewis Gordon of Temple University for his email correspondence that helped me tease out some of the moral and philosophical questions that I tackle in this work.

I am also grateful to Boubacar Boris Diop for his insight that helped me come to terms with my personal implication in the complex issues that I address.

This project was inspired by Nadjia and Dilâra, two of my students at the Université Marc Bloch in Strasbourg, France. They made the dilemmas of young Africans in France come alive for me in a dramatic way. It is their struggles and their impact on my life that I have sought to articulate in this study, and I hope I have been faithful in my pursuit of that goal. I would therefore like to dedicate this study to them.

I also dedicate this work to my parents, Wambui and Murere, for bravely handling my emotional struggles as I wrote about the joys and trials captured in this study. Their wisdom and love have always provided me with the stability and clarity with which I have faced many daunting challenges.

Above all, I would like to honor the legacy of my grandparents and of the African ancestors all over the world. This study has made me appreciate their courage, strength and resilience during the difficult times in which they lived. Because of them, we understand, endure and enjoy the challenges of life today. Praise be to Ngai, Mwene Nyaga, for the legacies, experiences and journeys which prove that to err is human and to live – not just forgive – is divine.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In October 2002, I arrived in Strasbourg to spend a year as an exchange instructor of English at the Université Marc Bloch. Having read poetry by Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, essays by Frantz Fanon and novels by authors such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Ken Bugul, I was acquainted with the alienation suffered by African intellectuals who had lived in France. However, I also knew that notable African-American figures such as Richard Wright and Josephine Baker had enjoyed considerable success in Paris, so I believed that blacks enjoyed a respectable status in France in comparison to other Western countries. My experience living as a single African woman in Europe made me realize that I had never really made a connection between academic knowledge and reality, nor had I recognized the contradiction between French attitudes towards Africans and African Americans.

What made my experience more difficult was the fact that people around me would confidently deny the contradictions that I could see, to the extent that I wondered if I was hallucinating. In order to confirm what the reality actually was, I read sociological studies about migration, but they did not articulate my internal conflict. I therefore began to look for contemporary fiction by Africans. One day, the attendant of a small bookshop recommended a book by an African living in Strasbourg. The book was Fatou Diome's first publication, *La préférence nationale*, a collection of short stories situated in both Senegal and Strasbourg. I was relieved to read an African's perspective

on the local Strasbourg places, events and mannerisms with which I was familiar. Before reading Diome's book, I had felt as if I was pulled in different directions, as if my emotions, my intellect, my history and my present were all separate from each other. Afterwards, I felt pieced back together and, better still, I confirmed that my experience was not unique.

Upon my return to the United States, I felt frustrated when reading criticism that portrayed African literature in French as a celebration of hybrid, universal identities or as evidence of improving fortunes of non-Europeans living in France. I could no longer read Calixthe Beyala's novels without being perturbed by the author's humorous rendition of sexist and racist stereotypes that I had heard them being used in real life. I was even more disturbed to read critical works that celebrated her novels as feminist. Most of all, I could not reconcile myself to the critics' use of the El Dorado myth (Cazenave 2003, Moudileno 2001) to explain why African migrants were prepared to risk their lives and the entire wealth of their families to enter France. The studies focused on the migrants' unshakable belief that France offers better economic opportunities and on the complicity of some Africans in maintaining the utopian image of France.

These views presented only one aspect of migration as I had experienced it. I had met several Africans who would have liked to return home but could not because they had not earned enough money to live on while they settled in their countries. One of these was a man from the Democratic Republic of Congo who could not attend his father's funeral because he had not saved enough money for him and his young family to resettle in Congo should he be denied a visa to return. His bitterness was accentuated by the fact that France was an important actor in the events that made his return difficult.

Having witnessed such realities and experienced the profound relief provided by literature, I wondered how one can read the novels without negating the lived experiences of Africans. Consequently, my study seeks to answer the following question: how can literary criticism read African novels in a manner that reflects the broader reality of migration to France? The evidence for my answer will come from an analysis of Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Bessora's *53 cm* and Nathalie Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*. The premise of this study is that literature needs to be analyzed in close relation to lived experience because it is one of the means by which human beings make sense of the world.

I have chosen the genre of tragedy as defined by Wole Soyinka (1976) to accomplish this task. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he argues that through tragedy, especially in its dramatic form, human beings gain an overview of their environment and of their place in it. Every element of the universe – human and non-human – is an actor that must respect the integrity of others for its own survival and that of others. Tragic suffering arises when any one element intrudes too far into the territory of another, and it is experienced by the universe rather than by human beings alone. I will argue that the suffering of African migrants with limited French schooling is a symptom of such violation of territories, for it results from the imbalanced interactions between Africa and France, and even more from France's failure to collectively accept certain historical and global realities.

To avoid making France responsible for every single event and experience of African migrants, I will draw on the concept of bad faith developed by intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1948a) and Lewis Gordon (1995a). Bad faith can be simplistically

defined as the denial of the tragic reality that human existence is, as Lewis Gordon explains, a dialectic between “the free and the unfree” (1995a 16). While all human beings have the freedom to choose how they act, their freedom and the consequences of their actions are also contextually facilitated and limited by elements beyond their control. Such elements include biological and emotional qualities, social status, historical events and the natural environmental. Bad faith occurs when we attempt to deny the complexity of our existence in order to minimize or eliminate the role that we or other actors play in influencing who we are and what we do. Gordon elaborates:

Bad faith [. . .] involves an effort to take advantage of the human condition as freedom and the human being as a being who lacks some control over the impact of others’ freedom to affect and to effect certain aspects of its various situations. In bad faith I may assert that what I “really am” transcends my situation in the world; for example, I “am” my freedom but not my gender or biography. Or I may try to take refuge in those aspects of my situation over which I seem to lack control; I can assert that I can’t help being what I am. Further, I can make an effort to be what I was or to disengage myself entirely from my past and my present by claiming to be what I will become. Each of these cases involves taking refuge in a form of being what I “really am,” as though my “real” being is as static and as complete as a stone. (17)

People usually exercise bad faith in order to deny responsibility for their choices or assume sole credit for phenomena which are contextually determined. In other words, bad faith involves the attempt to reduce complex interaction between the personal, social and environmental aspects of human existence to a single phenomenon.

Because it assesses each individual's or society's actions by their choices and their options, the concept of bad faith enables us to see how different people and institutions contribute differently to the same tragedy. All human beings have control of their choices but do not possess the same number of the options from which to choose. Gordon frames this distinction as follows: "Myself will always be my responsibility. Others can, however, share responsibility for forcing situations upon me that limit my options" (1995a 9). Bad faith is also simultaneously tragic and anti-tragic. Like tragic suffering, its manifestation is determined not only by one's actions or intentions but also the prevailing conditions. Bad faith is anti-tragic in the sense that it attempts to deny or suppress tragedy. Simply put, bad faith is the attempt to have one's cake and eat it.

It is important to note that bad faith is not a race or class specific phenomenon but an integral part of the human condition. In tragedy, everyone – from the king to the pauper – acts in bad faith if they deny responsibility for that which they can influence. Consequently, the central interest of tragedy is not who acts in bad faith but how they act in bad faith.

By reading the novels as tragedies, we are able to see that different individuals and institutions in both France and Africa manifest bad faith. The bad faith emphasized in the narratives largely stems from the French and African politicians' denial of the role that colonial history and foreign policy play in inducing and encouraging Africans to migrate. However, the writers also manifest bad faith by evading the logical conclusion that the contradictions between French Republic's ideals and actions often result from the desire to exercise control rather than from ignorance of the consequences of harsh immigration policies. The writers also criticize migrants and their families for

encouraging migration, evading or obscuring the fact that the general political atmosphere in France, from where they derive most of their readers, is also inclined to blame African societies for the troubles that migrants encounter. The writers ironically betray awareness of these implications by appealing to the readers' pity or by using satire to evoke humor.

Within the narratives, even the migrants with few economic resources and their families at home manifest bad faith because they submit themselves to the mercy of the French Republic but refuse to accept the Republic's choice not to act in their favor. A glaring and poignant example of this phenomenon is found in Etoké's *Un amour sans papiers*, in which the *sans-papiers* protestors carry out a hunger strike to prick the conscience of the French Republic but at the same time express doubt that that conscience exists.

Despite the fact that bad faith occurs across the social spectrum, tragedy reserves greater moral indignation for powerful actors such as the French and African elite than for African migrants with limited economic resources or French schooling. The indictment of the writers comes from the fact that they are spared some of the inconveniences experienced by the migrants without advanced schooling. Even when writers do suffer discrimination, they sometimes earn significant recognition for recounting their experiences. Fatou Diome's novel, for example, made the top ten on French bookseller lists for a number of weeks, and the author was part of Jacques Chirac's entourage that visited Senegal in 2005. For his novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge*, Alain Mabanckou won the Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire. Such accomplishments

usually facilitate regular travel in and out of France, a privilege that few African migrants enjoy.

In addition to tragedy and bad faith, another important concept that informs this study is that of oppression as a phenomenon that occurs at a mundane level. Gordon defines oppression as “the imposition of extraordinary circumstances of the ordinary upon individuals in the course of their effort to live ‘ordinary’ lives” (1995b 41). All human beings are born, fall in love, migrate, have families and eventually die, and immigration laws interfere with these routines. Consequently, I will argue that immigration policies are oppressive because they suppress Africans’ traditions, love relationships, identities, healing from trauma and interaction with the environment. Oppression is an act of bad faith because it seeks to control such aspects of life that are human but that transcend human willpower.

The link between oppression and the mundane explains the discrepancy between what the writers proclaim to criticize and the real-world implications of their criticism. The writers attack injustice through evocation of ideals such as human equality and feminism as well as contestable categories such as race and gender, and in so doing simplify complex situations and elide the concrete ways in which French colonial history, immigration laws and foreign policy affect people’s lives. Like the writers, critics of African literature in French tend to use these problematic categorizations as evidence of injustice, sometimes overlooking the fact that oppression does not result from categorization alone but from its distortion of reality through institutions and armed force over centuries.

Using this framework, I will argue that Africans with limited schooling or financial resources are the victims of migration, while the tragic heroes are the African elite as well as the French Republic. The African migrants with few resources seek to fulfill human needs such as love and acceptance as well as the desire to support their families financially when they run into the obstacles placed by France's presence in Africa or by immigration laws in France. Meanwhile, the African bourgeoisie offers little or ceremonial resistance because it depends on France for its moral and political influence. In addition, the French government maintains contradictory immigration and foreign policies because its primary interest is in using Africa as leverage in its goal to rival Britain and the United States as a world power. The French citizenry does not sufficiently challenge their government's actions because they inherently accept the justification of their government's actions based on racist stereotypes about a desperate continent in need of European intervention.

Rather than acknowledge these complex forces that influence migration, the narrators and characters with French schooling set themselves up as intermediaries between France and Africa by appealing to France's conscience on behalf of poorer African migrants. This gesture is evidently well-intentioned but ends up comforting the self-perception of the French Republic as a "friend" of Africa that the intellectuals challenge. The Republic is also a tragic figure because the promotion of its culture and interests in Africa inevitably confirms that its anti-immigration laws are simply ceremonial and reinforce the determination of African migrants to defy its immigration laws and border restrictions. These agents are tragic because, as Christine Clark-Evans put it, "the tragic character acts consistently as the central agent and subject who, by

neither virtue nor vice but rather some error, harms her own well-intentioned efforts” (46).

The remainder of this chapter demonstrates why tragedy as a literary genre and philosophical concept is an appropriate framework for studying African novels on this subject. It also presents an overview of literary studies on migration in African novels. The second chapter demonstrates that migration in Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* is inextricably linked to the environment, traditions and gender in Africa. The tragic heroine is the protagonist whose use of feminist and humanist ideologies hampers her appreciation of these complex realities. The third chapter proposes that Mabanckou’s *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is a tragedy of the tension between France’s colonial history and Africa’s traditions. The tragic character is the narrator who tells the story from the perspective of the victim – a young man jailed in France for cashing stolen checks – but who also makes the protagonist appear responsible for his own suffering.

Chapter four will examine the epistemological foundation of immigration policies through an analysis of Bessora’s *53 cm*. The novel successfully depicts the absurdity of French immigration laws, colonial history and anthropology. The tragic figure is the mother who tries to manipulate the French immigration institutions to enroll her daughter in school but is arrested in the end. Chapter five will demonstrate that Etoké’s novel *Un amour sans papiers* is similar to Bessora’s in placing the French-educated African at the center of the tragedy. In the novel, a young university student falls in love with an illegal migrant who is later repatriated to Africa without her knowledge. Despite her suffering, she holds onto the image of Africa as being mired in poverty and corruption while minimizing the same vices behind her experience in France. The study will conclude by

arguing that the novels on migration capture the tragedy caused by France's pursuit of ideals at the cost of human dignity while ironically affirming that dignity. They also reflect the tragedy of African writers who inadvertently or deliberately minimize their compatriots' suffering as they endorse the Republic's inflated self-image.

In the next section of this chapter, I will argue that Soyinka's perspective on tragedy is distinct because it extends the stage to the world in which we live. By contrast, scholars such as Oscar Mandel (1961), Northrop Frye (1968) and Eva Figs (1976) tend to limit tragedy to the human actors at the expense of social and environmental realities. Nevertheless, all the scholars neglect the role of oppression in subverting the performance of and participation in tragedy. The second section will tackle this gap through an analysis of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), particularly the chapter on national culture. The third section will highlight two distinct trends in modern literary criticism on migration: one which takes into places African literature in French on the world stage and the other which is largely informed by the critics' ideological leanings. The chapter concludes by pointing out the challenges that tragedy as a theoretical framework presents.

### **Literature, Tragedy and the World**

According to Soyinka, myth and literature are both tools through which human beings come to terms with the world in which they live. Myth articulates a vision of the world, while literature dramatizes myths. Through literature, the artist helps humanity position itself within the global framework. As Soyinka puts it, "the creative man is

universally involved in a subtle conspiracy, a tacit understanding that he, the uncommissioned observer, relates the plight of man, his disasters and joys, to some vague framework of observable truths and realities” (44).

Soyinka distinguishes theatre and rituals from the rest of literature by focusing on two elements: the stage and the audience. The stage extends from the theatrical platform to the world, for “[s]ound, light, motion, even smell can all be used just as validly to define space” (39). With this broad outreach of the stage, theatre becomes “one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being” (40). This stage exists because the audience is indispensable in the artistic performance, or as he puts it, “[t]he stage is created for the purpose of that communal presence which alone defines it” (43).

The “communal presence” that Soyinka refers to reflects the reality that human beings are simultaneously individual and social, and that theatre enables them to sense how individuals relate to the collective. He uses the traditional mask-drama to illustrate this dialectic:

The “spontaneous” participant within the audience does not permit himself to give vent to a bare impulse or a euphoria which might bring him out as a dissociated entity from within the choric mass. If this does happen, as of course it can, the event is an aberration which may imperil the eudaemonic goals of that representation. The interjector – whose balance of mind is regarded as being temporarily disturbed – is quietly led out and the appropriate (usually unobtrusive) spells are cast to counter the risks of the abnormal event. (39)

Social restrictions on individual participation in the performance are not tightly regulated; they are flexible to the extent that the individual can experience the spontaneous impulse without impeding the participation of the collective audience. Therefore, theatre represents a social dialectic at the global level as well as within societies.

Perhaps the most important idea that runs through Soyinka's analysis is that of the cosmic totality that dictates that all elements of the universe – from the gods, nature and other non-human agents, to humanity, societies and the individual – are equal actors in the world. Harry Garuba's exploration of "animist materialism" as "a religious consciousness of the material world" (268) provides a similar conceptualization but differs from Soyinka's perspective in that it presents human beings as the initiators of the non human actors' participation in tragedy. By contrast, Soyinka considers non-human actors as those to whom human beings must sometimes defer.

Other scholars limit the non-human actors to the gods of Greek mythology and pay little attention to the role of nature in either Greek or modern theatre. Mandel, for example, places emphasis on the protagonist at the expense of other actors in tragedy. The sections in italics are the areas that Mandel cautions are subject to controversy or debate:

A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist *who commands our earnest goodwill* is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, *of a certain seriousness and magnitude*, and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with *grave* spiritual or physical *suffering*. (88, italics in original)

Mandel presents the “given world” as a constant, yet as Soyinka indicates, the world has a momentum of its own because the non-human and human elements are constantly engaged in negotiation and conflict. The role of tragedy is in fact to reflect on the world in order to ensure that the balance between the different elements is maintained. Soyinka calls this relationship the “moral order” and cautions that it should be understood as that which guarantees the balance between human beings and the environment rather than “in any narrow sense of the ethical code which society develops to regulate the conduct of its members” (52).

The other weakness in Mandel’s definition is its central interest in the suffering of the protagonist. Unlike Mandel, Soyinka sees the protagonist’s suffering as a symptom of a universal malady, because “[a] breakdown in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunction of one man” (33).

Frye maintains a wider perspective of nature that is closer to Soyinka’s. He says that in tragedy, “we see the tragic hero disturbing a balance in nature, nature being conceived as an order stretching over the two kingdoms of the visible and the invisible, a balance which sooner or later must right itself” (209). However, he restricts the breach in the moral order to the protagonist alone, unlike Soyinka who says that sometimes even the gods contravene the moral order and human beings demand amends: “The penalties which societies exact from their deities in reparation for real or symbolic injuries are an index of the extent to which the principles of natural restitution for social disharmony may be said to govern the moral structure of society” (14-15).

Eva Figes concedes nature’s important role in tragedy, but relegates it to non-European or “primitive” societies in which people are resigned “to circumstance, [. . .]

weather, disease and death” (11). She states that the laws contravened by the tragic protagonist “are so basic as to be considered divine” (12), implying that it is human beings who determine the moral order and then legislate it as divine. This view espouses an inherent subordination of nature to human beings, which goes against Soyinka’s vision of cosmic actors.

The failure of these scholars to affirm nature’s role seems to confirm Soyinka’s thesis that Western societies have lost their sensibility to tragedy. He holds anthropology, rationality and religion responsible for this anomaly, as is evident in the allusion he makes to the New Testament:

A profound transformation has therefore taken place within the human psyche if, to hypothesise, the same homo sapiens mythologises at one period that an adventurous deity has penetrated earth, rocks and underground streams with his phallus, going right through into the outer atmosphere, and, at another period, that a new god walks on water without getting his feet wet [ . . . ] The ultimate consequence of this – in terms of man’s cosmic condition – is that the cosmos recedes further and further until, while retaining something of the grandeur of the infinite, it loses the essence of the tangible, the immediate, the appeasable. (3-4)

The essence of Soyinka’s argument is that Western epistemology has defied the basic law that each element of the universe must respect the intrinsic qualities of others. His concern is seemingly confirmed by Western scholars who advocate “eco-criticism” as a means to acknowledge the agency of the environment. In an edited volume, Lynn White Jr. notes: “Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards nature [ . . . ] We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our

slightest whim” (12). In the same volume, Christopher Manes decries the artificial silence imposed on nature by Christian and humanist ideologies, observing that animist societies “have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics an explicit social theme with us” (18). The problem with eco-criticism, however, is that it sees the welfare of nature as dependent on human goodwill rather than on man’s recognition of nature’s agency.

Soyinka’s concept of the cosmic totality is crucial to understanding African migration to France because it links human suffering to the environment. This link implies that oppression is immediately visible in the organization of space and man’s relationship to the natural, physical and even temporal space. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that the problematic relationship between France and her former colonies violates harmonious world order and that this is visible in the physical landscape.

Fanon illustrates this dynamic in the opening pages of *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961). The colonial city is divided into two unequal sections. In the colonizer’s section, day and night, the cycle of time, are contradicted by the bright lights. There also seems an obsession with cleanliness. Waste is a natural process of life, but “les poubelles regorgent toujours de restes inconnus, jamais vus, même pas rêvés” (42). The dirt of the earth is covered in asphalt, but there is still an obsessive desire to protect one’s feet: “Les pieds du colon ne sont jamais aperçus, sauf peut-être dans la mer, mais on n’est jamais assez proche d’eux” (42). The culmination of this unnatural city is in the people themselves – in a continent where the majority of people are Africans, the inhabitants of this section are all Europeans. Moreover, they are foreigners despite the years they have lived on the

continent. This foreignness, Fanon argues, is artificial: “En dépit de la domestication réussie, malgré l’appropriation le colon reste toujours un étranger” (43). Colonialism is, therefore, a contradiction with the environment because it intrudes too far into the territory of nature by contravening the natural process of domestication. It also treads too far into the territory of time by attempting to replace the past, on which domestication depends, with a perpetual present.

Kristin Ross (1995) has also drawn a link between colonialism and human interaction with the temporal space. She suggests that during the decolonization wars in areas such as Vietnam and Algeria in the years after World War II, the obsession with hygiene and modern technology became one of the alibis through which the French bourgeoisie evaded confronting the contradiction between their country’s actions abroad on one hand and their republican and humanist ideals on the other.

The French Republic’s losing battle against domestication in Africa is partly responsible for its aggrandized image that gained momentum during colonialism and that now influences migrants’ dreams of a better life. As Albert Memmi (1957) explains, the colonizer could only maintain his waning foreign identity through exhibitionism, and so he exaggerated the image of the “mother country” through elaborate military parades and costumes. The exaggerated image of the mother country was still not enough to suppress the colonizer’s awareness of the imbalance between his imagined world and the reality of the colonial world. In the same manner, the French government actively participates in maintaining its inflated image in Africa in an attempt to stem its waning influence while paradoxically passing laws to curb migration.