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Authorship, Audience, and Authenticity: Strategies of Meta-Representation in Contemporary African Arts

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Authorship, Audience, and Authenticity:
Strategies of Meta-Representation in Contemporary African Arts

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies

by

Adelaide Claudia Graham Kuehn

2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Authorship, Audience, and Authenticity: Strategies of Meta-Representation in Contemporary African Arts

by

Adelaide Claudia Graham Kuehn

Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Dominic R. Thomas, Chair

“Authorship, Audience, and Authenticity: Strategies of Meta-Representation in Contemporary African Arts” examines the ways artists, filmmakers, and authors from Cameroon, Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo represent themselves, their art, and the influence of their work within a contemporary, global network of the arts in Africa. As an interdisciplinary study at the intersection of cultural studies, film studies, art history, and literary analysis, this project draws from a broad range of contemporary media such as literature, academic essays, interviews, works of philosophy, documentary film, YouTube videos, and painting so as to understand how strategies of meta-representation are used to depict the pressures of authenticity and the process of artistic production in contemporary African works. A comparative methodology that combines multiple mediums of artistic production allows for broader discussion of the challenges of authenticity in African art. Additionally, such an
approach responds to a gap in current scholarship on African metafiction and studies that consider the techniques of meta-representation across art forms. The first chapter analyzes three novels—La Promesse des fleurs by Patrice Nganang, African Psycho by Alain Mabanckou, and Je vous souhaite la pluie by Elizabeth Tchoungui—in order to understand how these authors employ metafictional devices to depict the production, reception, and objectives of literature. The second chapter examines the films of Jean-Marie Téno, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, and various Internet and television productions to demonstrate how African filmmakers use representations of cinema in order to grapple with the future of filmmaking on the African continent. Finally, the third chapter studies paintings included in two exhibitions, Beauté Congo and Jeunes Regards Urbains II, to demonstrate how works of contemporary African art represent their own history and reception in an international art market. Looking to works of literature, art, and film that stage artistic production, I argue that representations of the arts found within African cultural productions provide the viewer or reader privileged access to the artistic process and offer a distinctive and multifaceted vision of the literary, cinematic, and artistic environments in Africa today.
The dissertation of Adelaide Claudia Graham Kuehn is approved.

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“Production at the Periphery: Literary and Artistic Resistance in Urban Cameroon”; Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Annual Conference; Riverside, CA; November 1, 2014

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“Birth, Burial and Boats: The Spiritual Significance of the Ocean in the Refugee Narrative”; 4th Annual Graduate Student Conference of the Cultural Analysis and Theory Department; Stony Brook University; October 19, 2013

“Unhappy Homes: The Crisis of Alienation and Dissatisfaction Chez Soi in Trois Femmes puissantes”; American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting; Toronto, Canada; April 6, 2013

“Reality Interrupted: Uncanny Consequences of Subjective Destabilization in Trois Femmes puissantes”. City University of New York Graduate Center Comparative Literature Conference titled “IN TRANS: Reading Between and Beyond”; New York, NY; November 9, 2012
INTRODUCTION

The Problems of Monolithic Authenticity

After my first novel, Purple Hibiscus, was published, a professor at Johns Hopkins informed me that it was not authentically African. My characters were educated and middle class. They drove cars. They were not starving. It made me wonder why I had never heard anybody speak of “authentically American” characters. Is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, with his love of money and position, any more or less authentic than John Steinbeck’s altogether dissimilar characters? Both Fitzgerald and Steinbeck are American writers, and their stories are American. I do not accept the idea of monolithic authenticity. To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African experience. – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The anecdote of highly-acclaimed writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrates how deeply ingrained stereotypes about Africa are in people, including highly educated people, and illustrates how these stereotypes lead to expectations of authenticity in works by African authors. As Adichie points out in her rhetorical question about Fitzgerald and Steinbeck, the obsession with authenticity seems particularly pernicious when it comes to African authors and their works. Her question is all the more compelling given her own trajectory, and the apparently seamless manner in which she navigates between Africa, Europe, and North America, defying at every turn attempts to circumscribe her or to enclose her in a specific geographic space, both of which function to limit her creative range and, ultimately, to foreclose her capacity to represent human experience. As Adichie demonstrates, the concept of monolithic authenticity often creeps into analysis of contemporary African literature, questioning the legitimacy of both African authors and their novels. If an author who is born in Africa—but is educated, published, and employed in Europe or the United States—writes a novel with an African protagonist that is set outside of Africa, is the novel an “African novel”? Is it an “authentically” African novel?

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2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer of novels, poem, short stories, and nonfiction essays who received a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2008 as well as numerous other prestigious literary prizes.
Opaque and superficial, perhaps, but these questions are raised repeatedly about contemporary African novels.³

With definitions of “authentic” that range from “possessing original or inherent authority” and “authoritative” to “genuine” and “trustworthy,” the concept of authenticity, in any context, is both abstract and ambiguous.⁴ The power to decide what is authentic—that is, what possesses the ill-defined quality of authenticity—makes the concept of authenticity highly problematic because it is, ultimately, a subjective value-judgment that cannot be codified.⁵ In accusing a work of literature of not being authentically African, the author of such a statement takes on the authority of deciding what is, and what is not, African literature. At a time when the writing, editing, publishing, and promotion of a book by an African author can, and often does, occur outside of the African continent, there is room for varying opinions about how to define African literature today. While numerous writers, scholars, and philosophers have expressed differing opinions of authenticity, the origins of the debate, and consequences for African authors, can all agree that the question of authenticity is inextricably tied to the production, circulation, audience, and reception of African literature, art, and film. As a result, debates about authenticity encompass many of the challenges of contemporary artistic production such as limited circulation on the African continent, reliance on foreign markets for publication and exhibition, and pressures to produce “authentic” works.

In grappling with the pressures of authenticity placed on African cultural productions, this project focuses on the ways artists, filmmakers, and authors from Cameroon, Republic of

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³ Such questions about the identity of the author and authenticity of the novel are very rarely raised regarding, for example, the “Americanness,” of a given novel.

⁴ Definitions taken from the entry “Authentic” in The Oxford English Dictionary.

⁵ As Christopher Miller explains in *Theories of Africans* (1990), anthropologists such as James Clifford and George E. Marcus have rejected simplistic versions of authenticity in favor of a model that is based on “polyvocality” (26).
Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo represent themselves, their art, and the influence of their work within a contemporary, global network of the arts in Africa. Looking to works of literature, art, and film that stage artistic production, I argue that representations of the arts found within African cultural productions provide the viewer or reader privileged access to the artistic process and offer a distinctive and multifaceted vision of the literary, cinematic, and artistic environments in Africa today. The true pressures and expectations of authenticity are revealed in these self-reflexive works of contemporary African art.

As an interdisciplinary study at the intersection of cultural studies, film studies, art history, and literary analysis, this project draws from a broad range of contemporary media such as literature, academic essays, interviews, works of philosophy, documentary film, YouTube videos, and painting so as to understand the specificities and commonalities of meta-representation within each medium. Beginning with examples of self-reflexivity in literature, known as metafiction, then moving to examples of contemporary metacinema and art that employ various self-reflexive techniques, each chapter builds upon the previous analysis in order to demonstrate how a range of cultural productions employ self-reflexive techniques. More in-depth chapter descriptions will be provided later in this introduction. At this juncture, suffice it to know that the first chapter analyses three novels—*La Promesse des fleurs* by Patrice Nganang, *African Psycho* by Alain Mabanckou, and *Je vous souhaite la pluie* by Elizabeth Tchoungui—in order to understand how authors employ metafictional devices to depict the production, reception, and objectives of literature. The second chapter examines the films of Jean-Marie Téno, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, and various Internet and television productions to demonstrate how African filmmakers use representations of cinema in order to grapple with the future of

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filmmaking on the African continent.\textsuperscript{7} Finally, the third chapter studies paintings in two art exhibitions, \textit{Beauté Congo} and \textit{Jeunes Regards Urbains II}, in order to demonstrate how works of contemporary African art represent their own history and reception in an international art market.\textsuperscript{8}

Sometimes called self-conscious or self-referential, works of art that reference themselves as works of art employ techniques of self-reflexivity and, in this study, are called meta-representations. The techniques used by a work of art to represent itself are designated by the prefix “meta” followed by the specific art form, for example, metafiction, metacinema, metapainting, metapoetry, metathtre, meta-art etc. Examples of these techniques include mise en abyme, or the representation of an artist or work of art within another work of art, or a work of art that reveals itself as art and comments on the conventions of art, to name only a few examples.\textsuperscript{9} Looking across several art forms—literature, film, and painting—this study works to understand how strategies of meta-representation are used to represent the pressures of authenticity and the process of artistic production in contemporary African works. A comparative methodology that combines multiple mediums of artistic production allows for broader discussions of the challenges of authenticity in African art as well as responds to a void in current scholarship on African metafiction and studies that consider the techniques of meta-representation across art forms. This project therefore draws from and builds on scholarship that examines contemporary African authorship, the consumption and circulation of contemporary

\textsuperscript{7}Films in the second chapter include Jean-Marie Téno’s \textit{Afrique, je te plumerai} (1992) and \textit{Lieux Saints} (2009) and Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s \textit{Le Complot d’Aristote} (1996) and \textit{Le Président} (2013).

\textsuperscript{8}The exhibitions discussed in chapter three include \textit{Beauté Congo—1926-2015—Congo Kitoko} at Fondation Cartier which ran from July 11\textsuperscript{th} to November 15\textsuperscript{th} 2015 in Paris, France and \textit{Jeunes Regards Urbains II} at espace doual’art which ran from March 28 to May 2, 2015 in Douala, Cameroon.

African arts, and studies of meta-representation in the arts. Edited scholarly volumes such as *Francophone Sub-Saharan African Literature in Global Contexts* by Dominic Thomas and Alain Mabanckou and *Francophone Afropean Literatures* by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas both provide a foundation for ways of understanding how globalization, migration, and transnational networks not only impact contemporary literary production but also expand the parameters of francophone literature. In turn, other works have focused on the consequences of marketing in the literary realm, such as *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* by Graham Huggan and *Packaging Post/coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World* by Richard Watts, in order to demonstrate ways in which literary texts are manipulated to fulfill expectations of European readership, a topic that reappears throughout many of the works discussed in this project. Overall, these scholarly works serve to establish the realities of African cultural production to which the works of literature, film, and art in this project respond.

The evolution of how metafictional devices have been analyzed in literature is further elaborated in the first chapter. One of the first scholars to identify and find significance in the metafictional techniques of African literature was Evan Mwangi in *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*. My own analysis of metacinema and meta-art draws from works that discuss the techniques generally, often in European contexts, but endeavor to offer insights into how meta-representational strategies function in the mediums of film and art. The

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film analysis builds upon the work of Lisa Konrath in *Metafilm: Forms and Functions of Self-reflexivity in Postmodern Film* by expanding her study of metacinema to African documentary and feature films. In the realm of meta-representation in visual arts, I look to a corpus of scholarship that analyzes self-portraiture such as *Portraiture* by Shearer West and *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World* by Jean Borgatti and Richard Brilliant. Considered together, these texts lay the foundation for the analysis of meta-representation and provide insights into the significance of particular self-reflexive techniques in diverse works of art.

In putting the texts of African writers, scholars, and philosophers in conversation with each other, the following introduction to the problems of authenticity presents the origins and arguments of debates surrounding authenticity in African cultural productions. Writers of African fiction, who also write about the position, status, and process of the African author, provide invaluable insights into the experience of writing and the politics of publication, circulation, and reception. Essays and articles by Alain Mabanckou, Patrice Nganang, and Abdourahman A. Waberi, among others, that deal with the question of authorship, serve as a gateway to understanding how writers conceive of the problems of authenticity and the solutions they envision to these problems. In the above-mentioned examples, these are “creators” of African literature but also, thanks to the university appointments all three of them hold in American universities, also theorists. The insights they have are therefore especially useful in the broader consideration of the “meta” and how this is conceptualized in this study. In many ways,

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these more recent interventions are an extension of conversations and debates that began over half a century ago in influential journals such as *Présence africaine* and most notably in 1956 at the Sorbonne where the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers was held.\textsuperscript{15}

**African Authenticity: Issues of Geography, Language, and Publication**

In the field of African literature, questions of authenticity probe the limits of “Africanness” and search for boundaries of what is “truly African.”\textsuperscript{16} Beginning in the 1960s, scholars from the continent began to question the legitimacy of African literature written in European languages. In the period immediately following independence, writers and scholars in Africa struggled to negotiate linguistic landscapes that had been fundamentally and irreparably transformed by colonialism. Some believed the continued use of hegemonic European languages would result in alienation from African cultures while others argued for the continued utility of these languages to unite people throughout Africa. The origins of the debate surrounding how to define African literature and who qualifies as an African writer can be traced to a conference held in Uganda, in June 1962 at Makerere University, entitled “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression.”\textsuperscript{17} Attended by all the most influential African writers and scholars of the time, the conference did not produce consensus about how to define African literature and instead led to divisions in the field.\textsuperscript{18} The following year Nigerian activist, politician, and scholar

\textsuperscript{15} The purpose of the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in 1956 was to address issues of colonialism, Négritude, and the legacy of slavery.

\textsuperscript{16} The work of Allen F. Roberts in the article “Is ‘Africa’ Obsolete?” published in *African Arts* (2000), problematizes the ideas that constitute “Africa” and “Africanness” and demonstrates that the concept of “African authenticity” relies upon false ideas of stasis and containment that have never existed on the continent.

\textsuperscript{17} For a thorough background of the debate in the Anglophone context, see Pamela J. Olübùnmi Smith, and Daniel P. Kunene, eds. *Tongue and Mother Tongue: African Literature and the Perpetual Quest for Identity* (Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{18} Conference attendees included Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Robert Serumaga, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, and Rajat Neogy. The purpose of the conference was to address the issue of how the legacy of colonialism would impact language use in African literature.
Obi Wali published the essay “The Dead End of African Literature,” declaring that literature written in European languages did not qualify as African literature because it was bound to the “idiom and traditions of a foreign culture.” Writers began taking sides in the polemic: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o sided with Obi Wali in condemning the use of English while Chinua Achebe, later joined by Wole Soyinka, defended the use of European languages because it overcame linguistic barriers and allowed for international circulation of literature. This debate, originating within the Anglophone context, still resonates within the francophone context as demonstrated in the continued criticism of African authors who write in French, debates between Alain Mabanckou and Patrice Nganang, and the pioneering publication of Boubacar Boris Diop’s novel Doomì Golo, written in Wolof. While initially centered on language use and, by extension, the location of publication, debates about authenticity now also call into question the location from which a writer produces his or her work.

Contemporary debates around African literature still evoke many of the same arguments about authenticity brought forth in the 1960s while also addressing the present literary factors that influence those who seek to define the “Africanness” of writers and their works. Novelists Alain Mabanckou and Patrice Nganang have both written extensively about their experiences as African writers as well as how questions of authenticity impact francophone African writers more broadly. It is critical to note that Nganang, Mabanckou, and recently Achille Mbembe, have a complicated and rather unpleasant relationship with each other. Heated academic exchanges between Nganang and Mabanckou can be traced back as early as 2005 when Nganang

20 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o began his career publishing in English but now writes exclusively in Gikuyu and is the founder and editor of a Gikuyu-language journal.
published an article entitled “Écrire sans la France” in which he argues for writing literature in African languages and abandoning what he calls “neocolonial ideologies.” Mabanckou responded to Nganang with an article entitled “Écrire sans la France : l’écrivain d’Afrique noire francophone et la langue française,” challenging the practicality and hypocrisy of Nganang’s proposal. Nganang later critiqued Mabanckou’s novels, both the subject matter and style, in his two works Manifeste d’une nouvelle litterature africaine: pour une écriture préemptive (2007) and La république de l'imagination: lettres au benjamin (2009). Mabanckou subsequently responded to Nganang in Le sanglot de l'homme noir (2012). The specific details of this literary conversation will be further elaborated later in this introduction. Up until this point, the exchanges between Nganang and Mabanckou occurred within published writing and while unflattering, were not unprofessional. But in 2015, Nganang’s criticism took a dramatic shift from scholarly critique to personal attack. Nganang, believing that Achille Mbembe sabotaged his opportunity for promotion at Stony Brook University, took to Facebook to accuse Mbembe of sexual misconduct with students at several different universities where he has taught over the years. Nganang made this extremely serious allegation without providing specific details or evidence to support his claim. Mbembe did not immediately respond but eventually filed a formal complaint with Stony Brook University and sued Nganang for defamation in the State of New York. Since then, Nganang has also accused Mabanckou of repeated plagiarism and dishonesty, again using social media outlets to post his accusations. I summarize these exchanges not to disseminate gossip but rather to illustrate that the world of francophone African literature and scholarship remains a relatively small one in which competitive personalities and complicated relationships do exist. While this study focuses exclusively on the scholarship of
these three writers, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge their interactions outside of the
texts.

By looking to the articles and essays of Alain Mabanckou and Patrice Nganang, as well as the work of other writers such as Abdourahman A. Waberi, and theorists such as Achille Mbembe, it is possible to begin understanding how expectations of authenticity impact the contemporary African author. The following analysis begins with two works by Alain Mabanckou, arguably the most important voice in this debate today, and subsequently presents Patrice Nganang’s counterpoints. These two writers are of particular importance in this project because their literary work is also featured in the first chapter. The work of Abdourahman A. Waberi and Achille Mbembe adds additional perspectives on the international trajectories of contemporary African writers and the impact of this mobility on how their work is received. As the following analysis demonstrates, Mabanckou, Nganang, Waberi, and Mbembe have differing opinions and expectations of the African writer and his or her relationship to the continent of their birth, thus each writer approaches the origins and future of African literature from a distinctive perspective.

Over the past decade, Alain Mabanckou has written numerous essays and articles about the pressures, challenges, and expectations of the francophone African writer both in France and in international literary scenes. What unifies Mabanckou’s writings on topics such as the French publishing industry, the use of the French language in African literature, and the category of ‘la

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22 Mbembe, and V. Y. Mudimbe who is mentioned later in the introduction, are first and foremost African scholars, as opposed to Mabanckou and Waberi, who are primarily writers but also comment on writing. Nganang is harder to place as either writer or scholar because he writes both novels and works of criticism yet, it is worth noting, his fictional works have received more critical attention than his scholarly production.

23 If it were not already the case, Alain Mabanckou’s appointment at the college de France and his meeting with President François Hollande in 2015 solidified his status among the most well-known and influential contemporary authors of African origins publishing today.
francophonie,’ is his forward looking approach that consistently finds sources of agency and empowerment in situations fraught with inequity. Mabanckou resists discourses of victimization and instead celebrates the possibilities and opportunities of living in a globalized world. Given Mabanckou’s perspective on authorship in the 21st century, it should not be surprising that he rejects the demands of authenticity and tactfully points to the hypocrisies of African authors who take the opposing stance.

Examining excerpts from *Le sanglot de l’homme noir* and an article entitled “Immigration, ‘Littérature-Monde’, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer,” the following analysis presents Mabanckou’s stance on authenticity, and the issues that entangle it, while also putting his writing into conversation with other contemporary authors and scholars. The title of Mabanckou’s 2012 work *Le sanglot de l’homme noir* is an intertextual reference to Pascal Bruckner’s *Le Sanglot de l’homme blanc* (1983), in which the author argues that the political left of the west has a highly sentimental view of the “Third World” resulting in widespread self-hatred and guilt. Referencing Bruckner’s title with overt irony, Mabanckou addresses fellow “Third World” authors who take issue with the classificatory title ‘la francophonie’ and lament the dominance of the French publishing industry in Africa. Mabanckou uses metaphors of eating and digestion to gesture at the hypocrisy of authors who reject ‘la francophonie’ yet directly benefit from it:

> il est délicat de blâmer une situation dont on tire profit soi-même. A moins de pratiquer une ‘littérature à l’estomac’, celle qui consiste à brouter avant de critiquer, une fois que son ventre est plein—et en attendant la prochaine fringale ! On constate en effet que la plupart des moralisateurs, y compris ceux ‘du dedans’, tirent d’appréciables dividendes de la francophonie. Ils sont présents dans les
salons et rencontres littéraires francophones, ils sollicitent souvent diverses
bourses ou résidences d’écriture en Europe, aux frais des institutions françaises.
Certains d’entre eux, après une expérience malheureuse dans une maison
d’édition africaine, se lancent à la conquête des éditeurs parisiens.\textsuperscript{24}
The metaphor of eating, and becoming full, places the writer in a position of benefiting from the
relationship with French publishers, rather than of being exploited and manipulated as other
writers have characterized it. The relationship between African writers and French publishers is
in fact a major polemic in francophone literature and has been an issue hotly debated since 2007,
when \textit{Le Monde} published a manifesto titled, “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” which
was coauthored and signed by 44 prominent writers.\textsuperscript{25} This manifesto declares the end of
francophone literature and “la naissance d'une littérature-monde en français.” Proclaiming “le
centre…est désormais partout, aux quatre coins du monde,” this manifesto calls for the breaking
down of boundaries, hierarchies, and categorical designations which divide literary production
written in the French language. Following its publication in 2007, special journal issues,
international conferences, several books, and numerous articles have been devoted to the debate
of “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français”;\textsuperscript{26} very generally, scholars in these debates ask the
following question: does embracing transnationalism allow for a break from the postcolonial
definitions of literature and the hierarchical positioning of French and francophone literature, or
on the contrary, does the rebellious and idealistic manifesto simply reinforce the dominance of

\textsuperscript{24} Alain Mabanckou, \textit{Le Sanglot de l’homme noir} (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 144.
\textsuperscript{25} Alain Mabanckou was one of the original signatories of “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français.”
\textsuperscript{26} Examples of publications responding to the manifesto include: \textit{Transnational French Studies: 
Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde} by Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, David Murphy
(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010); Graham Huggan’s “The trouble with world literature” in \textit{A Companion to Comparative Literature} (2011): 490-506; \textit{From Francophonie to World Literature in French: Ethics, Poetics, and Politics} by Thérèse Migraine-George (Lincoln: University of Nebraska
the French publishing industry and reassert a neocolonial form of French universalism? Since the publication of the manifesto, Mabanckou has remained engaged in the debate and continues to write about a variety of issues raised in the work.\(^\text{27}\)

In *Le sanglot de l’homme noir*, Mabanckou’s portrayal of the relationship between writer and publisher is mutually beneficial; the writer not only profits from foreign publication but also often solicits it and views foreign publication more favourably than being published in Africa. Mabanckou addresses his accusation of biting the hand that feeds him to his fellow writer Patrice Nganang. Evoking “littérature de l’estomac,” the 1950 pamphlet by French writer Julien Gracq that condemned the Parisian literary scene and the culture of literary prizes, Mabanckou underlines Nganang’s hypocrisy in disparaging the French literary scene when he publishes his novels in France and accepts French literary prizes awarded to his novels.\(^\text{28}\) In *Le sanglot de l’homme noir* and later publications, Mabanckou expresses frustrations with individuals who directly benefit from the French publishing industry yet disparage its power and influence.

In the article “Immigration, ‘Littérature-Monde’, and Universality: The Strange Fate of the African Writer,” Mabanckou also tackles one of the main issues related to questions of authenticity in African writing: the location from which the author writes, generally described as either from inside or outside the continent. In particular, Mabanckou cites and challenges the following excerpt from *Anthologie africaine* by the scholar Jacques Chevrier,\(^\text{29}\)

Think of Calixthe Beyala, Daniel Biyaoula, Alain Mabanckou, Sami Tchak,


\(^{28}\) Julien Gracq is best known for his 1951 novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* and his critique of the French literary establishment throughout his career.

Bessora, or Fatou Diome, to name but a few. All of them have committed
themselves in varying degrees to live in France, at whatever cost, and mainly in
Paris or its immediate vicinity. Consequently, their discourse is off-center, out of
kilter,- for one thing, they find themselves in exile relative to an Africa that is
more and more distant and mythical, and for another they must confront everyday
life in a French society yet to get the measure of the cultural diversity which is
now part of its very warp and weft.30

Chevrier makes two assumptions in this citation, first, that works written by authors living in
Africa are somehow more authentic, more “centered” and thus, central, than those written by
African writers living in France, and secondly, he assumes that the experiences and trajectories
of the six authors he mentioned are all analogous. Chevrier’s characterization of the African
writer living “in exile” and “at any cost” in France, is one of a writer who has lost any
connection to their roots, and thus lacks authenticity. By locating the “center” of discourse for
francophone authors in Africa, Chevrier denies an author’s ability to write about a place other
than where the author is physically located.

Finding Chevrier’s claims simplistic and limiting to any writer, Mabanckou responds,
“the place of residence can hardly be the main yardstick for gauging creative writing. No one has
made this point more clear than the Francophone writer Dany Laferrière, who was born in Haiti,
but who derisively describes himself as ‘a Japanese writer.’”31 A fellow writer who actively
engages with the politics of francophonie, in essays, interviews, and his novels themselves, Dany
Laferrière is a writer of Haitian origins but who now lives and writes from Canada. While some
believe that the international movements of francophone writers distance them from their origins,

Mabanckou argues the opposite, writing “a shift in the creative world of an author improves a writer's ability to portray his original surroundings. Literature offers many striking instances of authors producing their masterpieces on alien ground.” Citing the examples of Aimé Césaire’s *Le cahier du retour au pays natal*, Victor Hugo’s *Les châtiments*, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the work of Laye Camara, he continues, “works such as these, written abroad, have served the ‘memory’ of peoples in the writers' country of origin, peoples quite well able to recognize themselves.” Mabanckou confronts the belief that a writer must live in Africa in order to write authentic works by providing examples of novels that break the inside/outside of the continent opposition that Chevrier creates. Indeed, when considering arguments about how location impacts the authenticity of African texts, it is important to maintain the perspective that since the advent of African literature written in French, the works of authors such as Ferdinand Oyono, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Amadou Kourouma, to name only a few examples, were all informed by study, work, and travel abroad.

Ultimately, Mabanckou’s article describes a double bind of authenticity that confronts the contemporary African author. On one hand, “African authors resident in Europe are widely viewed as out of touch with African reality, cut off from their African roots. Their vision of the world is said to be skewed because they are captive to the Parisian publishing system and no longer address their ‘brothers and sisters’ but rather a European readership that in effect dictates what they should write.” On the other hand, “authors living in Africa are considered the only

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34 The following works, which are by and large the best known works written by each author, all feature influences from the study, work, and travel abroad of the authors: Ferdinand Oyono’s *Une vie de boy* (1956), *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961) by Cheik Amadou Kane, and Amadou Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances* (1969).
bearers of authentic and unchanging values and ancestral traditions.”

For the francophone writer published in France, there is no way to escape these questions of authenticity. There seems to be two options: either they remain in Africa, pursue publication in Africa where they are unlikely to receive recognition or financial gain but maintain their authenticity in the eyes of the west; or, alternatively, the African writer pursues opportunities outside of the continent, for both publication and professional advancement, but their work is criticized for lack of authenticity because they left Africa. Mabanckou’s primary argument is that there is no winning at this game so it is really not worth playing. That is to say, the African author is better off rising above the unreasonable demands for authenticity because there is no possibility of satisfying them.

At the crux of the double bind of authenticity is the larger issue of how the west imagines Africa. Borrowing from the work *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* by V. Y. Mudimbe, Mabanckou writes, “Africa and Africans are the invention of a West that sees itself as a totality and creates outposts beyond its frontiers. Consequently Africa - or at any rate that Africa - does not exist, and nor does a literature orchestrating such a way of thinking.”

Through an examination of the foundations of African philosophy, Mudimbe demonstrates how the work of African intellectuals is built on western epistemological traditions as well as the ways that African scholars have responded to their position in relation to the west. In part a reflection on the role of anthropology itself, *The Invention of Africa* works to do away with the dichotomy of tradition/modernity and, in doing so, exposes the history of western constructions of African otherness. Mabanckou evokes Mudimbe’s work in order to gesture at the ways that African and European histories are far too entwined to try to separate from each other.

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The expectation that all African authors have the same relationship to Africa and that they represent the continent in an authentic way is not only unrealistic, it is highly essentializing and rooted in an imperial mentality. Faced with the reality that European readership largely expects the representation of an Africa that genuinely does not exist, the African author finds himself or herself in the uncomfortable position of trying to satisfy readers with a fantasized version of their continent. Describing this position, Mabanckou writes, “inasmuch as the typical reader of African literatures is a Westerner, how is it possible to create works in an independent manner, without truckling to demand and humoring the fantasies of what Mohamadou Kane calls a lectorat de raison - an intellectual (European) readership rather than an affective (African) one?”38 Similar to the experience described by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in the introduction to this chapter, Mabanckou expresses the way that authors are caught between the stereotypes and expectations of Africa that define western taste and their real experiences and relationships with Africa.

In the collection of essays Le Sanglot de l’homme noir, Mabanckou addresses questions of authenticity as they relate to language, specifically African authors who write in the languages of former European colonizers. The principle argument of those who want to “écrire sans la France” is that “le français serait entaché d’un vice rédhibitoire, insurmontable, inexcusable: c’est la langue du colonisateur. C’est une langue qui ne nous permettrait guère de nous exprimer avec authenticité. ‘Authenticité’ ? Encore un mot chargé de conséquences inimaginables.”39 The phrase “écrire sans la France” is the title of an article written by Patrice Nganang thus, without naming him, Mabanckou challenges the arguments of his fellow writer. In order to discredit the idea that using a European language still linked to the violence of colonialism prevents authentic

expression of the African writer, Mabanckou attacks the concept of authenticity itself when he writes,

N’est pas au nom de l’authenticité que certaines nations du continent noir ont vu leurs populations sombrer dans la déliquescence ? Dans les années soixante-dix, en effet, Mobutu Sese Seko, alors président du Zaïre, avait mis en place la ‘zaïrianisation’, une politique de retour à la ‘authenticité africaine’ dans laquelle tout se qui rappelait l’Occident devait être abandonné. Le dictateur interdit donc à son peuple de porter la cravate et imposa le costume traditionnel dit abacost comme tenue officielle. Les noms des lieux hérités de la période coloniale étaient replacés par ceux qui avaient une consonance africaine…  

Using a historical example from Zaïre, Mabanckou mocks the superficial trap of authenticity by illustrating how absurd it is to think that changing things like clothing styles and street names somehow can rehabilitate the authenticity of a culture. Questioning the ideal of authenticity itself, Mabanckou is able to expose the absurdity of thinking European languages somehow contaminate the authenticity of African authors.

While the relationship between authenticity and language has been particularly fraught in the francophone context, the circumstances for Anglophone African authors is quite different. Drawing from the Anglophone context, Mabanckou asks the following question: “Naipaul, Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Walcott, Danticat, doivent-ils être considérés ‘dans la lignée de l’idéologie coloniale’ lorsqu’ils révèlent l’étendue de leur talent d’écrivains en langue anglaise? A moins que les partisans de l’authenticité ne considèrent—par une opération relevant du sophisme—que la langue anglaise n’est pas issue d’une puissance coloniale…”

40 Mabanckou, Le Sanglot, 138.  
41 Mabanckou, Le Sanglot, 142.
makes the point that Anglophone authors are not questioned the way francophone authors are for their use of European languages in order to expose the illogical nature of arguments for linguistic authenticity.

Throughout Mabanckou’s writing on authenticity, he argues that continued concern with the location and language use of African authors is detrimental to literature and he urges that the mobility of the contemporary African author should be considered beneficial, enriching to works of literature. As he explains, “l’Afrique n’est plus seulement en Afrique. En se dispersant à travers le monde, les Africains créent d’autres aventures peut-être salutaires pour la valorisation des cultures du continent noir. Revendiquer une ‘africanité’ est une attitude fondamentaliste et intolérante.”

Mabanckou’s most recent publication, *Le monde est mon langage*, begins with a map of the world, and is structured around his travels, with each chapter named after a different city in the world, and celebrates his many voyages. Mabanckou begins the work by describing his relationship to the three locations where he has lived, “le Congo est le lieu du cordon ombilical, la France la patrie d’adoption de mes rêves, et l’Amérique un coin depuis lequel je regarde les empreintes de mon errance. Ces trois espaces géographiques sont si soudés qu’il m’arrive d’oublier dans quel continent je me couche et dans lequel j’écris mes livres.”

Travel is a way of life for Mabanckou and his work is informed, and enriched, by his mobility throughout his career.

Mabanckou is decidedly positive about the ability of the African writer to succeed, remain true to his or her experiences, and find a readership that accepts the work for what it is; while Mabanckou addresses the challenges of the African writer, he does so from an empowered position that sees the possibility for change in the future. Writer Patrice Nganang tackles many of

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42 Mabanckou, *Le Sanglot*, 159.
the same topics that Mabanckou does—circulation, publication, language use, and reception of francophone African literature—but his approach is remarkably different. Nganang writes passionately, with overtones of outrage, and frequently characterizes the position of the francophone African writer as one of a victim, unable to change his or her status. Where Mabanckou celebrates the diversity of contemporary African literature, Nganang sees it as inadequate and advocates for a renewed focus on Africa as the only productive site where an African novel can take place.

Much like Mabanckou, since the early 2000s Nganang has published several articles and essays on African literature while also publishing works of fiction. Nganang’s is critical of the French publishing industry and western literary scholars and values African novels set in Africa, written by writers living in Africa. Unlike Mabanckou, Nganang does not directly take up questions of authenticity but many of his arguments are closely related to the demands and expectations of African authors that have been discussed in relation to authenticity in this chapter. The 2004 article “Ecrire sans la France” epitomizes Nganang’s vision of the francophone writer and his or her relationship to France: “l’écrivain francophone se retrouve nollens vollens aux portes des institutions littéraires parisiennes, en train de mendier une reconnaissance qu'il sait ne pouvoir trouver ailleurs, et encore moins dans son pays d'origine.”

In his view, the writer, occupying a vulnerable and victimized position, forced “to beg” for recognition, is entirely beholden to the French publishing industry. Nganang’s writing characterizes the French publishing industry as a relentless machine that simultaneously crushes African publishers and takes advantage of African writers.

44 Although not the objective of this study, sociological analysis mapping African book publication by scholars such as Claire Ducournau are revealing when examining the diverging opinions of Mabanckou and Nganang.
Given Nganang’s cynical vision of the relationship between France and the francophone writer, it should not be surprising that he advocates for breaking the dependence on France and creating a literary culture that is indigenous to Africa. He defines his strategy, “écritre sans la France”, as follows: “retrouver la mobilité latérale de nos aïeuls et de nos aînés qui de pays en pays, de terre en terre, et surtout de langue en langue se déplaçaient, sans profession de foi préliminaire, au gré de l'interlocuteur, au gré de la terre sur laquelle se posaient leurs pieds, et avec la même dextérité s'exprimaient en medumba et en bassa autant qu'en douala: bref, ne vivaient pas la multitude de leurs langues comme une damnation.”

Calling for mobility within Africa, and fluency in African languages, Nganang idealizes a system in which France is not a “center” that draws writers away from their places of birth and French is not the only common language between people on the continent. In a move characteristic of Nganang’s writing, he calls for profound, paradigm shifting changes without acknowledging the practicalities of how they would, or could, occur.

Similarly abstract and theoretical, *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une écriture preemptive* expresses Nganang’s profound discontent with the status quo of African literature. Published in 2007, the same year as “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” Nganang’s manifesto received substantially less critical attention. The *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine* makes wide sweeping claims about the implications of the Rwandan genocide for contemporary African literature, history, and philosophy. Nganang believes the genocide caused a rupture in, and will foster a new beginning for, African philosophy. Described by several scholars as a “call to arms,” Nganang’s *Manifeste* traces the

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46 Nganang, “Ecrire.”

47 The fact that Nganang’s manifesto received limited attention while Mabanckou received significant notice for his contributions to “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français” may, in fact, be the source of conflict between the two writers.
contributions of authors such as Wole Soyinka, Aimé Césaire, Amos Tutuola, Sony Labou Tansi, Sami Tchak, and Yambo Ouologuem, however it repeatedly claims there has yet to be a literary contribution that adequately represents the African condition post-genocide; Nganang insists, “nous n’en sommes pas encore là en littérature africaine.”

Taking stabs at literary criticism that reads engagement, postmodernity, the postcolony, créolité, and globalization into African texts, Nganang asks, “au fond est-il possible de lire la littérature africaine, moins à partir de son inscription mimétique dans les réalités du continent, les géographies nationales, ou la conscience de ses lecteurs vrais ou potentiels, qu’à partir de son enracinement dans la vérité?”

Nganang’s response to the genocide is to advocate for a “new African literature” founded in “la vérité.” Nganang argues for an “écriture préemptive” which he defines as contemporary African literature that expresses the “tragedy” of the African continent while simultaneously preventing such a catastrophic event from occurring again in the future; he locates this “dissident literature” in novels set in the “chaos” of urban Africa, focused on the quotidian experience of “la rue,” the site of a new, or renewed, African subjectivity.

Nganang recognizes the analysis of engagement as a tired method of reading African literature, yet his own work has a complicated relationship with the literary tradition. At the most basic level, “un écrivain engagé” is an author who takes a political, social, religious or esthetic position, and “un roman engagé” is the resulting work that reflects this position.

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50 Nganang, Manifeste, 11.
51 For a thorough background on this literary tradition, see Kenneth Harrow, Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007) and Emmanuel Bouju, ed. L’engagement littéraire (Rennes: Presses Universitaire de Rennes, 2005).
Nganang’s *Manifeste* recalls Mongo Beti’s seminal essay, “Afrique noire, littérature rose” (1955), in which he criticizes Laye Camara of writing for European audiences in his novel *L’Enfant noir*. Both Nganang and Beti demand a break with the past and the inadequate literature it produced, discuss the challenges facing the African author, and attempt to outline a new direction for African literature. The similarities between the two works, published roughly fifty years apart, point to the African author’s continued preoccupation with how the novel is characterized and how the novel itself both characterizes and influences the present moment.

Nganang’s entire project in the *Manifeste* is to make a literary argument for “new African literature” and suggest that literary works embody this argument. Despite obvious thematic similarities between his project and that of authors writing engaged literature, Nganang rejects the critical lens of engagement because it binds African novels to established plots and forms, thus condemning the literature to appropriation and adaptation rather than invention. Nganang views the critical perspective of engagement as limiting and repetitive, as opposed to his vision of African literature, which allows for freedom and creativity; the representation of “la vérité” and “la rue” liberates African authors from the constraints of politically or socially committed writing motivated by moral obligation.

Much like his arguments about language use in Africa, and calls to abandon European languages, Nganang’s attack on literary criticism is heavy with tones of anger and again proposes a “return to Africa” as the source of renewal for African literature. In his 2009 work, *La*...

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52 Nganang’s grievances with various African authors are inscribed in a long history of literary disputes such as James Baldwin’s criticism that Richard Wright’s *Native Son* cloaked racial protest in literary disguise.

53 Nganang rejects the outdated analysis of critics such as Martin T. Bestman who writes, in 1981, “la littérature négre-africaine remplit par-dessus tout une fonction sociale et politique. ‘L’art pour l’art’ ou une ‘littérature gratuite’ est un luxe que ne peut se permettre l’écrivain négre-africain, car l’auteur noir est ‘en situation’ dans son temps et doit rendre compte de la cruelle réalité qui l’entoure. Il a donc l’obligation morale de traiter des tragiques questions qui déchirent le destinée humaine et de dénoncer les violations flagrantes des droits de l’homme” (25).
république de l'imagination: lettres au benjamin, Nganang repeatedly attacks Mabanckou for not writing the kind of literature described in the Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine. Nganang accuses Mabanckou of being out of touch with the realities of Africa, insensitive to the suffering on the African continent, and full of contempt for young “banlieusards.” While it is not particularly productive to belabor these accusations here, it is important to acknowledge that Nganang’s charges against Mabanckou and his writing are all related, directly or peripherally, to the fact that Mabanckou is not writing from the African continent, about the African continent. Given the immense value Nganang places on African writers who write from within Africa, one might assume he is one of the few francophone authors who writes from his native Cameroon; this is, in fact, not the case. After completing his doctorate in comparative literature at a university in Frankfurt, Germany, in 2006 he moved to the United States where he has taught at Vassar College and Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, and is now a Professor at Stony Brook University. As his professional trajectory illustrates, Nganang himself has not lived in Cameroon for much of his life yet this has not stopped him from criticizing others for “losing touch” with Africa.

Debates surrounding the geographies of writers and their works have become a topic that many other contemporary novelists discuss in articles and essays. In the article “Fragments of an African Discourse: Elements for a New Literary Ecosystem,” Abdourahman A. Waberi describes the conditions and consequences of the global dispersion of francophone African authors. Waberi – the novelist, poet, university professor, and newspaper columnist – is aligned with Mabanckou’s opinion that the mobility of the African author cannot be seen as a threat to their authenticity, on the contrary, should be considered an asset with the potential to enrich the

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54 See pages 79, 83, and 87, respectively, for details of these criticisms.
55 Nganang does not seem to address the fact that several of Mabanckou’s novels take place entirely in Africa.
literature. Yet Waberi acknowledges that the move out of Africa is complicated for authors and they must negotiate a new relationship with their homes. He writes,

> These new arrivals, now living outside the African continent, test their creative machinery in an interstitial space that is always haunted by their experiences in, and on-going relationships with, Africa. The space between here and elsewhere, the intimate and the colossal, yesterday and today; a space, finally, that is both foreclosed and open, at once improbable, familiar, and strange. This space is in the process becoming the main scene, if not the common place of their inquiry.\(^\text{56}\)

According to Waberi, African authors who have left Africa exist in a new space that is somehow in-between Africa and their place of residence outside of Africa. Because there is no rupture in their connections to Africa, these ties remain intact even after departing the continent. The word haunting has both negative and positive connotations in this context, on one hand the ghost of Africa could be interpreted as inescapable but on the other hand, the memories of the African homeland are ever-present, and unwavering. Characterized by contradictory forces, the new space of literary production is destined to become the norm because so many writers are leaving Africa to pursue opportunities elsewhere in the world.

As Waberi describes, there are consequences that accompany the mobility of authors and “melancholy minds will deplore the brain drain. Amateurs of authenticity will cry over the loss of roots. And artists will continue their route.”\(^\text{57}\) Acknowledging concerns over brain drain and authenticity, Waberi does not pay much mind to these criticisms knowing that ultimately, writers will overcome the obstacles and continue to be able to tell their stories. He cautions that when considering the work of contemporary writers living outside Africa, and understanding “the

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\(^{57}\) Waberi, “Fragments,” 105.
turbulence of globalization,” the reader and critic must abandon the following binary oppositions: “rootedness vs. cosmopolitanism, relativism vs. africanity. The infinite and unpredictable number of possible relations between cultures, places, and temporalities leads us to question the diverse without denying the contour of one's own enclosure, and many African writers sift these enigmas through the sieves of their texts.” The binary oppositions Waberi condemns are over simplified and do not accurately describe the wide range of possible connections to cultures and geographies that African authors might have. Waberi suggests the texts of African authors are the place to locate the ways in which writers work through and negotiate their relationships to Africa.

In debates about the location from which African writers produce their work, the decision to leave Africa and not return is often characterized as a choice, but as Alain Mabanckou and Abdourahman A. Waberi explain in a recent interview published in Le Monde, returning to their country is no longer a viable option for either of them. Waberi describes being threatened and intimidated by the government in Djibouti. In Mabanckou’s words, “il y a une sorte de fatwa contre moi. Il paraît que je suis visé par une instruction pour ‘divulgation de fausses nouvelles et outrage à magistrat.” In addition, the Congolese Minister of Communication has accused Mabanckou of not paying taxes and threatened to revoke his citizenship. In the Republic of Congo, there are ambiguous divergences between official and unofficial politics regarding literature and contemporary authors such as Mabanckou. For example, the Congolese government has officially supported literary pursuits by sponsoring the “Bassin du Congo” book

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58 Waberi, “Fragments,” 105.
shop, a stand at Salon du Livre, and the 2013 Etonnants Voyageurs festival, not to mention that Henri Lopes—Congolese novelist, politician, and diplomat—has operated as long-term mediator of cultural issues. Nevertheless, while Mabanckou previously participated in events such as the Etonnants Voyageurs festival and was able to safely travel to his native country, he has since become more vocal in his criticism of President Denis Sassou Nguesso following changes to the constitution that would allow him to remain in power. As a result of speaking out against Sassou Nguesso, it is unlikely Mabanckou will be able to return in the near future. As evidenced in the experiences of Mabanckou and Waberi, it cannot be a requirement of authenticity that a writer remain in their native country if it is a threat to their wellbeing to do so. The situation of the African writer living in exile must be taken into account when considering the range of relationships writers maintain with their origins in Africa.

The scholar Achille Mbembe uses the term “l’afropolitanisme” to acknowledge the diverse trajectories of Africans today and to account for the wide-ranging relationships that they have with their countries and the continent. Much of Mbembe’s previous scholarship has been about how the west sees and represents Africa; in his work on Afropolitanism, however, his focus is on how Africans see themselves. A transnational culture, “l’afropolitaine” as a concept validates experiences and knowledge gained outside of Africa, views multilingualism as an asset, and understands mobility as an experience that allows individuals to gain “une incalculable richesse du regard et de la sensibilité.”

Accounting for, and valuing, international travel and settlement, Mbembe’s Afropolitanism allows Africans to exist abroad, without any threat to their “Africanness.” Much like Mabanckou, Mbembe seeks to expand the parameters of who and what

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61 Etonnants Voyageurs is an international book and film festival founded in 1990 by Michel Le Bris, Christian Rolland, and Maëtte Chantrel that takes place annually in Saint-Malo, France as well as in other cities around the world.

is African, thus dismissing demands for authenticity by accepting the realities of global
dispersion of peoples in the 21st century.

Afropolitanism legitimizes the international trajectories of Africans while also
establishing aesthetic and political positions, much like the movements of Negritude and Pan
Africanism, which came before it.63 In the literary and artistic realms, “l'afropolitanisme est une
stylistique, une esthétique et une certaine poétique du monde. C'est une manière d'être au monde
qui refuse, par principe, toute forme d'identité victimaire - ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'est pas
consciente des injustices et de la violence que la loi du monde a infligé à ce continent et à ses
gens.”64 In rejecting the role of the victim, in all its forms, Mbembe empowers the individual to
see more than realities of suffering on the continent and instead take responsibility for their role
in changing them.

Mbembe advocates for a distanced relationship between nation and individual;
politically, Afropolitanism is “une prise de position politique et culturelle par rapport à la nation,
à la race et à la question de la différence en général. Dans la mesure où nos États sont de pures
inventions (récentes, de surcroît), ils n'ont, strictement parlant, rien dans leur essence qui nous
obligeât à leur vouer un culte - ce qui ne signifie pas que l'on soit indifférent à leur sort.”65 Ever
conscious of the artificially constructed nature of African nations and, similarly, how race and
difference are inventions to serve particular historical narratives, the Afropolitan individual is
not bound to their nation for identity yet still remains invested in its success. As a whole,
Afropolitanism as a concept and way of life provides flexibility and openness to the beliefs that one can have as an African, living inside or outside the continent.

As the work of Mabanckou, Nganang, Waberi, and Mumbé illustrates, African writers’ relationship to Africa is a changing one and the locations from which they now write are largely a result of global economics. While institutions in the United States have created roles for African writers and intellectuals in universities, there are far fewer institutional roles in France, where African Studies as a discipline remains unsupported. It is within this context of transition and transformation in African arts that authenticity has come to encompass issues of authorship, language, location of publication, geography, and mobility. This project considers all facets of authenticity, all of the pressures and expectations it bears, as they are represented within African cultural productions such as novels, films, and works of visual art. The corpus of artistic works in this study all use techniques of meta-representation in order to stage the production, publication, circulation, reception, and audience of cultural productions; in doing so, these works grapple with the broader status and function of contemporary African arts.

**Metafiction, Metacinema, and Meta-art**

Just as this study frames the analysis of authenticity around the issues endemic to the texts of African writers and cultural theorists, each chapter looks to works of literature, film, and art in order to understand how the pressures of artistic production are manifested in the works themselves. While each chapter provides an in-depth review of the theories and scholarship of metafiction, metacinema, and meta-art, this section provides definitions and common manifestations of each form.

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The novels discussed in this study can all be considered works of metafiction, or can be seen as containing metafictional elements, because they all use the devices of metafiction to produce a textual self-awareness, or self-consciousness, of the constructed nature of the novel and the role of the author in this process of construction. The devices of metafiction are complex and varied, but several common examples include: the representation of an author or work of fiction within a novel; a novel that reveals itself as a novel or comments on the conventions of the novel; and a work of fiction that discusses or refers to the author or the previous work of the author. Each featuring a novelist as the protagonist of the novel, the three texts analyzed in the first chapter foreground the writing and publication process, the challenges of writing and being a writer, and the societal pressures that weigh on the African writer.

Much like metafiction, metacinema is characterized by the quality of reflexivity, meaning “consciously calling attention to itself or its process or production.” In the context of cinema, this means that the filmmaker uses film to reflect on the medium of film itself or to reflect on the role of the filmmaker in producing a film. Several films examined in the second chapter employ techniques of metacinema or mockumentary in order to represent the current status and challenges of contemporary film in Africa. A genre within the larger category of metacinema, the mockumentary is a film that suggests it is documenting reality when in fact the events and characters are fictional. Parodying the documentary format, the mockumentary uses the techniques, and plays with the conventions, of the traditional genre. By looking to a range of cinematic genres—fictional films and documentary films, feature length and short form films, professional and amateur productions—the analysis in the second chapter delves into the varied 

67 Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘reflexive.’
way that representations of cinema are used by African filmmakers to interrogate their artistic
genre.

The term meta-art is used to describe works of art that explicitly represent the artistic
process, the status of the artist, and the philosophy of art. The phenomenon of meta-art originated with avant-garde movements of the 20th century such as Dadaism and is exemplified by Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 work *Fountain.*

Because self-reflexivity is inherent in nearly all contemporary art, primarily in the way works of visual art so frequently respond to, or draw from, previous traditions and push the boundaries of what is considered art, the category of meta-art encompasses works of art that overtly represent the process and reception of art. Many of the works in the third chapter employ portraiture or self-portraiture to represent the figure of the artist within a work of art, and to comment on the status of the artist in contemporary African arts. First tracing European preoccupations with African authenticity and examining influential exhibitions of African art in the 20th century, the analysis then looks to works of contemporary African visual art that respond to the lasting impact of the stereotypes of African people and the legacy of preoccupations with cultural authenticity.

The cultural productions at the center of this study are distinctive in the way they represent the artistic processes behind writing, filmmaking, and creating works of visual art. By attending to cultural productions that employ techniques of meta-representation, this project illuminates artists’ intimate reflections on representation and the pressures of authenticity.

**Meta-representation in African Arts**

Each chapter of this study deals with a different medium of art and the specificities of the meta-representational techniques the medium employs. While connections between works are made throughout the chapters and comparisons are drawn between different techniques, it is

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70 The phenomenon of meta-art originated with avant-garde movements of the 20th century such as Dadaism and is exemplified by Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 work *Fountain.*

important to study each medium discretely in order to understand how that medium represents itself and the challenges specific to the art form. Additionally, the pressures of authenticity manifest themselves differently for literature, film, and art thus studying each for distinct representations of production, publication, circulation, reception, and audience is essential.

The question of representation is of course central to this study, and the first chapter provides a concerned analysis of the ways in which writers employ literary self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, and metafiction in order to analyze the strategies and impact of the novels’ engagement in their own production. The novels *La Promesse des fleurs* (1997) by Patrice Nganang, *African Psycho* (2003) by Alain Mabanckou, and *Je vous souhaite la pluie* (2006) by Elizabeth Tchoungui all depict the literary process in distinct circumstances, through varied narrative styles, and to different ends. *La Promesse des fleurs* portrays literary production as an endeavor fraught with great risk and minimal reward. As Nganang’s protagonist struggles to negotiate the competing demands of daily life and the fictional world within the novel he is writing, multiple realities collide, and at times, merge. Similarly plagued with angst about the writing process, the protagonist of Mabanckou’s novel finds himself trapped in a cycle of disappointment and creative paralysis because the pressure to live up to his esteemed predecessors is so great. While the writing process is entirely metaphorical in *African Psycho*, the creative process is still clearly an anxious one, always leading to disastrous failure. Unlike Nganang and Mabanckou’s novels which center around writing itself, *Je vous souhaite la pluie* focuses on the process of publication and reception of the novel as well as the media stunts the francophone author must endure in order to be successful. The novel traces the maturation of a young author as she discovers the process of disguise and fabrication crucial to marketing a novel within the French publishing industry. In examining these three works, I endeavor to
demonstrate that the strategies of metafiction in these novels foreground questions of authenticity and authorship in contemporary African literature.

African films that tackle questions of preservation, accessibility, production, and purpose of cinema provide the focus of the second chapter, “Cinematic Metacommentary and the Future of Filmmaking in Africa.” All of the contemporary African films discussed in this chapter are concerned with the film industry and film viewing structures in Africa. Some of the films, primarily those that are documentary in nature, employ representations of cinema in order to present an accurate depiction of the status of film production, distribution, and circulation on the African continent. Other films in this chapter, specifically the fictional films, fall into the category of metacinema because as self-reflexive works, they call attention to the artifice of film or stage the production of film, from within a film. Beginning with the documentary films of Jean-Marie Téno, and examining the way he employs representations of culture in his work, the chapter then looks to another non-fiction form, short documentary films from the Democratic Republic of Congo, that illustrate the financial obstacles filmmakers face and how Internet technology offers new possibilities for film distribution. Then juxtaposing the documentary and the fictional, the chapter moves to an analysis of subverted genres in the fictional films—a feature film and a mockumentary—of Jean-Pierre Bekolo. The broad variety of films included in this chapter—documentaries, fictional films, feature lengths films, and short films—allows for an examination of cinematic metacommentary across genres and forms.

In many ways combining aspects of textual and visual meta-representation from the two previous chapters, the third chapter of this study, “Art and Authenticity: (Self-)portraits of Contemporary African Art,” focuses on the exhibitions Beauté Congo—1926-2015—Congo Kitoko and Jeunes Regards Urbains II. Curated by André Magnin, the exhibition Beauté Congo
included paintings and sculpture and illustrated the evolution of Congolese painting over the past ninety years. A much smaller exhibition, *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* was shown at Espace doul’art in Douala, Cameroon and featured the work of three young artists working in Douala. Broadly, this chapter shifts attention to how visual artists included in these two exhibitions use their work to represent African arts, specifically the history, reception, and future of their medium. Looking first to the works included in *Beauté Congo*, I examine how Congolese contemporary art uses texts and well-known cultural references in order to problematize the historic consumption of African arts and the preoccupation with authenticity. Secondly, in examining the work of young artists included in *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*, I contend that young Cameroonian artists use the portrait, and the paradoxes it evokes, in order to represent their own personal, “authentic” vision of life in urban Africa. By tracing European preoccupations with African authenticity as well as the evolution of African art exhibitions in Europe and the United States, the chapter works to understand the specific pressures of authenticity that African visual artists experience.

Together, these three chapters provide insight into how contemporary African artists use their work to interrogate expectations of authenticity and the processes by which they produce their work. The novels, films, and art invite their audiences to consider the artist and their work from a new, more intimate perspective. Employing a variety of literary, cinematic, and artistic techniques, the works in this project foreground the artist and the artistic process. By considering the meta-representations these works produce, this project seeks to engage with the global transitions and transformations occurring within contemporary African arts.
CHAPTER ONE

Representing Representation: Strategies of Metafiction in
La Promesse des fleurs, African Psycho, and Je vous souhaite la pluie

L’art c’est la force de faire dire à la réalité ce qu’elle n’aurait pu dire par ses propres moyens ou, en tout cas, ce qu’elle risquait de passer volontairement sous silence.
Sony Labou Tansi, Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez

The function of art, as described by Sony Labou Tansi in the citation above, is to serve as the voice for an unspeaking reality; in this role, art has the power to rescue reality from silence. The works of literature, film, and art at the center of this project give voice to the reality of the African writer, filmmaker, and artist and expose elements of the artistic process. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which francophone novels depict the production, reception, and objectives of literature from within the novel. I draw upon theories of literary self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, and metafiction in order to analyze the strategies and impact of the novels’ engagement in their own production. The library of sub-Saharan African literature provides a rich series of works that employ metafictional devices and depict the challenges associated with literary production. For the purposes of this chapter, I have selected three diverse works, all of which depict literary production, portray the literary process in unique circumstances and through varied narrative styles, and to different ends. These include the novels La Promesse des fleurs (1997) by Patrice Nganang, African Psycho (2003) by Alain Mabanckou, and Je vous souhaite la pluie (2006) by Elizabeth Tchoungui.

La Promesse des fleurs represents literary production as an endeavor fraught with great risk and minimal reward. As Nganang’s protagonist struggles to negotiate the competing demands of daily life and the fictional world within the novel he is writing, multiple realities collide, and at times, merge. Similarly plagued with angst about the writing process, the
protagonist of Mabanckou’s novel finds himself trapped in a cycle of disappointment and creative paralysis because the pressure to live up to his esteemed predecessors is so great. While the writing process is entirely metaphorical in *African Psycho*, the creative process is still clearly an anxious one, always leading to disastrous failure. Unlike Nganang and Mabanckou’s novels which center around writing itself, *Je vous souhaite la pluie* focuses on the process of publication and reception of the novel as well as the media stunts the francophone author must endure in order to be successful. The novel traces the maturation of a young author as she discovers the process of disguise and fabrication crucial to marketing a novel within the French publishing industry. In examining these three works, I demonstrate that the strategies of metafiction in these novels foreground questions of authenticity and authorship in contemporary African literature.

This chapter suggests that novels containing metafictional elements, which are used to illuminate the process of writing, represent a phenomenon in contemporary francophone fiction that deserves significant critical attention. In his recent work, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, the philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe explores the complexities of new African fiction in the twenty-first century. Mbembe writes that literature is no longer about loss, trying to recuperate the past, or returning to origins but rather “comment constituer de nouvelles formes du réel—des formes flottantes et mobiles.” Characterized by a detached mobility, the realities that Mbembe describes transcend strict categories of nationality, genre, and subject matter that were used to define the literary production of previous generations. I will demonstrate that employing techniques of metafiction is one of the ways in which authors are fashioning the “nouvelles formes du réel” described by Mbembe; authors question the relationship between fictionality and factuality, and what it means to try to write “reality” by means of metafiction.

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72 Achille Mbembe, *Sortir*, 224.
In addition to transitions in the content of contemporary African novels, there are also changes occurring in the creative process as writers manipulate, repurpose, and respond to canonical works. In describing the process of creating the “new African novel,” Mbembe writes, “on rature, on gomme, on remplace, on efface, on recrée les formes et les contenus. On procède par de faux raccords, des discordances, des substitutions et des montages—condition pour attendre une force esthétique neuve.”73 Dramatizing the work of the writer, Mbembe emphasizes the alteration and transformation inherent in the writing process. Looking to these changes—authorial, editorial, imaginative, and eminently self-conscious—and the ways they are foregrounded in contemporary novels, provide insight into how the “new African novel” represents the realities of the creative process. The novels I analyze investigate and challenge systems of fictional representation and break conventions by depicting the trials and pitfalls of literary representation into the fictional form.

While the contemporary novelists I have selected are distinctive in the way they employ elements of metafiction in their work, such experimentation is of course not new, and such techniques could also be attributed to a previous generation of writers who experimented with the boundaries of representation and how to write reality. For example, in the late 1960s, Ivoirian author Ahmadou Kourouma and Yambo Ouologuem of Mali both published novels which subvert linguistic norms of the French language, incorporate oral folktale; and as well as literary intertexts into the narrative, and employ productive ambiguity intended to highlight reader interpretation in creating meaning.74 In addition, Congolese authors Sony Labou Tansi and Henri

73 Mbembe, Sortir, 225.
74 For Kourouma, see for example, ed. Jean Ouédraogo L'imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma: contours et enjeux d'une esthétique and Madeleine Borgomano, Ahmadou Kourouma: Le "Guerrier" Griot. For Ouologuem, see for example, Derek Wright, “Orality in the African Historical Novel: Yambo Ouologuem's Bound to Violence and Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons” and George Lang, “Text, Identity, and Difference: Yambo Ouologuem's Le Devoir de Violence and Ayi Kwei Armah's Two
Lopes both use literature to question repressive political regimes and the incomprehensible violence they deploy. Lopes and Labou Tansi’s texts deliberately confuse orality and textuality, express lexical and syntactical creativity, and switch narrative voices repeatedly. As exemplified in the epigraph to this chapter, the paratextual materials of works by Lopes and Labou Tansi are replete with an overt, self-conscious engagement with the fictionality of the novel, the role of the author in its creation, and questions of responsible representation. The work of contemporary francophone writers is undoubtedly influenced by the elements of metafiction expressed in the works of their literary forebears. Remembering the traditions of these past generations of writers, I examine how contemporary writers build on and reinvent these traditions through their use of metafictional techniques. Within the category of metafictional techniques, I focus on the following two features: firstly, the trope of the writer composing a novel within a novel and secondly, the blurring of boundaries of fiction, reality and literary criticism.

**Literary Self-Consciousness and the Devices of Metafiction**

In order to contextualize the analysis that follows, the terms self-reflexive, self-conscious, and metafiction require further elucidation. Scholars differentiate between literary reflexivity and self-consciousness by the degree to which a text “knows it is a text.” Reflexivity is a more general term for a text in which the world within the work doubles back on itself and the reader.

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*Thousand Seasons.*”


is made to understand the limited nature of the text. On the other hand, a self-conscious text contains a “systematic self-awareness” that pervades the work. Kawin’s definition is useful in identifying self-conscious elements inherent in all novels, rather than specifically describing novels constructed by means of self-conscious techniques. Identifying the need for a more precise way to describe texts that express a textual self-awareness, I define a self-conscious text as a work that uses the devices of metafiction to produce a textual awareness of the constructed nature of the novel and the role of the author in this process of construction.

The term metafiction refers to the devices by which the literary text becomes reflexive or self-conscious; these devices are complex and varied but several common examples of metafictional devices include the representation of an author or work of fiction within a novel, a novel that reveals itself as a novel or comments on the conventions of the novel, and a work of fiction that discusses the author or the previous work of the author. Many scholars have analyzed the metafictional qualities of works such as *Don Quixote*, *Ulysses*, and *Hamlet* in order to illustrate the pervasiveness of self-conscious fiction in works that have reached universal status and are known to writers around the world; in fact, scholars have argued that metafiction is an inclination inherent to all novels.

While metafictional techniques are perhaps prevalent in all literature, an explicit authorial intention to probe the limits of the novel can be traced to France in the 1950’s, where Alain

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77 Works such as *Self-reflexivity in literature* eds. Werner Huber, Martin Middeke, and Hubert Zapf, eds and Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* both demonstrate characteristics of self-reflexivity in a diverse range of literary texts.


79 William H. Gass was the first scholar to use the term metafiction in his work *Fictions and the Figures of Life* published in 1970. Writing about the novels of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, Gass writes that their “antinovels” are in fact “metafictions” as they are works about “writers who are writing about what they are writing” (25). While the term emerges to describe elements of postmodern fiction, it has also become a feature of retrospective reading of older works.

Robbe-Grillet led the movement for the Nouveau Roman.\textsuperscript{81} This influential literary movement called for a reinvention of the novel and discarded traditional notions of character, narrative, and plot in favor of an individualized vision of the world.\textsuperscript{82} In Robbe-Grillet’s theoretical essays that constitute \textit{Pour un Nouveau Roman} (1963), he explains that each generation of writers must reinvent the form of the novel. In response to changes to the novel in France, as well as numerous and impassioned debates surrounding the “death of the novel” in the United States, American literary scholars became interested in self-conscious literary forms in the early 1970s. Robert Alter, Margaret A. Rose, and Robert Scholes published the first studies of metafiction when the concept of self-conscious fiction was still controversial within academia and produced many debates surrounding its significance.\textsuperscript{83}

In the 1980s, when metafiction was a much more accepted topic of critical inquiry, Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh each published their own studies of the form and function of metafictional techniques, both of which remain the most frequently cited works on the subject.\textsuperscript{84} Hutcheon and Waugh’s studies have set the standard for critical work on metafiction. It is worth noting, however, that their corpus of literary references is decidedly western European, with little or no attention paid to literary traditions from the putative third-world and areas affected by European imperialism. More recently, the scholars Madelyn Jablon and Evan Maina Mwangi have critiqued the work of Waugh and Hutcheon and expanded the study of metafiction into non-

\textsuperscript{81} A critic originally coined the term nouveau roman and it was sometimes used derisively to describe the literary movement.

\textsuperscript{82} While Robbe-Grillet acted as the most vocal advocate for the nouveau roman, some scholars argue that the first nouveau roman emerges with Nathalie Sarraute’s novel \textit{L’Ere du soupçon}. The group of nouveau romanciers largely published their works with Editions de Minuit.


\textsuperscript{84} See Linda Hutcheon, \textit{Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox} and Patricia Waugh, \textit{Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction}.
European bodies of fiction. Madelyn Jablon develops a theory of metafiction from within novels written by black writers rather than imposing preexisting hypotheses. Similarly, Evan Maina Mwangi questions the legitimacy of using criticism to read non-western cultural productions, and makes the significant methodological choice to situate his study of self-reflexive fiction in relation to the work of African writers and theorists such as Nadine Gordimer, Said Khamis, and Kyallo Wamitila.

Challenging the definition of metafiction in western aesthetics, Mwangi argues metafiction is a phenomenon that developed around the world simultaneously, and while linked to western literary practices, metafiction in African texts “gestures to its own indigenous specific location.” In addition, Mwangi refutes Jablon’s analysis and argues it is impossible to characterize a category such as “black metafiction” or “African metafiction” because a literary technique cannot be specific to any social group. The idea that literary devices are not attached to a particular literary tradition, and that metafiction cannot be traced to one single origin, suggests the possibility of using established western criticism to study African texts, as long as it is done with an awareness of the potential pitfalls.

While my analysis of African texts relies, in part, on works of western criticism in order to identify metafictional strategies in African texts, my arguments regarding the employment and impact of these techniques always originate from within the texts, with close attention given to the specific implications in an African context. As Christopher Miller cautions in Theories of Africans, the “mediation and authority of African commentaries, critiques and theoretical models” must be brought into dialogue with any western analysis of African literature in order to

85 See Madelyn Jablon, Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Fiction and Evan Maina Mwangi, Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality.
87 Mwangi, Africa Writes Back to Self, 6.
create a “responsible” reading. 88 In addition, any scholar must be wary of the fact that “theory” is a label assigned by institutions and thus ‘Theory’ “stands as a figure for the role that westerners have assigned themselves in relation to Africa—detached, objective, universal, synthesizing, and most of all, powerful.” 89 Yet as the process of decolonization of the academy progresses, it is now “possible and imperative for readers to supplant Eurocentrism with Afrocentrism, while remaining attentive to eccentric strategies that operate in new, overdetermined spaces.” 90 Miller’s gesture towards the eccentric highlights the necessity of considering the specific origins, cultural context, and historical landscape of African texts. In other words, a scholar must understand an author’s positionality in relation to the literature and theory of Africa, Europe, and the United States.

The three writers discussed in this chapter are emblematic of the global trajectories and diverse careers of the contemporary francophone author. Patrice Nganang was born and educated in Yaoundé, Cameroon, then completed a doctorate in comparative literature at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Germany, and is now Associate Professor at Stony Brook University in New York. Elizabeth Tchoungui, daughter of a Cameroonian diplomat and French mother, was born in the United States but grew up in Cameroon and now works in French television. Alain Mabanckou grew up in Pointe-Noire, Congo, received his baccalaureate from Lycée Karl Marx, attended law school at Université Paris-Dauphine, and is presently a professor at University of California, Los Angeles. As the details of origins, education, and professional progressions illustrate, all three of the authors have been immersed in African, European, and American

89 Miller, Theories, 7.
90 Miller, Theories, 3.
contexts. With this in mind, my reading of their novels takes into account the multifaceted backgrounds of the authors and how these experiences may inform their writing.

The examination of metafictional representation in contemporary African literature is intended to address a gap in literary scholarship. By neglecting to study African literature through this lens, scholars fail to recognize the fertile and sophisticated aesthetic strategies used to problematize literary representation. Since the postcolonial turn, there has been a profound scholarly investment in analyzing the social, political, and cultural significance of African literature. Literary criticism on francophone African literature initially read the novel as an artifact to be studied like an anthropological object rather than a work of creativity and imagination.91 Later, scholars focused on the critique of colonialism found in the postcolonial novel and the ways in which the novel expressed resistance to the oppressive colonial regime.92 Next, during the extended period of “disenchantment” during postcolonial transition, critics turned their attention to how literary texts represent the political and ideological challenges facing the new African nation.93 As immigration from Africa to Europe exploded in the age of globalized nations, questions of identity, belonging, and transcontinental migration became widespread topics of literary scholarship studied under frameworks such as “Afrique-sur-Seine,” “migritude,” and Afropeanism.”94 In response to the issue of literature’s role in representing

94 In Afrique sur Seine: A New Generation of African Writers in Paris, Odile Cazenave studies the representation of immigrants to France in the novels Bleu, Blanc, Rouge (1998) by Alain Mabanckou and
genocides in Africa, theories of memory and testimony were fundamental to the analysis of works resulting from Fest’Africa’s 1998 project *Par devoir de memoire*, which sought to represent the Rwandan genocide in literature. Additionally, the abuse of child soldiers and the destruction of the environment by oppressive regimes have also recently received considerable attention from literary scholars. All of these phases of criticism have undoubtedly made valuable contributions to the study of the francophone novel; my position is that the analysis of literary self-consciousness is the crucial next step in the evolution of scholarship.

Today, the failure to recognize the complicated aesthetic strategies of literary self-consciousness present in the works of African authors, relegates these writers to depicting African realities when, in fact, their works also constantly interrogate the stakes and test the boundaries of literary expression and may not be interested in “Africa” per se, or even “reality.” The novels in this chapter simultaneously represent aspects of the culture, history, society, politics, and daily life of Cameroon and Congo, while also employing metafictional techniques that question the form and function of the novel itself; these objectives are inextricably linked and to overlook literary self-consciousness in the contemporary francophone African novel is to only attend to half the story. The underlying mechanisms of metafiction must be explored in order to appreciate how writing, authorship, and publication are problematized within contemporary novels. Yet while the strategies and systems of self-conscious writing have been

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95 For example, Nicki Hitchcott writes extensively about Gilbert Gatore’s *le passé devant soit* (2008). Boubacar Boris Diop writes the novel *Murambi: Le livre des ossements* (2000) and essay “Genocide et devoir d’imaginaire” both of which are about memory, testimony, and witnessing the Rwandan genocide.

extensively studied in European and American contexts, African novels are rarely read through this lens, even when laden with complex and interesting examples of self-conscious techniques.

One can only speculate as to why the features of literary self-consciousness in the francophone novel have been largely overlooked by scholars. A possible explanation might be that following decolonization, countries in francophone Africa experienced such wide-sweeping social, economic, and political transformations that critics have been preoccupied with how these changes are represented in literature. Scholars, rightly so, have been primarily interested in how the rapidly changing dynamics of life on the African continent, and abroad, has been recorded in literature. Nganang’s trilogy about life in urban Cameroon serves as a particularly illustrative example: critical attention has concentrated primarily on how Nganang represents linguistic diversity, his depiction of the political climate in Cameroon, and his use of the perspective of a canine narrator to illustrate life in Yaoundé. The complicated intertextuality, rich metaphors, and subtle symbolism in the novels are lost when Nganang’s works are read only through a socio-linguistic lens. Focused on the realities expressed in African literature, critics have been distracted from how authors themselves, from within their works, problematize literary reality, the role of author in creating this reality, and the way critics read reality in their works.

Critics’ obsession with the representation of reality in African fiction is seconded by literary prize culture and its focus on reality as a primary unit of measuring “quality” in fiction. French literary prizes, such as the Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie, emphasize the

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97 See Aurélie Lefebvre, “Patrice Nganang et 'la parole des sous-quartiers', une approche sociolinguistique de l'écriture du français dans le roman francophone” and David Ngamassu, “Patrice Nganang, ou l’art d’écrire à la jointure des espaces langagiers: le français langue africaine dans Temps De Chien et La Joie De Vivre.”
98 See Emmanuel Ottou “Des stratégies de résistance littéraire chez Patrice Nganang” and Kenneth W. Harrow, “Patrice Nganang's L'invention Du Beau Regard and Dog Days: Three Phases of Capitalism with Two Dogs and One Devouring Pig.”
expression of “la diversité culturelle” as a primary selection criterion thus reading novels for how they express cultural realities rather than valorize the way texts probe what “reality” and the “real” mean for contemporary African authors. The selection criterion for French literary prizes was in fact addressed, in 2005, by the creation of the Prix du Style. Antoine Bueno, founder of the Prix du Style, explains the origins of the prize in a short “manifeste” posted on the webpage; Bueno begins, “alors que le style est l'essence même de la littérature, il semble aujourd'hui la chose la moins valorisée par la critique ou les jurys de prix littéraires. Drôle de paradoxe. Triste constat. C'est pour remédier à ce fâcheux état de fait que j'ai décidé de fonder le Prix du Style.” Bueno envisions the prize as a celebration of language intended to redirect attention to the beauty and versatility of written expression. Bridging the gap between prizes that value literary style and those more concerned with cultural diversity, Alain Mabanckou, 2005 winner of the Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie for Verre Cassé, made the short list for the 2015 Prix du Style for Petit Piment. The culture of literary prizes in France has an enormous impact on the reception and circulation of novels, and provides interesting insight into how contemporary francophone literature is labeled, categorized, and appreciated in France.

My objective in bringing together the works in this chapter is to propose multiple frameworks for understanding the implications of metafictional representation within the texts. Each in their own way, the novels by Nganang, Mabanckou, and Tchoungui turn literature inside-out so that the object of their novels is The Novel itself. Systematically confusing boundaries between reality of the novel, the protagonist’s literary production, and the world outside the novel, Patrice Nganang’s La Promesse des fleurs serves as the first example of how

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See http://www.francophonie.org/Prix-des-5-continents-de-la.html for full selection criteria.

See prixdustyle.com
authors use metafictional techniques to engage with the status and function of contemporary francophone literature.

**The Risks and Responsibilities of Writing in *La Promesse des fleurs***

*La Promesse des fleurs* is the first novel in Patrice Nganang’s trilogy about life in urban Cameroon. The first person narrator, a young man named Soumi, describes his life in an impoverished neighborhood outside of Yaoundé where he lives with his mother, father, and two sisters. The novel tells of several momentous events in the young narrator’s life—the unjust arrest of his close friend, the destruction of his neighborhood for future commercial construction, a flood that drowns his father, and the rape of his sister; Yet throughout all of these tragic events, Soumi is chiefly preoccupied with his writing and the development of his novel’s beautiful and virtuous heroine, Jacqueline. Consumed by the writing process, Soumi constructs his identity around writing even when it alienates him from his family, friends, and the difficulties of his community. The novel is ultimately the story of how the protagonist learns to navigate the allure of the imaginary realm of fiction and the difficult realities of his life.

Through an analysis of the structure and shifting realities of *La Promesse de fleurs*, I argue that metafictional techniques question the purpose of literary production and the responsibilities of the contemporary francophone author. During the course of his literary career, Patrice Nganang has discussed the status, struggles, and duties of the African author in essays, articles and interviews. Nganang’s obvious self-consciousness with regards to literature and its purpose provides further motivation for reading his novels for the self-conscious strategies they produce. While many of Nganang’s texts elaborate explicitly on questions of purpose and responsibility, I focus on how these concerns about literature are staged within literature. The

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102 For examples of Nganang’s engagement with literature, see introduction.
representation of trials and tragedies endured by the protagonist in *La Promesse de fleurs* provide significant insight into the state and purpose of contemporary francophone literature.

Even before the novel begins, the paratextual material signals the conflict between the risk and responsibility of writing that pervades the novel. The epigraph of *La Promesse des fleurs* is a quote from Franz Kafka’s work *Les Recherches d’un chien* (1922), cited below, the epigraph discusses a gap between generations and presents challenges of how to remember the past:

> Notre génération est peut-être perdue, mais elle est moins coupable que la précédente. Je peux comprendre le doute de ma génération, et ce n’est d’ailleurs plus un doute, c’est l’oubli d’un rêve rêvé il y a mille nuits et oublié mille fois ; qui veut nous réprimander à cause de ce millième oubli ? Mais je crois comprendre également le doute de nos parents, nous n’aurions certainement pas agi autrement, je dirai d’ailleurs : heureux sommes-nous, de n’être pas coupables, heureux sommes-nous d’avoir le privilège de pouvoir nous précipiter en un silence presque innocent vers la mort, dans un monde déjà obscurci par d’autres.

The epigraph is fraught with the opposing concepts of memory and forgetting, innocence and culpability, doubt and certainty, all of which are themes that carry through the novel. The epigraph does not mention these concepts in relation to writing but, in *La Promesse des fleurs*, all of these issues are directly related to fictional representation. The passage signals a generational divide that absolves the younger generation from guilt but also leaves them lost and silenced. The phrase, “c’est l’oubli d’un rêve rêvé il y a mille nuits et oublié mille fois” illustrates the repeated loss of the new generation and the inability to move forward once caught.

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103 It is possible that the choice of the work of Franz Kafka is meant to represent the feelings of absurdity, bewilderment, and powerlessness felt by the protagonist in Nganang’s novel. In other words, the surreal and terrifying world represented in Kafka’s works foreshadow dark periods in the novel that follows.
in a cycle of forgetting. The younger generation’s tendency to remain silent and ignore the responsibility to speak up plays out dramatically in the novel as the protagonist deals with tragedy in his community. *La Promesse des fleurs* presents a generational divide between Soumi and his parents, and, more importantly, between his generation of contemporary writers and the previous generation; the epigraph foregrounds uncertainties of representation and responsibility that will arise repeatedly within the novel and sets a foreboding tone for the story that ensues.

The novel is divided into three sections, titled “Les fleurs,” “Les fruits,” and “Les pépins,” and then each of these sections are split into multiple short chapters. The internal structure of *La Promesse des fleurs* is itself a metafictional device in that the protagonist of the novel is himself writing a novel and developing his own protagonist, all as the novel progresses. The literary production of the protagonist is a mise en abyme embedded in the fabric of the novel. As Linda Hutcheon describes, the mise en abyme of the self-conscious novel “transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretive experience.”

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104 In an article entitled “The Rhetoric of Disenchantment through Symbolism,” Théophile Munyangyango analyses the use of flowers and floral imagery, present in the title, section division titles and at numerous point throughout the novel, in order to illustrate how the symbolism of flowers inform a “rhetoric of disenchantment” in regards to independence and democracy (56). In addition, this sequence is a confused version of the life cycle in botany, which normally begins with a seed, a plant then flowers before it produces fruit. Therefore Nganang’s section titles might be suggesting his novel follows an a-typical or “un-natural” cycle of life.

105 The first mention of the term mise en abyme in a literary context appears in the journal of André Gide dated 1893 (Dällenbach 7); providing examples from painting and theatre, Gide writes, “in a work of art, I rather like to find thus transposed, at the level of the characters, the subject of the work itself. Nothing sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions of the whole work more accurately” (41). As Gide describes, imbedding a work of art, whether it be a painting, play or novel, within the frame of a work of art allows for a unique and transformative perspective to be gained in the work.

well as interpreting the blurred lines between reality and fiction, the reader becomes involved in creating and giving meaning to the text.

In *La Promesse des fleurs*, the mise en abyme stages the tension between fiction and reality by creating a fictional illusion but subsequently confusing this fiction with the reality of Soumi’s life. Patricia Waugh describes one of the characteristics of metafiction as a “pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality.” The word *insecurity* is particularly fitting in the context of Nganang’s novel because Soumi’s pursuit of his heroine and the writing of his novel are fraught with significant struggle and anxiety. For Soumi, being a writer defines his life and identity even before he has completed much writing at all; he admits, “je ne suis pas encore allé bien loin dans mon écriture. Je n’ai pas encore pu écrire de livre de tout; je n’ai même pas encore pu écrire de chapitre; je n’ai pour autant pas encore arrêté de croire que je suis écrivain. C’est une conviction intime, une foi même.” From the beginning, Soumi knows he is a writer and the narrative that follows traces the development of his passion. While describing his writing rituals and the authors who inspire him, namely Léopold Sédar Senghor, Tchicaya U Tam’si, and Sony Labou Tansi, Soumi explains, “ceci n’est que mon propre rituel de création. Comme le rituel de l’amour.” Here is it important to underscore the fact that the writers Soumi mentions are real francophone authors, not fictional constructs; this is an early example in the novel where realities inside and outside the novel are blurred, made insecure, because the “real” intrudes into the fictional realm.

The comparison between writing and love, romantic and physical, foreshadows one of the primary differences Soumi feels between himself and his friends. While his peers pursue girls and are preoccupied by physical desire, Soumi is largely oblivious to teenage intrigue; he is

solely concerned with his book and Jacqueline, his heroine, is the only woman who captures his attention. Initially, Soumi expresses confidence in his vision and in his ability to execute his novel, explaining repeatedly that the story of Jacqueline “était simple dans ma tête, finie. Il ne me suffisait plus que de trouver des mots pour la formuler, pour la coucher sur une feuille de papier, pour écrire”. For Soumi the act of imagining a story and inventing a character are enough to give him the illusion of being a writer; putting his story into words almost seems like an afterthought. However, as the novel progresses, Soumi’s self-assurance slowly begins to erode as he faces numerous challenges in the completion of his novel.

As a result of Soumi’s clear vision of the structure, characters, impact, and importance of his novel, the reader learns much about his ambitions for the novel without ever knowing details of the actual plot. In one particularly detailed passage, Soumi describes the structure of his novel:

La structure était achevée, et il ne s’agissait plus que de faire danser mon héros à la superficie du langage, sur cette plate-forme théâtrale qu’est la vie. J’avais pensé à un volcan quelque part, pour faire sauter la structure elle-même. La structure de mon roman devait être éclatée, parce que correspondant à un monde éclaté, parce que ressemblant à s’y perdre aux yeux caverneux d’un aveugle. La structure de mon roman correspondrait à ce quartier jeté dans l’obscurité par la force du soleil cruel.

Again, it becomes clear that, for Soumi, the creative act of imagining a story is more important than writing it down; the final step of the process, the actual writing, is not something he is concerned with at this point. The evocative image of making his protagonist “dance” on the stage of language concurrently implies a separation between the literary realm and reality while also

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110 Nganang, Promesse, 27.
111 Nganang, Promesse, 28.
emphasizing that this “stage” of language is life itself. The melding of theatre and life itself in this passage suggests that life is representation, that there is no division between reality and representation. The boundary between reality and the realm of Soumi’s imagination is unstable and will be continually probed throughout the rest of the novel.

Soumi states he wants his work to represent reality when he explains “la structure de mon roman devait être éclatée, parce que correspondant à un monde éclaté.” Soumi’s desire to use literature to represent his reality is contrary to the relationship most contemporary writers have with reality in their work. On the one hand, it is irresponsible and restrictive to hold African writers to the ethnographic demands of representing reality; at the same time, notwithstanding the novel’s metafictional strategies which blur fiction and reality, Nganang’s novel features a writer who is obsessed with finding a structure that will correspond to his reality, that is, reality as he perceives it. This contradiction further illustrates the ways Nganang uses his novel, and his protagonist’s writing process imbedded in his novel, to challenge the reader’s understanding of the relationship between literature and reality.

The structure of Soumi’s novel is characterized as inside out, disrupted, and fragmented. The image of the volcano suggests a structure that has a seemingly fixed exterior but is hiding a volatile interior. The phrase “faire sauter la structure elle-même” suggests Soumi seeks to reinvent the structure of the traditional novel. The repeated adjective, “éclaté,” used to describe both the structure of Soumi’s novel and the world around him, echoes the impending explosion of the previously mentioned volcano and suggests a violent division or splintering of the novel. In comparing the structure of the novel to the experience of “s’y perdre aux yeux caverneux d’un aveugle,” Soumi indicates his novel would provide access to the usually inaccessible, just as an uninhibited gaze into unseeing eyes might expose something previously unobserved. Finally,
Soumi emphasizes that the structure of the novel mirrors the impoverished neighborhood where he lives, which is peripheral to the city and receives no governmental aid or support.

The discussion of the structure of Soumi’s novel of course demands consideration alongside *La Promesse des fleurs* itself. Much of how Soumi describes the structure of his novel could be applied to the mise en abyme form of Nganang’s novel. First, the “éclaté” nature of Soumi’s novel bears resemblance to the abrupt shifts between Soumi’s life, his experience of writing, and the realm of his imagination that jar the reader of *La Promesse des fleurs*. In addition, the idea of exposing something that was previously concealed might correspond to the revelation of the authorial process depicted in Nganang’s novel. Finally, Soumi’s precise consideration of his protagonist and the structure of his novel encourage the reader to speculate about how Nganang, or any novelist, may have conceived of their own work.

The story of Jacqueline, and Soumi’s ambition to capture his imagined realm in words, alienates him from his peers, family, and daily life in general. His thoughts and spare time are both dominated by his imagined heroine and his attempts to put her into words. Soumi’s interactions with his family are primarily limited to him expressing annoyance about their interruptions while he writes. He also complains that he has to share his room with his sister although he admits he leaves her almost no space among his books and papers; literature crowds out his sister, depriving her of vital living space and foreshadowing tragic events that transpire at the end of the novel. When it comes to his friends, Soumi feels a certain superiority in relation to them because of his writing and he senses they dislike him because of this status; he even describes their feelings toward him as hate, as the following passage illustrates,

*Ils me haïssaient parce qu’ils savaient que j’écrivais des poèmes, que j’étais en train d’écrire un roman. Ils me haïssaient, parce que je ne manquais pas une*
occasion pour leur dire qu’ils n’étaient que les lâches qui attendent patiemment de mourir dans leur lit gras de vieillesse, de leur belle mort. Oui, ils me haïssaient parce que je leur disais qu’il fallait plus d’imagination que d’argent pour sortir de la misère et de la dégénérescence. Ils me haïssaient, parce que je leur disais ensuite que ce qui leur manquait le plus, c’était la capacité d’imagination et le courage de penser leur vie. Leur haine n’était que l’autre visage d’une jalousie qui transparaissait en des phrases assassines lâchées au hasard des conversations, en d’interminables phrases-variations sur le thème : ‘la vie est ailleurs que dans les livres’.

Soumi explains how his peers perceive his writing and the effect it has on their perception of him. According to Soumi, writing is a mode of agency to take control of life and escape the current surroundings. The passage illustrates that Soumi understands writing to be a form of action against poverty and the “degeneration” of his circumstances. The repetition of the phrase “Ils me haïssaient” serves to both emphasize the divide between Soumi and his peers but also to highlight the intensity of emotion felt by his friends. For the protagonist, the purpose of writing and imagination is to escape and without it, his friends are stuck, powerless in their present state.

The final phrase of the passage cited above, “la vie est ailleurs que dans les livres,” is significant in that it encapsulates the primary dilemma for the protagonist in the novel: his conflicted relationship between his life in books and life around him. The phrase is also a critique leveled at him by his friends (who, by extension, think that he his “hiding” from “real life” by seeking refuge in books). This predicament is a technique of metafiction that forces the reader to consider the layers of “reality” within the novel and how it relates to realities outside of the novel. It is clear to the reader that Soumi sees the world around him in a much different way.

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112 Nganang, Promesse, 51.

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than his peers and, at times, these two visions of the world collide. As the novel progresses and pressure on Soumi mounts, his realities become clouded and disorienting, leaving the reader to her own personal understanding of the events of the novel.

There are several moments in the novel when Soumi appears to transcend his present state and fully envision Jacqueline as a real, live woman. During one of these moments, Soumi approaches a house where he believes Jacqueline lives but instead he finds an old man who opens the door and scares the boy away, shouting the following message:

‘Dire qu’il y avait des écrivains qui étaient prêts à mourir pour que vive leur personnage,’ dit-il. ‘Ah ! L’époque glorieuse est finie ! Où est passée la génération d’écrivains radicaux ? Où sont les écrivains assassins ? Es-tu de ceux qui écrivent pour gagner beaucoup d’argent ? Es-tu de ces imbéciles que écrivent des romans pour passer à la télévision et jouer aux stars ? J’attendais un écrivain, mais je ne vois venir qu’une machine à écrire, qui en plus a peur de la rouille !’

Et dans mon dos, je l’entends crier : ‘Il y en a qui sont prêts à s’exiler pour leurs héros vivent ! Regarde Ngugi ! Regarde Soyinka ! Regarde Beti ! Ça, ce n’étaient pas des écrivains pour talk show ! Peut-on se dire écrivain et avoir peur de la mort ? Ah ! Ah ! Ah ! Regardez-le fuir ! Il a même peur de son ombre !’

As the exclamation marks clearly illustrate, the old man speaks with passion and outrage as he shouts at Soumi. The series of four rhetorical questions he poses seem to indicate he is baiting Soumi to defend himself, which he is completely unable to do as he flees from the stoop of the house. Clearly, the passage illustrates an opposition between a “glorious” past generation of authors—such as Beti, Ngugi, and Soyinka—who fought for their writing, took risks, and feared nothing and a new generation of author who just cares about making money, appearing on talk

113 Nganang, Promesse, 83.
shows, and does not fight for their work.\textsuperscript{114} The old man’s tirade projects a responsibility of bravery, radicalism, even heroic deeds in order to be a respected African writer. This passage also illustrates that Soumi is doubly alienated as a writer: on one hand his family and community do not see any value in his literary pursuits while on the other hand, the old man clearly values literature but \textit{not} the kind of literature Soumi is writing.

The relationship between the contemporary writer and his or her literary forbearers is fraught with pressure to live up to their standard yet, also, forge their own path. As Ode Ogede elaborates in \textit{Intertextuality in Contemporary African Literature}, a paradox of African writing is the way “developing writers envision having to elbow aside their predecessors or compeers as the best possibility for them to clear imaginative space for themselves, but they all have to draw creative inspiration by standing on the shoulders of those larger than themselves.”\textsuperscript{115} There is an inferiority complex that emerges out of the conflicting pressures and expectations between generations. The contemporary writer is at once dependent on and bound by the canon yet simultaneously expected to innovate and tread new ground.

The divide between generations recalls the epigraph in which Kafka describes a younger generation being pulled in two directions by expectations; the younger generation is freed of guilt but, as a result, is unmotivated to speak out and is thus criticized. This is an important moment in a metafictional reading of \textit{La Promesse des fleurs} because the novel stages its own criticism by comparing itself to the works of a previous generation of writers. Both Soumi’s novel, as well as Nganang’s, are implicitly placed in contrast to the works of the “radical” authors of the past. The reader must make her own judgment about how each novel measures up.

While the novels in this chapter all emphasize the differences between generations of writers, the

\textsuperscript{114} The previous generation of writers bears a striking resemblance to the \textit{écrivains engagés}.
reader is left to speculate on the sources of these divergences. One source of the divide could be that the first generation of writers were fighting for independence and the subsequent generation now lacks a motivating cause because independence has been attained, or equally likely, perhaps the fact that the long desired independence has turned out to be so fraught leaves the second generation unsure of how to proceed. The novels do not provide answers as to what divides the generations yet the specters of African-writers-past remains an omnipresent theme that appears in Nganang’s work as well as in novels by Alain Mabanckou and Elizabeth Tchoungui. And in each of these novels, the text solicits consideration within a genealogy of francophone literature.

Soumi’s acute self-consciousness about his writing, and how it measures up to other writers, takes on another form when faced with the possibility of censorship. Early in the novel Soumi discovers that his sister Sandra is romantically involved with an older man of wealth and power, presumably a government official of some kind. Soumi promises not to expose Sandra’s relationship to their parents but reacts angrily when Sandra tells him that her companion wants to warn him to be careful because the government “does not like writers.” The mysterious man even offers to work his connections to help Soumi find a job and get his work published once he finishes school. After Sandra conveys these messages to him, Soumi, shocked, replies,
qui ne sont que de simples couvertures du vide et du rien qui à travers le bic écrivant refait surface?\textsuperscript{116}

Sandra’s message voices the risks a young writer takes simply by producing fiction and proposes an alternative that is evidently abhorrent to Soumi. Soumi’s reaction condemns any governmental involvement in literary production. Silence, emptiness, and meaninglessness characterize the work of the censored writer. Beginning in the epigraph, and repeated throughout the novel, silence is positioned as the enemy of the writer, the ultimate foe the writer must combat. In this passage, silence appears in the form of government censorship but as the novel progresses, and Soumi remains unable to write his story, the encroaching silence is in his own mind, in the form of a kind of self-censorship.

As time passes and Soumi’s inability to make progress on his novel persists, he becomes progressively more disheartened. The unwavering self confidence expressed in the beginning of the novel eventually turns to disappointment and despair. Soumi explains,

\begin{quote}
J’étais convaincu que je finirais par trouver le geste juste, le mot juste, l’élan juste pour dire l’histoire de Jacqueline au monde, pour l’arracher au silence envahissant de ma chambre, de ma tête et la lancer dans le soleil de la cour à laquelle, assis à ma table, je tournais le dos; j’étais convaincu que je finirais par dire Jacqueline pour le monde, pour la postérité et me faire un nom dans le bal des écrivains d’importance\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

The repetition of “j’étais convaincu que je finirais” emphasizes the contrast between Soumi’s initial conviction that he would write his story and the slow realization of how difficult writing actually is for him. A sinister silence reappears in this passage, this time inside his room, and

\textsuperscript{116} Nganang, Promesse, 118.
\textsuperscript{117} Nganang, Promesse, 149.
inside his own head. Holed up in his bedroom, Soumi turns his back to the sunlight of the courtyard, a metaphor for the world around him that he repeatedly neglects in favour of writing his book. The second sentence of the passage reiterates an anxiety expressed previously in the novel, Soumi wants to be considered among the “écrivains d’importance” but that is not enough to motivate him, and instead he is paralysed by the weighty expectations.

Soumi disappoints himself, as well as his protagonist, by not writing. He articulates Jacqueline’s disenchantment when he says, “je pouvais comprendre que mon personnage s’ennuie avec le temps qui passe. Vous n’allez pas jouer à cache-cache avec une femme pendant sept ans sans rien concrétiser. Elle ne vous prendra au sérieux. Elle vous prendra à la fin pour un raté, pour un imbécile, pour un incapable, pour un impuissant.”

Perhaps believing her to be a real person or personifying his character and endowing her with subjectivity, Soumi conflates his failure to write with an inability to successfully woo a woman. He worries Jacqueline thinks less of him, even sees him as emasculated, for not being able to write.

Throughout the text, but most dramatically at the conclusion, Nganang’s novel clouds the boundary between La Promesse des fleur and Soumi’s novel through dreams and moments that seem like hallucinations. As Patricia Waugh has written, metafictional texts seek to problematize the concept of literary realism but certainly do not abandon realism within the novel; instead, conventions of realism serve as the “norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves.” Waugh’s theory is helpful in understanding how to appreciate the few surreal and dreamlike moments in the novel that contrast strikingly with the rest of the narration. For example, at the end of the novel, Soumi’s sister is raped by several police officers who come to the house looking for her boyfriend. During the confusion following

118 Nganang, Promesse, 149.
119 Waugh, Metafiction, 18.
the crime, Soumi is distraught and frantically asks his unconscious sister, “Pourquoi ne m’as-tu pas dit que tu étais Jacqueline.” Soumi confuses his sister and his fictional heroine, thinking they are the same woman. After the dust has settled following the crime, Soumi realizes,

\[
\text{Ce n’était pas ma sœur qui avait été violé, c’était mon amante, c’était la femme que sous la forme de ma Jacqueline j’avais véritablement toujours voulu posséder, la femme je fuyais en me cachant dans le monde de mes rêves, dans l’univers de mon roman, en la chassant hors de mon royaume des fictions, hors de mon bureau de travail, hors ma chambre.}
\]

In this passage, the world Soumi lives in and the world of his novel are collapsed into one. The reader is thus forced to confront the different realities within the novel and work to make sense of how Soumi perceives these two realities. The realization that Jacqueline and his sister are somehow the same woman sends Soumi into a spiral of despair and confusion, ultimately leading him to a condemnation of his imagined world because it lead him to neglect life around him.

Soumi’s conflation of his sister and his imagined “amante” reflects his crisis of regret over the attention he gave his writing at the expense of protecting his sister; had he not been so completely caught up with his imagined love affair with Jacqueline, he may have been able to better protect his sister from the violent attack.

In the final chapter of the novel, years have passed and Soumi reflects back on his preoccupation with writing; his opinion on the importance of writing has changed dramatically, as illustrated in the following passage:

\[
\text{Aujourd’hui encore, je ne peux m’empêcher de croire que j’ai échoué dans tout ce que j’ai entrepris. Je voulais écrire l’histoire de Jacqueline. Je voulais qu’elle soit}
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\[\text{Nganang, Promesse, 202.}\]
\[\text{Nganang, Promesse, 208.}\]

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un héro romanesque, comme la Mère Courage ou comme Chaïdana, mais je n’ai jamais pu écrire une seule phrase que soit restée, pour dire sa vie au monde et faire de moi l’écrivain que j’ai toujours voulu être, parce que j’avais choisi finalement, de taire la vérité quand je l’avais découverte, et de vivre en silence.\textsuperscript{122}

The two examples of “héros romanesques” Soumi mentions are both complicated, tragic, and not obvious heroines; la Mère Courage, the eponymous protagonist of a play by Bertolt Brecht about the Thirty Years War, sells odds and ends on the battlefields of Europe in order to support her family but ends up losing all of her children in the process.\textsuperscript{123} Chaïdana, a character in the novel \textit{La vie et demie} by Sony Labou Tansi, prostitutes herself to men of the dictator’s regime and then kills them, one after another, in order to avenge the death of her father. These intertextual references lead the reader to wonder what kind of novel Soumi is trying to write. Up until this point, the reader does not know details of Soumi’s novel, other than that he wants to write about Jacqueline. The brief details provided in the quotation above contradict the image the reader has of Soumi’s writing and plants other questions about his work.

The conclusion of the novel is an admission of defeat by the protagonist; he was unable to write the story he intended and instead presents the reader with the story of his failure. Soumi explains,

\begin{quote}
Je me suis contenté de consigner sur ces pages l’histoire de mon échec cuisant dans mon entreprise d’écriture d’un roman ; je me suis contenté ici, de montrer comment il m’a été impossible d’écrire \textit{L’Histoire vraie de Jacqueline}, et
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{122}Nganang, \textit{Promesse}, 215.

\textsuperscript{123}The intertextual reference to a work by German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht signals the importance of Nganang’s extensive experience in Germany and his exposure to German literature. Completing a doctorate in comparative literature and teaching in the field German studies, Patrice Nganang undoubtedly has literary influences from German, French, and African authors that have impacted his writing.
pourquoi ; je me suis contenté de tracer la géographie du pleur, de cri qu’étouffait mon silence, de redessiner doucement les frontières qui s’étaient dressées devant mon écriture. J’ai tout au moins été sincère, même dans cette profonde honte et c’est ma seule excuse devant le visage du monde.\footnote{Nganang, Promesse, 215.}

The ending of *La Promesse des fleurs* urges the reader to consider the preceding novel as testimony of Soumi’s inability to write the novel he hoped to produce. The novel he intended to be a “histoire vraie” of a character he invented. As Jean-Claude Blachère points out in his article entitled “‘Un troupeau de métaphores’: Le champ symbolique dans les romans de Patrice Nganang,” throughout his oeuvre, Nganang employs the words “vérité” and “vrai” in ways that problematize and subvert the very idea of Truth; Blachère writes,


While Nganang writes about the responsibility of the African writer to represent “la vérité” in *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine: Pour une écriture preemptive*, in *La Promesse des fleurs* the author exemplifies the impossibility of writing a *histoire vraie* for his protagonist. Yet while the novel ends with the protagonist feeling as though he has failed miserably at his goal,
the reader is left to consider what it is that he was able to write. Is Soumi’s testimony of failure in fact a much more “true” and “authentic” histoire vraie than the story of Jacqueline? Nganang’s novel poses questions about the purpose of literary production and the responsibilities of the contemporary writer for both the protagonist and the reader alike.

The struggle, alienation, and sense of failure that accompanies the writing process come to a climax at the conclusion of the novel. Similar sentiments, along with the failure to actually produce the desired work, also arise in the novel African Psycho by Alain Mabanckou. While the novel African Psycho is vastly different from La Promesse des fleurs in tone, setting, narration, and plot, both novels represent the trials of the creative process and the challenge of moving out from under the shadow of a previous generation of writers.

**Anxious Authorship in African Psycho**

*African Psycho* is the story of an aspiring murderer who is constantly preoccupied by the planning of his crime. The title and basic premise of *African Psycho* is borrowed from Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991), the story of Manhattan businessman turned serial killer. Mabanckou greatly appreciates Ellis’ novel but sees it as quite different from his own; in an interview, Mabanckou says, “Patrick Bateman is the perfect serial killer. Grégoire is just eternally awkward,” and he goes on to insist upon the centrality of the African setting in the shaping of his character.126 John Walsh argues that just as Ellis uses satire to expose “American excess and greed,” Mabanckou employs satire to comment on the way “stories of conflict and extreme poverty continue to define the West’s perception of all things African.”127 The narrator and protagonist, Grégoire Nakobomayo, recounts details of his violent and scandalizing upbringing in a city reminiscent of Brazzaville, as well as the past crimes of his idol, the serial

killer, Angoualima. Grégoire obsessively plots his violent acts, anxiously anticipates media coverage of his crimes, and constantly compares his work to that of Angoualima.

In my reading of the novel, I understand Grégoire’s plans for murder as a metaphor for the writing process and his emulation and mimicry of his idol as anxiety about how his work measures up to that of established and respected authors. This reading is admittedly unconventional but I am drawn to understand the novel in this manner because of the compelling way the protagonist perceives the act of murder as an expression of creativity and craft. In addition, passages that illustrate Grégoire’s preoccupation with the work of his idol treat murder as if it were a great art; he studies his master’s work so closely because he hopes to one day become a master himself. Ultimately, metaphors of writing in *African Psycho* serve to represent the anxieties of authorship, such as recognition, reception, and influence.

The metaphorical reading of the novel is inspired by the way the protagonist Grégoire respects and worships the ‘art’ of murder. Early in the novel, Grégoire describes the act of murder with affection and respect, as if it were a true art:

> Lorsque je lis les faits divers dans les quotidiens de notre ville, je constate qu’il n’y a pas geste aussi simple que celui de mettre un terme à la vie de quelqu’un. Il suffit de se munir d’une arme quelle qu’elle soit, de tendre un guet-apens à la future victime et de passer enfin à l’acte. […] Le pire serait que ce forfait passe inaperçu. Il est clair que je n’envisage pas cette hypothèse humiliante. Sinon, à quoi m’auraient servi ces jours de réflexion pendant lesquels mes méninges s’emmêlaient à propos du choix de l’arme appropriée à ce crime à venir, au point que je m’étais presque retrouvé au bord d’une crise de nerfs?  

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This passage, and many others like it in *African Psycho*, illustrates the way Grégoire cherishes the act of murder and the choice of weapon. Repeatedly outlining the procedure of murder demonstrates that the protagonist is both fascinated and seduced by the simplicity and finality of ending a life. In *African Psycho*, murder is not a senseless crime, committed at random by the criminals insane, rather it is presented repeatedly as an act of great reflection, forethought, and planning carried out by creative individuals who respect the skill of killing. From choosing a victim to selecting a weapon, ending a life requires virtuosity and ingenuity in order to get noticed. In addition, the line “le pire serait que ce forfait passe inaperçu” expresses Grégoire’s need for his crimes to be “read.” It is not enough to commit the crime, he requires acknowledgment of the crime, much like a novel needs a readership in order to reach a certain status.

The importance of being recognized for the crime is a fundamental component of a successful murder and thus different forms of news media take up an important status within the novel. The narration of *African Psycho* frequently incorporates passages from the radio, television, and other media; as Philip Amangoua Atcha elaborates in the article “*African Psycho*: Une écriture du macabre,” crime writing “intègre et exploite les médias et d’autres supports modernes de communication dans le tissu narratif, des éléments considérés jusque-là par la critique, comme de la trivial littérature ou de la paralittérature.”¹²⁹ Grégoire studies murders in films for inspiration, he listens to crime reports on the radio, and scours newspapers for salacious details. As such, all of these media are incorporated into the text of the novel. Both the genre of the crime narrative and the intermixing of media serve to “erode the distinction between the public and private, the media and social space, fiction and reality, entertainment and cultural

politics”. The erasure of boundaries between reality and representation plague Grégoire; his constant attention to the accuracy of media representation is a result of his anxieties about authorship.

At the beginning of the novel, Grégoire expresses great frustration because he recently sexual assaulted a young nurse, yet the attack was barely mentioned in the media; he explains, frustrated,

Après cet acte, je vous assure que, le lendemain, je suis resté une journée entière à écouter Radio Rive Droite, dans l’espoir qu’on évoquerait en détail les faits à la place de cette dépêche qui, même si on ne me nommait pas, avait froissé mon orgueil et m’avait couvert d’avanies, moi qui ai toujours souffert que mes actions soient sans cesse créditées à d’autres malfrats de la ville.

Feeling snubbed by the media haunts Grégoire because his idol, who he refers to as “le Grand Maître,” received virtually constant media attention for his crimes. Grégoire’s concern with the possibility that his work will be overlooked stands in the place of concerns about authorship and literary influence. Just as an author might fear appropriation and plagiarism of their literary work, Grégoire worries that others will take credit for his crimes and that he will not be recognized.

The desire for recognition that Grégoire expresses above is related to his desire to live up to the reputation of his idol, Angoualima. Grégoire’s emulation of his idol is obsessive and neurotic. As the following passage explains, he is unable to keep his idol out of his thoughts:

chacune fois qu’un de mes coups se solde par un fiasco, je ne sais pas ce qui me pousse à songer à mon idole Angoualima et à me rendre aux premières heures de

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Grégoire’s fascination is so out of his control he abandons himself to it. Angoualima invades his thoughts and Grégoire happily takes abuse from him. Angoualima is the hero of a previous generation of criminals who inspire Grégoire but also make him feel incompetent in comparison. Just as evidenced in the novel *La Promesse des fleurs*, there is a recurrent comparison between generations that leads to an inferiority complex on the part of the contemporary author. The pressure to live up to the work of the respected authors of the previous generation causes paralysis and stagnation for Grégoire’s creative process. Grégoire hopes to break away from the reputation of his idol and innovate, just as a contemporary author might seek to do with his or her writing.

I pursue a metaphorical reading of *African Psycho*, in part because there are several points in the novel in which the narrator discusses literature and the process of his research for his crimes. These moments are fundamental in illuminating Grégoire’s personality and explaining the motivation for his “work.” The passages question the relevance and representational strategies of literature and provide glimpses at what is truly at stake in the novel. At several moments Grégoire reflects on the ways literature fails to accurately represent reality. After describing his childhood love of the comic series *Blek le Roc* at length, Grégoire concludes: “Je croyais que ces personnages étaient réels et vivaient quelque part où ils consacraient leur existence à défendre la liberté, l’aventure, et l’héroïsme. J’ai commencé à les

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détester le jour ou j’ai réalisé que c’était un être humain qui les dessinait en France, qui les faisait courir à travers le monde et que leurs aventures n’étaient que le fruit de l’imagination…”. As a child he felt deceived by the fictional form and troubled by the contrivance of his beloved stories. Literary imagination is a frustration and disappointment to Grégoire. Overtly questioning the relationship between reality and fiction, this passage is an example of metafictional narration when, rather than couched in metaphor as it is for most of the novel, the topic of writing comes to the surface.

At a few brief moments, such as the passage cited above, the heart of the metaphorical reading of the novel comes to the forefront in noteworthy ways. In other words, rather than leaving clues about writing within representations of the act of murder, the text directly addresses reading, writing, and literature. In another example of explicit engagement with literature, Grégoire discusses his own literary preferences,

>`Je me suis lancé, moi aussi, dans la lecture de ce que les gens appellent la grande littérature. À chacun ses goûts. Moi, ce que je recherchais, c’était de l’action, de la frayeur, que je retrouvais plutôt dans la littérature populaire. Cependant, on rapportait que, pour être un homme cultivé, il fallait se plonger dans les Proust, les Genet, les Céline, les Rousseau et bien d’autres auteurs de cette trempe.`

Grégoire describes an opposition between what he sees as “great literature” and popular literature. He acknowledges the role of the former in making one cultivated yet expresses his preference for novels in which there is action. This provides an element of surprise and complexity to his character. One doesn’t generally think of criminals as people who have immersed themselves in the French canon. The mention of Jean Genet among the list of French

writers is of particular interest because so many of the details of Genet and Grégoire’s early lives are parallel: both abandoned by their mothers as infants; they were passed between a succession of foster families; and both spent much of their childhood committing petty crimes before beginning their creative works. The biographies of Genet and Grégoire demonstrate the ways in which the line between creativity and criminality can be blurred. The passage also illustrates that, in many ways, Grégoire hopes to be considered “un homme cultivé” and he genuinely believes he can achieve this goal through the mastery of the art of murder.

In addition to frequenting churches, Grégoire spends time in the local courthouse to observe his fellow criminals. Grégoire’s visits to the courthouse reveal the ways in which he feels separated from other people by his work. He is an observer of others, as if he had nothing in common with the rest of the human race. He describes the experience as somewhere between cinema and theatre: “j’avais la sensation d’aller au cinéma, car nous faisons la queue, sauf qu’au palais de justice, les séances étaient gratuites et les acteurs à quelques mètres de nous, comme au théâtre.” He is always a voyeur, away from the action but soaking it all in. He has a taste for the dramatic and appreciates the spectacle of human dramas played out for all to see.

Ultimately, visits to the courthouse are research for Grégoire. He discovers details of the lives of his fellow criminal, and as he explains, “le grand palais de justice de notre ville était ainsi devenu mon lieu d’errance, mon laboratoire des sentiments humains. Je me perdais dans les couloirs sinistres à peine éclairés. Je tendais l’oreille aux disputes des familles, aux pleurs de la veuve ou de l’orphelin.” Just a writer might observe people around him or herself in order to create a lifelike novel, Grégoire hopes to distill the human emotion he observes in the courthouse into his own murders.

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Grégoire’s life is dominated by the “research” he gathers for his crimes as well as his own internal struggles related to accomplishing a crime violent enough to satisfy himself and his idol. Grégoire envisions his trajectory to becoming an accomplished murderer as a progressive escalation of his smaller crimes over time. He explains at one point, “tuer, un verbe que j’adule depuis ma majorité. Tous les petits coups que j’exécutais, au fond, c’était pour conjuguer plus tard ce verbe sous sa forme la plus immédiate et la plus aboutie”.\(^{137}\) The use of language—specifically the conjugation of a verb—stands in for the actual physical act of committing murder. This description is striking because it seems that Grégoire envisions the act of murder in a linguistic or textual realm of representation. In addition, this quotation illustrates that Grégoire is preoccupied with the language of killing as much as he is with the physical act.

Grégoire’s obsessive imagining, planning, and worrying about his future crime is largely dominated by concerns about his idol. Simultaneous veneration and terror characterize Grégoire’s relationship to his idol, who, as Grégoire explains, he cannot get off of his mind, “je me lève tous les matins et murmure Angoualima. Je me couche tous les soirs et murmure Angoualima. Il m’entend, je le sais. Il est devenu le père que je n’ai pas connu et que je n’ai pas cherché à connaître au risque de perdre à jamais mon identité”.\(^{138}\) While illustrating Grégoire’s obsession with his idol, this passage also exposes how the relationship between idol and worshipper threatens to efface Grégoire’s identity. Describing Angoualima as a father figure, but a father figure he would perhaps prefer not to know, Grégoire explains that this relationship has the potential to overshadow his own identity. Angoualima’s crimes loom so large in the consciousness of the city that Grégoire feels as though he is not able to have an impact. The anxiety of never being able to rival the work of Angoualima is a metaphor for fears of not being

\(^{137}\)Mabanckou, \textit{African Psycho}, 58.  
\(^{138}\)Mabanckou, \textit{African Psycho}, 60.
able to move beyond the legacy of previous, established authors and their styles of writing. There is also an interesting psychoanalytical element in Angoualima’s role as father because one might imagine that in order to overcome his anxieties of influence, Grégoire would need to “tuer le père.” Yet Grégoire never fantasizes about doing away with Angoualima, perhaps suggesting a kind of psychological stall in the progression of the establishment of selfhood.

The creativity and originality of his crime is of utmost importance to Grégoire. Just as he fears he will not be able to surpass the reputation of his predecessor, Grégoire considers the characteristics of other murders and their perpetrators closely in order to find a way to exceed their crimes. As Grégoire makes clear, the choice of weapon is a weighty decision for a murderer: “ce qui me révulse le plus en matière de couteaux, c’est le nombre d’assassinats commis avec…seuls les derniers des imbéciles opèrent encore par ce moyen. Pour voir plus large, je range sous cette rubrique d’armes : la hache, le coupe-coupe, la houe, la sagaie, le coupe-papier du roman de Guy des Cars, le râteau, la pelle ou la pioche”.139 Grégoire’s revulsion for the unoriginality of killing someone with a knife, rather than for the act of actually ending someone’s life, is so perverse it is amusing. Mabanckou’s character feels many of the expected reactions to murder—horror, disgust, disillusionment—but these emotions are always ironically directed at some aspect of the accomplishment of the murder rather that the fact that an innocent life was taken. The intense focus on the implement of murder indicates that Grégoire attempts to develop his own stylistic for killing. Again, he endeavors to break away from the past, innovate, and make his own inimitable mark.

From the weapon used to kill the victim to when and where they are killed, Grégoire considers all features of a murder as factors that contribute to the originality, and thus

memorability, of the act. Returning obsessively to the question of the proper tool to commit murder, Grégoire continues,

le couteau ? Je ne nie pas son efficacité. Quand je lisais encore, j’avais vu que plusieurs auteurs célèbres prêtaient cette arme à leur personnage. Je pense surtout à l’Arabe de Camus dans L’Étranger. Bon, c’est une autre histoire. C’est vrai que l’Arabe avait bien sorti son couteau, mais avait-il tué le narrateur avec ? Non, c’est plutôt le narrateur qui avait utilisé un pistolet ! Mieux encore, il avait tiré quatre fois sur un corps déjà inerte !

Literature is a source of inspiration for the protagonist and in this passage he uses literature to support his opinions on the selection of a weapon. By rehearsing the famous scene of violence in Camus’ novel, Grégoire seems to want to prove the superiority of the pistol to the knife. The weapons of fictional characters, and the choices authors make in giving these weapons to their characters, factor into Grégoire’s own considerations for his “perfect” crime. Grégoire’s decision about what weapon to choose aligns with that of Camus, again supporting the metaphorical reading of *African Psycho* that recognizes murder to represent writing.

At the end of the novel, another criminal usurps Grégoire’s victim. Someone else kills his girlfriend Germaine before he can. After the murder of Germaine, Grégoire thinks that in “une situation normale” there would be an investigator like in the films or police novels he knows so well. He muses that an inspector would be assigned to the case who would wear “un pardessus beige, un feutre noir et fumerait une pipe, des Gauloises ou des Gitanes sans filter.” After finding the first clues—a ring, an earring, a strand of hair or perfume—picking it up with his tweezers and examining it, “la machine serait mise en marche.”

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scenario as follows: “L’inspecteur se serait posé d’abord une question fondamentale : *Pourquoi Germaine et non une autre prostituée ?* Puis une autre : *Quel a été son emploi du temps avant le crime ?* Puis une autre encore : *Avait-elle eu différend avec quelqu’un de son entourage ?* Puis une autre encore : *Avait-elle un maquereau, un mari, un petit ami ?* Puis une autre encore : *Où vivait-elle ?*142 Grégoire imagines how the crime would be traced back to him and he would become the number one suspect in the murder case. The repetition of “puis une autre encore” pokes fun at the suspense of the crime novel just as the description of the cigarette-smoking investigator plays into every stereotype of the genre. Yet, interestingly, as Grégoire mocks the formulaic nature of the imagined investigation, he still hopes things could play out this way so that he could receive the credit, fame, and notoriety for committing the crime.

Patricia Waugh identifies the detective story as a plot type ripe for metafictional derision because “tension is wholly generated by the presentation of a mystery and heightened by retardation of the correct solution. Even characters, for the most part, are merely functions of the plot.”143 Because the detective story is so formulaic, it is easy to manipulate reader expectations by deviating even slightly from the form. As both Waugh and Hutcheon write, the formula is a satisfying—and I would go so far as to say comforting—aspect of the detective story.144 In *African Psycho*, the rigid detective story functions first to highlight how differently a murder is handled in Congo as compared to the European settings of the traditional crime novel; and secondly, the detective formula illustrates the influence of these plots on the protagonist and his vision of crime. Grégoire aspires to commit murders as strictly and expertly planned, timed, and executed as the detective stories. The repetition of Grégoire’s plans echoes the serial nature of his idol’s killing but, in the end, Grégoire’s failure represents a disjunction of narrative linearity.

143 Waugh, *Metafiction*, 82.
144 Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, 73.
Subverted by Mabanckou, who refuses to allow the genre to fulfill its literary function, the formula of the detective story is shattered and the criminal fails to successfully commit a crime. By calling attention to the formula but then straying from it, Mabanckou asserts a kind of individual, artistic mastery over the genre.

In the final scene of the novel, Grégoire returns to the cemetery where his idol is buried and attempts to take credit for Germaine’s murder. He stands near his idol’s grave and speaks to his ghost, explaining fabricated details about Germaine’s murder. Angoualima sees right through Grégoire’s lies and says to him, just before he disappears forever, “Maintenant tu peux déguerpir en te disant une chose: tu ne seras jamais un vrai criminel. Et si malgré tout tu le deviens, je te promets que je ressuscitera pour te brûler moi-même avec les flammes de l’Enfer.” The novel ends at a moment of complete defeat for Grégoire; the plan he anguishes over for months is a failure, he is unable to leave his mark, and his beloved idol has vowed never to appear again. The tone of debauched desperation and futility is carried through the novel and climaxes at the conclusion.

In the limited scholarship published on *African Psycho*, there is a range of opinions on how to make sense of the tone, violence, and nihilistic ending of the novel. In an article entitled “*African Psycho* ou l'écriture de l'insignifianc,” Bidy Cyprien Bodo uses a “theory of insignificance” developed by Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis to analyze forms

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146 In comparison to Mabanckou’s later novels, *African Psycho* has received significantly less critical attention and media coverage. One explanation for this fact may be that Mabanckou’s work was not as widely known or extensively written about (a number of scholars—Cazenave, Moudileno, and Thomas—had been writing about his work for some time, and Mabanckou had been a regular guest at academic conferences) until he published *Verre cassé* with Éditions de Seuil in 2005. Not until he was published with a major editor did Mabanckou really begin to enter onto the literary prize circuit and gain the international recognition he now enjoys. Published in 2003 at Le Serpent à plumes, *African Psycho* came before the explosion of the author’s career and has fallen under the radar as a work deserving of critical analysis.
of “insignificance” of people and words in the novel. The first part of the article demonstrates how Mabanckou uses paradox, monotony, and contradiction in order to destabilize the meaning of words and the second section focuses on the ways human life is devalued through scatological statements, violence, and dehumanization of the body. In the final section of the article, titled “Écriture de l’insignifiance comme psychanalyse du monde africain?”, Bodo argues that Mabanckou’s text points to a fundamental identity crisis within contemporary Africa; he writes, “ce texte au titre fort évocateur, semble faire une étude psychanalytique du monde africain pour en révéler une profonde crise identitaire, une psychologie perturbée. Cette situation est manifeste dans la crise de la représentation de soi. Elle est identifiable dans la nature des codes de perception ou de saisie de soi et de son environnement.”

Bodo goes on to explain that in the absence of an uniquely African social imaginary, separate from European paradigms, “la société africaine à l’œuvre dans ce texte de Mabanckou ne peut ni forger, ni maintenir, une représentation d’elle-même qu’elle puisse affirmer et valoriser.”

If the reader takes African Psycho as a representation of the social reality in Congo, it is easy to see how the murder, rape, corruption, and dysfunction in the novel could lead someone to make an argument similar to the one Bodo makes above. But what this method of reading neglects to consider is the complex irony and satire central to African Psycho, and many of Mabanckou’s other works. As John Walsh explains,

in narratives on his native Congo and its relationship with France, Mabanckou deploys irony as a means of dissembling (from the Greek eironeia) but also, through the reader’s interpretation, of rebuilding. Such a tactic allows him to cast characters with dubious potential into central roles that confound the reader’s

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148 Mabanckou, African Psycho, 50.
expectations. Mabanckou creates absurd situations to contest traditionally held views about the African experience.¹⁴⁹

Unlike Bodo, I do not read a crisis of Self in African Psycho because like Walsh, I understand the entire novel to be layered with irony and satire. If there is a crisis in this novel, it is a crisis of representation. And moreover, it is an expertly staged crisis of representation, not a “failure” or a “crisis” of Mabanckou’s own. Dressing the writer up in the clothes of a melodramatic murderer, so to speak, Mabanckou successfully portrays the intimate anxieties and neuroses of representation. Grégoire’s most pressing concerns in life are leaving his mark, receiving recognition, and being respected alongside a hero of the past. Thus by cloaking the writing process in metaphor throughout the novel, Mabanckou subtly conveys the pressures and expectations that characterize the process of literary representation for the contemporary African writer.

Much like La Promesse des fleurs and African Psycho, which provide windows into the intimacies of creative expression and the pitfalls that accompany it, Elizabeth Tchoungui’s novel Je vous souhaite la pluie tackles both the internal and external battles that face the contemporary African writer. While undoubtedly less tormented and psychologically haunted than Grégoire, the protagonist of Je vous souhaite la pluie endures an aggravating set of challenges as a woman writer in France.

**Media Manipulations in Je vous souhaite la pluie**

Je vous souhaite la pluie tells the story of a young writer who leaves her home in Yaoundé, Cameroon, relocates to Paris, and works determinedly to get her novel published. The protagonist of the novel is a hard-working young woman named Ngazan who supports her family

by working several jobs and spends her spare time reading poetry. She did not receive a formal education because of financial constraints but nevertheless she rejects the husband-hunting and celebrity obsessions of her peers for more intellectual pursuits, such as writing a novel. After meeting a young Frenchman, Alexandre, in a Yaoundé bar one evening, she is reluctantly won over by his charms and falls in love with him. She eventually moves to France after marrying Alexandre and begins a new life in Paris. Ngazan continues to work on her writing, although Tchoungui’s reader never finds out details about the substance of Ngazan’s writing; in other words, her writing process and the content of her novel are denarrated. In Paris, her drunken and dysfunctional friend, Princess, introduces her to several important figures in the publishing world, and while Ngazan finds the harsh reality of this industry discouraging, she is eventually successful in getting her work published.

*Je vous souhaite la pluie* directly engages with the way that francophone novels are marketed in France and how the marketing process of polishing and packaging impacts the author. Centered on a protagonist going through the trials of publication in France, the novel exposes the artificial and disingenuous aspects of how francophone authors and their works are promoted. Because the publication process is foregrounded for the protagonist’s novel, the reader is compelled to consider how *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, a novel also written by a young African woman, was manipulated during the publication process. The metafictional technique of mise en abyme juxtaposes the process of publication for the protagonist and the author. Metafictional techniques critique the reliance on France to publish the work of francophone authors and illustrate the way the francophone author, and her work, are manipulated in order to fit into a rigid narrative.
Anna-Leena Toivanen’s article “A Romantic Fairy Tale in the Era of Globalization: Love, Mobility and Cosmopolitanism in Elizabeth Tchoungui’s Je vous souhaite la pluie” describes Tchoungui’s novel as “a postcolonial African Cinderella tale in the context of globalization: the underprivileged yet beautiful, brave and talented female protagonist fights her way from the African predicament to the European limelight.” While it is undeniable that elements of Tchoungui’s novel are reminiscent of what some call “chick lit,” Toivanen’s characterization of the novel as a “fairy tale” or “Cinderella story” is reductive. The identifying characteristic of novels categorized as “chick lit” is a preoccupation with modern romance and contemporary consumer culture. While the beginning of Je vous souhaite la pluie does indeed focus on the development of Ngazan and Alexandre’s relationship, the majority of the novel is centered on the writing and publication of Ngazan’s book. The marketing of Ngazan’s novel is entwined with elements of contemporary consumer culture but again, the primary focus is the novel. The narration is witty, fast paced, and peppered with references to popular culture yet nevertheless provides insight into valuable questions of authorship and the African experience in France. In fact, the intimacy of the narrative style allows for a privileged look into how the challenges of authorship impact the young protagonist in her daily life.

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151 For scholarly definitions and analysis of “chick lit” see Stephanie Harzewski, Chick lit and Postfeminism and Caroline J. Smith, Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit.
153 While containing several thematic similarities to “chick lit,” Je vous souhaite la pluie is far less related to this genre than, for example, Léonora Miano’s novel Blues pour Élise (2010). Blues pour Élise tells the story of the professional, romantic and familial (mis)adventures of a group of young women living in Paris. The novel is divided into eight chapters, each of which provides a window into one of the lives of the young women, their sexual/romantic partners or one of their family members. Unlike Tchoungui’s novel, Blues pour Élise is dominated by stories of love won and lost and the sexual exploits of the young women.
Another contributing factor to the novel’s classification by some critics as “chick lit” is likely the casual tone of the narration. The novel consistently confronts the issues surrounding the publication of African texts with a mocking and familiar tone. For example, Ngazan’s conversations with an editor illustrate the almost comic way she pinpoints the challenges of the francophone author and their dependency on French publishers and their markets in France; she explains to her editor, “Je suis écrivain, je viens du Cameroun, aujourd’hui je cherche un éditeur en France, parce que entre les 30% de Camerounais analphabètes et les 90% qui n’ont pas les moyens d’acheter un livre, le marché est un peu restreint.”154 As Ngazan’s quick quip illustrates, the lack of a market for, and thus minimal circulation of, fiction in most francophone sub-Saharan countries is a distinctive challenge faced by authors as they must seek publication, more often that not, outside of their native countries and, perhaps more pointedly, in the country of former imperial domination. Throughout the novel both the third person narration and the dialogue take on a humorous and playful—but not lighthearted—tone that provides the reader with an intimate understanding of the characters’ personality through their informal conversations.

Initially, her inability to receive a formal education and the unlikelihood of her work ever getting published discourage Ngazan from committing herself to writing. At one point in the novel, Alexandre encourages Ngazan to attend university and she launches into a diatribe that begins, “ici [Cameroon], croire en soi comme tu dis, être intelligent, ça ne suffit pas. En admettant que Dieu me parachutte un colis de dollars pour nourrir ma famille pendant mes études, au concours d’entrée à l’École normale, je tomberai de toute façon sur un examinateur qui me demandera quelques faveurs en échange d’une bonne note… .”155 Ngazan is pessimistic about

155 Tchoungui, Je vous souhaite la pluie, 74.
both her ability to attend school but also the quality of education she would receive there. She disparages the corruption in the Cameroonian education system that mirrors her experience with the first publisher she meets: everything is done for a favor, sexual or monetary. It is not until she arrives in France with her new husband that she devotes most of her time to writing and pursuing a publisher for her work. What eventually becomes clear to her is that the expectations of favors, sexual or otherwise, will continue to plague her throughout the process of becoming a published author.

One evening, Ngazan attends a party of an editor to whom she has given a copy of her manuscript. She feels highly out of place at the party but attends in the hopes of asking the editor what he thinks of her work. Once she finally finds him, they have the following conversation,

—Bon, alors mon manuscrit ? s’impatienta Ngazan

—Ah! belle demoiselle, soupira Antoine Nutheil, comme terrassé par un tortueux coup de Jarnac. Je suis un éditeur mais je n’en suis pas moins un homme.

L’éditeur s’intéresse à votre manuscrit….

—Mais l’homme s’intéresse à mon cul, c’est ça? coupa Ngazan, ulcérée.

The editor propositions Ngazan and she storms out of the party. She feels like her writing is not taken seriously and is frustrated by the way men in the publishing industry repeatedly see her as a pretty face rather than a “serious” writer. Every step in the publication process—from bringing her manuscript to editors to shooting photos for press materials for the final product—Ngazan is valued more for the beauty than for her talent as a writer; moreover, her ability to sell books is more about her personal journey than the substance of her novel. Throughout *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, incrementally, she comes to discover that publishing a novel has remarkably little to do with her ability to tell a compelling story. This is perhaps one of the reasons the content of

156 Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 159.
Ngazan’s work is denarrated in the novel. Tchoungui underscores the lack of attention to content, form, structure, etc. of African authors by “hiding” these details of Ngazan’s writing from the reader.

Once she relocates to Paris with her husband, Ngazan compares her experiences to her expectations as well as the expectations of her family and friends back in Cameroon. She is acutely aware of how misguided her countrymen can be in their visions of Europe. The protagonist acknowledges this is largely a result of problematic entanglements of culture and politics that bind Cameroon to France. Yet Ngazan feels there is a difference between her generation and her parents’ generation vision of France; as the narrator explains, “elle n’a seriné ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’ avec l’œil fier de celui qui sait. Plus tard, elle a opté pour ‘nos oppresseurs les Gaulois’ au fils des émissions qu’elle suivait sur RFI ou sur TV5.”157 The phrase ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’ is a reference to the colonial education system and the civilizing mission of the French that required African students to learn the same curriculum as students in France, regardless of its applicability. The phrase has come to represent the rigidity of the French system and the alienation students felt learning lessons about European ancestors the Gauls and, classically, snow and the four seasons. The fact that the French curriculum in colonial Africa had no bearing on or relevance to the climactic, cultural, social or religious particularities of sub-Saharan Africa resulted in an alienating disconnect between what students learned in school and the reality they lived everyday. Yet in the passage above, the narrator explains that Ngazan did not grow up with this type of relationship to France but rather has a much more critical vision of the country.

Ngazan resents the neo-colonial nature of relations between France and Cameroon and the unbalanced power dynamic that results; the narrator continues,

\[157\] Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 127.
Elle a aussi lu ce livre honni des potentats africains qu’on se refile sous le manteau au Cameroun, *Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République*, de François-Xavier Verschave. Il démontre ce que l’homme de la rue dit tous les jours: que les dictateurs africains ne sont que les pantins des Français. Que les meilleurs, ceux qui voulaient sortir l’Afrique de l’ornière, ont été méticuleusement éliminés avec la bénédiction des états-majors tricolores.158

On one hand, citing the title of an actual scholarly work, and an especially powerful critique of African and European relations at that, serves to illustrate Ngazan’s engagement with contemporary politics and her awareness of scholarship surrounding neocolonial relationships. On the other hand, this passage minimizes the significance of the study by stating that all Africans knew their leaders were puppets to European governments and they hardly need a book to remind them of the fact. Ngazan is aware of the way African independence was undermined by the French yet does not see Cameroon as a helpless victim free from blame; instead she sees a need to take responsibility for their history.159 As the narrator explains, “elle aurait pu dresser ainsi un réquisitoire sans fin contre sa patrie par alliance qui continue à faire loi en Afrique. Ensuite, elle a pris ses distances par rapport à cette théorie infantilisante qui empêche les Africains d’assumer leurs responsabilités”.160 This extended passage illuminating Ngazan’s political philosophy is fundamental in understanding her attitudes and reactions to the French paternalism she experiences during the process of publishing her work.

158 Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 127.

159 Ngazan takes a view of history that acknowledges the crippling actions of European nations in the process of African independence, but does not go so far as to portray these African nations as passive and innocent. Likewise, in his seminal work *On The Postcolony*, Achille challenges several dichotomies of domination—resistance/passivity, autonomy/subjection, state/civil society, hegemony/counter-hegemony in order to illustrate that these false dichotomies obscure more complex postcolonial power relations. 160 Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 127.
Ngazan’s political and social awareness stands in stark contrast to the superficial vision of the world her friend Princess espouses throughout the novel. Princess and Ngazan grew up together in Yaoundé and after arriving in Paris, Ngazan receives much unsolicited guidance from her childhood friend. Fashion trends, VIP parties, and sexual provocation are Princess’ specialty and she is repeatedly shocked by Ngazan’s lack of interest in these topics. At one point, Princess provides Ngazan the following insights into how best to capitalize on her physical appearance:

N’oublie pas, tu es Zénobie la mystérieuse, souveraine de Palmyre, la reine de Saba, Hatshepsout la pharaonne, impériale, toujours ! Tu dois étonner, sans cesse laisser planer le mystère. Surtout, ne dis jamais que tu viens des ghettos de Yaoundé. Quand tu auras du succès, tu pourra toujours faire cette révélation, ça ancrera ta légende. D’ici là, reste évasive. Une belle mystérieuse, ça excite l’imagination ! Et pas que l’imagination, pour les hommes.\textsuperscript{161}

The catalog of regal—and most importantly foreign and exoticized—women serves to emphasize that the African woman’s power is inextricably linked to her beauty. Mystery and surprise must be cultivated in order to maximize impact among the intended audience. This role that the African woman must play in order to receive recognition recalls a similar dynamic in the 1982 novel \textit{Le Baobab fou} by Senegalese author Ken Bugul in which the protagonist performs “le jeu de l’Occident” in the absence of any other prospects of identification within Belgian society.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{161} Tchoungui, \textit{Je vous souhaite la pluie}, 132.
\textsuperscript{162} Ken, the protagonist of \textit{Le Baobab fou}, dances provocatively at nightclubs, acutely aware of the men entranced by her movements. Her body becomes a tool that she can employ to catch the attention of anyone she encounters in Belgium. A deep desire to be seen and to receive recognition pushes Ken’s performance to become increasing public and sexual. She wears transparent clothing, brightly colored outfits and enormous hats to call attention to herself. The protagonist finds jobs as a fashion model, a model for photographs and paintings and eventually, a prostitute; all of these occupations involve some component of corporeal performance. It is her body, not her intellect or personality, which is desirable in her social circle, and thus she seemly does not care to purse work outside of the realm of the corporeal. The cultivation of difference, the embellishment of the stereotype, solidifies Ken’s position among her
Princess encourages Ngazan to manipulate the revelation of her own biography in order to maximize the impact of her humble beginnings in Cameroon; constructing a personal “légende,” and playing a highly sexualized role, are of primary concern to Princess because she views this as the most effective way to get what she wants. Ngazan largely writes off the misguided strategies of Princess yet is still disturbed by the implications of her friend’s vision of the world. Princess’ encouragement to manipulate her image foreshadows similar kinds of superficial “rewriting” that occurs once Ngazan’s book is under contract and the publisher begins ordering marketing materials for the novel. Ngazan is faced with the fact that her image, origins, and lifestyle can all be transformed in order to produce a seductive, and consumable, version of herself.

Ngazan’s perspective on and expectations of France, and the goals she hopes to achieve there, could not be farther from Princess’ superficial charade. The following passage illustrates Ngazan’s tempered expectations and reserved anticipation:

Paris n’avait jamais été un eldorado pour elle. Elle n’avait jamais compris les risque-tout morts congelés dans un train d’atterrissage ou étouffés par les sables du Sahara pour avoir voulu rejoindre la Terre promise. Pourtant, après quelques semaines dans la capitale française, l’espoir avait gonflé ses veines. Paris était la ville de tous les possibles, et son rêve enfoui de se voir publiée s’était révélé.

Ngazan’s narrative of her arrival in France and her expectations of the country overall differ from the common perspective of many immigrants. Aware of how France can be viewed as “El

European acquaintances. The visual aspect of the stereotype, what it means to look like an African woman, dominates the protagonist’s performance. Ken’s desire for visibility becomes most evident in dinners she calls, “soirées africaines.” She invites European friends to her apartment—a very small space decorated with photographs of her naked body—and makes a Senegalese meal. While the guests eat “un plat exotique,” she puts on a fashion show of seductive African outfits. Her body is the focal point of all interactions she has with others.

dorado” or the “Promise Land,” Ngazan never viewed France in this way and certainly did not endure the struggles that many experience in trying to reach Europe. Nevertheless, her arrival in Paris does inspire her to believe that her writing could have a real chance at getting published. Ngazan's attitudes towards France shape her experience of the process of publication because she maintains a perspective that is critical of the power structures that impact her experiences.

Ngazan’s husband, Alexandre, is a peripheral character in the novel and the reader knows little of his perspective on his wife’s experiences; yet in the following passage, the reader gets a rare glimpse at his viewpoint:

> Qu’un puissant prenne le temps de s’intéresser à toi, c’est déjà énorme. Il a flairé ton potentiel. Et puis Maurice Glénant est un type à peu près recommandable. Il n’est pas totalement cynique. Comme il fabrique des armes qui tuent des millions d’innocents, il a besoin de s’acheter une bonne conscience. Enfin, une bonne image surtout, car la bonne conscience, c’est bien pour se présenter devant Dieu tous les dimanches à la messe, mais ce n’est pas ça qui fait tourner le bizness. S’il parvient à te lancer dans les milieux littéraires, toi, la serveuse noire, fille du ghetto, les médias en redemanderont, et ce sera le jackpot pour lui! ¹⁶⁴

Alexandre reacts to Ngazan’s account of a promising conversation she had with a businessman with close ties to the publishing industry. Calling the man “un puissant,” Alexandre highlights the inequalities of power inherent in Ngazan’s search for a publisher. In suggesting that the man is drawn to Ngazan because he views her as a vehicle by which he can clear his conscious of his numerous crimes, Alexandre emphasizes both that the man has a self-serving agenda as well as the fact that the quality of his wife’s work is barely relevant in the search for a publisher yet, ironically, it could serve as “jackpot” for someone. Alexandre clearly understands that this man

¹⁶⁴Tchoungui, Je vous souhaite la pluie, 191.
sees her as a “fille du ghetto” and not much more. As she moves progressively closer to getting
her work published, Ngazan begins to understand the reductive gaze of the industry that sees her
background and beauty as a vehicle to sell books and cares remarkably little for the quality of her
writing.

In *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, the focus on the publication process, from within the novel
itself, leads to commentary on the perception and expectations of the African author within the
French publishing industry and media. The reception of Ngazan and her work is a central theme
in the second half of the novel. Following the acceptance of her manuscript in France, she finds
herself being made-up and made-over by her publisher in order to transform her into the
expected vision of the African author. The following passage describes a photo-shoot for the
press materials of Ngazan’s book:

> le photographe lui avait demandé d’être sexy et délurée, parce qu’il fallait bien
que l’agence les vende, ces photos. Alors on lui avait prêté des vêtements aussi
courts que coûteux, du champagne pour la désinhibiter, […] un *bass-booster* et
des CD disco pour qu’elle puisse onduler son corps, parce que la beauté était la
marchandise la plus facilement monnayable, parce que si elle faisait bander les
acheteurs, c’était gagné, qu’elle soit aspirante pop star, top model en herbe, espoir
de la télé ou jeune écrivaine douée.\(^\text{165}\)

This passage illustrates the ways in which Ngazan is pressured into remaking her physical
appearance and persona in order to sell books. Exploiting her race and beauty, in particular ways,
the publisher hopes to peak the interest of potential readers. Ngazan’s “exotic” origins are put on
display because she is strange and mysterious yet at the same time, her otherness is tamed by
dressing her up in designer clothing and accompanying this with model-like poses. As Graham

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\(^{165}\) Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 205.
Huggan describes in *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, the postcolonial exotic “occupies a site of discursive conflict between a local assemblage of more or less related oppositional practices and a global apparatus of assimilative institutional/commercial codes.” Simultaneously othered and “domesticated,” the aesthetic perception of exoticism obliges these contradictory processes. *Je vous souhaite la pluie* exposes stereotypes of the African author by illustrating the artificial image of the francophone author created by French publishers.

Tchoungui’s work preempts the criticism of the potential commentator by calling for more authentic evaluation of the novel, isolated from the artificial marketing schemes. The media stunts become more and more ridiculous as the release date of Ngazan’s novel approaches. At one point, a journalist hopes to film and interview Ngazan in her “village” with her husband for a television program. She explains that the people in her village do not even know she has written a book, and the journalist responds, “Génial! Encore mieux! On va le jouer ‘retour de l’enfant prodigue’. On va dépêcher le meilleur de nos grands reporters, il a couvert le mariage de Charles et de Lady Di, la mort de Lady Di et Dodi, une vraie pointure. Dites-moi, je sais que les villages pygmées sont très isolés. Il y a combien de jours de marche pour arriver chez vous?” First, the woman has incorrectly assumes Ngazan is a “Pygmy” because her novel is titled *Pygmée-Party* and secondly, imagines that Ngazan comes from a rural community inaccessible by road when, in reality, Ngazan lived primarily in Yaoundé. She is being called upon to project an identity that is completely constructed in fantasy and has nothing to do with her actual life or the particular set of experiences that have informed her writing.

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Throughout all of these media stunts, marketing and advertisement are exposed as projects of manipulation or, at times, pure invention. Ngazan’s “Africanness” is put on display as her key to selling books without any regard whatsoever for how she cares to present herself. The press materials and paratextual packaging of Ngazan’s book are entirely outside of her control yet greatly influence who the book is directed towards and how this readership will receive it. The ridiculous photographs and poorly conducted interviews all have an impact on how a book is received by the public. As Richard Watts argues in *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World*, “there is no untangling the book as art form, as repository of cultural signification, from its status as a commodity circulating in a capitalist economic system.”

Je vous souhaite la pluie exposes the inner workings of the literary institution that influence the release and marketing of a contemporary francophone novel. In the end, the consequences of the packaging are impossible to measure but the protagonist at least makes her feelings about the process very clear. Nevertheless, she buys into it, and accepts it. There are two divergent ways to read Ngazan’s acceptance of the marketing process: either she is savvy to exploit her assets or she is complicit in her own objectification. Ambiguities of *Je vous souhaite la pluie* allow for either interpretation to be viable.

The final scene takes place on the set of a television talk show where Ngazan is invited to discuss her novel with Théophraste Morlet, a well-known and respected fictional television personality. The interview is a disaster, from the very beginning. First, she is introduced as follows, “elle vient des ghettos du Cameroun, elle n’a pas son bac et pourtant c’est la révélation littéraire de ce début d’année. Mesdames, Mesmoiselles, Messieurs je vous demande d’accueillir

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Ngazan Ella Belinga!**170** The interviewer implies her marriage to a French man was opportunistic, he refers to “the country of Africa” and finally, after losing her cool as a result of multiple insults and inaccuracies, Ngazan accuses him of not reading her book and eventually gets up and leaves, mid-interview. Drama is high and Ngazan exits to a roaring applause. In the moment, there is a sense of triumph for Ngazan because she has refused to be pushed around by her interviewer and takes control of her own portrayal in the media. The conclusion of the story is theatrical, and ultimately, quite melodramatic.

The conclusion of the novel, particularly Ngazan’s behavior on the television program, bears a striking resemblance to the actions of author Calixthe Beyala, a controversial figure in contemporary France today. In drawing comparisons between Ngazan and Beyala, it is crucial to explain the boundaries crossed in doing so; Ngazan is a fictional representation of a plausible writer-character who eventually comes to be seen as, perhaps, a thinly veiled version of a real-life francophone African author. The comparison may seem tenuous, but the connection between Ngazan and Beyala originates within the novel. In describing Ngazan’s work, one fictional critic compares her to “la truculence de Calixthe Beyala”.171 Just as seen in the novels by Nganang and Mabanckou, real authors intrude into the fictional realm, blurring realities inside and outside the boundaries of the novel.

Born in Cameroon, Beyala has published fifteen novels, received prestigious literary prizes and has been the center of numerous polemics following two separate accusations of plagiarism. In her book *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, Nicki Hitchcott examines how Beyala is portrayed in the media and the ways she has positioned herself as an author. Appearing repeatedly on French television to promote her novels as well as serving as a guest

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171 Tchoungui, *Je vous souhaite la pluie*, 206.
“expert” on various popular culture topics, Beyala has become “an icon of African femininity in France” as evidenced in the way that “interviewers draw attention to her physical appearance; camera operators often focus on her legs; and even in discussions of her fiction, such distinguished television presenters as Patrick Poivre d’Arvor single out the erotic qualities of her writing.” During several of her television appearances, Beyala has lost her temper with the interviewer or a fellow guest; raising her voice and causing palpable tension, Beyala does not shy away from televised arguments, and may intentionally foment conflict. Celebrated for her writing and “erotic-exotic” media persona, Beyala is concurrently criticized for her media overexposure and accused of being a fraud. Much of Ngazan’s experience in Je vous souhaitez la pluie is reminiscent of the way Beyala is portrayed by the media. Yet while Ngazan rejects the misleading image thrust upon her, Beyala “plays the media at their own game” by working to maintain a celebrity status throughout her career. At least on a superficial level, Beyala seems to take control of her media image by calling out interviewers and relishing the ensuing attention it brings her. Yet, what Beyala is certainly not in control of, is the fact that the sales of her books may depend on her ability to sustain her visibility in the French media.

The climax of the novel stages the forced performance of the francophone author in France and illustrates how authors are obliged to capitalize on their origins, real or invented, in order to sell books. Ngazan’s critical perspective provides the reader insight into how the individual writer must navigate an onslaught of inauthentic representations of themself in order to redirect the focus to their actual written work. Perhaps to emphasize the imbalance of attention

172 Nicki Hitchcott, Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 34.
173 See, for example, a youtube video titled “Altercation entre Calixthe Beyala et Michel Polac” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2r235ZfJ7Fg]
174 Hitchcott, Calixthe Beyala, 38.
on authorial background and image in favor of analysis of literary merit or significance, the reader knows nothing but the title of Ngazan’s book at the conclusion of the novel.

As a whole, *Je vous souhaite la pluie* brings the challenges of authorship to the forefront of the reader’s consciousness and in doing so, forces the reader to consider the whole literary process, from conception of the story to marketing of the final product. The metafictional technique of *mise en abyme* structures the novel so that at various points throughout the reader is encouraged to recognize that the challenges Ngazan faces are likely intimately related to the experience of Elizabeth Tchoungui, also a young woman of African origins writing in France. Broadly, questions of authorship and authorial authenticity are at stake in *Je vous souhaite la pluie* as well as the other novels discussed in this chapter.

**Authenticity and Authorship**

I have endeavored to illustrate how techniques of metafiction stage and confront the challenges facing the francophone writer from *within* works of fiction themselves. The works of Nganang, Mabanckou, and Tchoungui serve as examples of contemporary francophone African literature that employ techniques of metafiction in order to depict the production, reception, and objectives of literature from *within* the novel. In Nganang’s novel, metafictional techniques question the purpose of literary production and the responsibilities of the contemporary francophone author. Metaphors of writing in Mabanckou’s work serve to represent the anxieties of authorship, such as recognition, audience reception and influence. The reliance on France to publish the work of francophone authors and the ways the francophone author, and her work, are manipulated in order to fit into a rigid narrative are highlighted by means of metafictional techniques in Tchoungui’s novel. On the most fundamental level, the novels by Nganang, Mabanckou and Tchoungui are all asking the question: what does it mean to be a contemporary
francophone African writer? Each in their own way, the novels represent the figure of the writer, and the process of writing, by means of the very medium they interrogate.

On a secondary level, the metafictional techniques employed in the novels, and the issues of authorship they raise, gesture at the broader issue of authenticity. In *La Promesse des fleurs*, Soumi tries to reconcile his understanding of authorship with a glorified vision of the francophone author. He is forced to reconsider the topics he can write about bearing in mind both the reality of his circumstances and the kinds of topics past generations have tackled. In other words, must an African author write novels of political, societal or cultural significance in order to be an *authentic* writer?

In *African Psycho*, the protagonist struggles with how to break from the past in order to find his own style and free himself from the judgments of a previous generation. In addition, the protagonist grapples with the role of the media in deciding the authenticity of an author. Relatedly, *Je vous souhaite la pluie* poses questions about how francophone writers can maintain authenticity when the machine of the publishing industry pressures and coerces the author into presenting a certain kind of image. Each novel tries to establish the origins of authenticity, who has the power to determine it, and how to maintain an authentic self when faced with an onslaught of misrepresentations. While Nganang, Mabanckou, and Tchoungui do not necessarily offer answers to all the questions they pose, the discussion of authenticity nonetheless provides a window into how concerns about authenticity may impact contemporary francophone authors today.

In a broad sense, questions of authenticity reappear in the following two chapters focusing on contemporary art and film, although the qualifications and pressures differ somewhat from those in the literary realm. In the subsequent analysis of contemporary African
documentaries, feature films, and short YouTube productions, I continue the lines of inquiry developed in this chapter by looking to how these works grapple with the production and dissemination of films by means of representations of cinema. Moreover, these films represent and problematize the challenges of production and circulation of cinema on the African continent.
CHAPTER TWO

Cinematic Metacommentary and the Future of Filmmaking in Africa

Comme chaque produit visuel, le film est un éclairage spécifique de la réalité. Aujourd’hui, des images qui ne sont pas de leur production submergent les Africains.
Baba Hama, directeur du FESPACO

A scene begins with young men and boys sitting together on rows of wooden benches. The camera pans a small, dark, cramped room, focusing on the upturned faces of the men and boys as they watch a film. The viewer sees the flickering light of the film reflected on their faces, hears the muffled action, but knows nothing of the substance or identity of the film being screened. Observing only the facial reactions to the film, and the occasional fidgeting motion, the viewer is immersed in the experience of watching a film. In such scenes, the observer witnesses the ability of films to transport, entertain, and move an audience. Seeing the quick reactions, changes in expression, and captivated stares of other people watching a film reminds the viewer of their own reactions to film and emphasizes the powerful ability of film to elicit emotion. The trope of scenes in which the viewer watches others watch a film functions as a form of metacommentary that asks the film viewer to critically engage with the experience of film spectatorship. Through an analysis of films that include such scenes of film viewing, as well as films that employ other representations of film production and viewing, this chapter poses the following questions: In what ways do African filmmakers use film to represent the realities and challenges of the African film industry? How are these critiques presented and structured? And, finally, what is at stake in the metacommentary of contemporary African cinema?

The following analysis explores the varying approaches that African filmmakers have deployed in order to tackle questions of preservation, accessibility, production, and purpose of African film. The first section of the chapter analyses the documentary style of Jean-Marie Téno
and the way he uses representations of culture to confront problems of preservation and accessibility. In the second section, a selection of short form documentary films from the Democratic Republic of Congo, produced for television and the Internet, illustrate the financial obstacles filmmakers face and how Internet technology offers new possibilities for film distribution. In the final section, the analysis shifts toward fictional films—a feature film and a mockumentary—both by Jean-Pierre Bekolo that use the subversion of cinematic genres to comment on African films. The broad variety of films included in this chapter—documentaries, fictional films, feature lengths films, and short films—allows for an examination of metacommentary across genres and forms.

All of the contemporary African films discussed in this chapter are concerned with the film industry and film viewing structures in Africa. Some of the films, primarily those that are documentary in nature, employ representations of cinema in order to present an accurate depiction of the status of film production, distribution, and circulation on the African continent. Other films in this chapter, specifically the fictional films, fall into the category of metacinema because as self-referential films, they call attention to the artifice of film or stage the production of film, from within a film. Examples of metacinematic techniques include acknowledging the camera and audience within a film—commonly known as breaking the fourth wall; film plots about the filming and production of a film; and films that represent the director or writer of the film itself. Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s film *Le Complot d’Aristote* employs several such techniques, thus serving as an excellent example of metacinema and how these techniques are used to problematize cinematic production. In his film *Le Président*, Bekolo uses a subgenre of metacinema, the mockumentary, to reflect on the conventions of the documentary film while also

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175 See Lisa Konrath, *Forms and Functions of Self-Reflexivity in Postmodern Film* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010).
presenting a scathing critique of Cameroonian politics. As Cynthia Miller writes in her introduction to the book, *Too Bold for the Box Office: The Mockumentary from Big Screen to Small*, mockumentary films “exist in a place where social commentary, cultural critique, and the crisis of representation collide” thus describing how the manipulation of genre in the mockumentary allows for thinly veiled social criticism.\(^\text{176}\) An examination of representations of cinema, metacinema, and mockumentary provides distinctive and privileged insights into how filmmakers themselves perceive, and propose to overcome, barriers of distribution, funding, and production.

While all of the films in this chapter address the contemporary status of film in Africa, many of the issues discussed in the films are rooted in the colonial past. Films were first introduced in Africa in the final years of the nineteenth century or very beginning of the twentieth century; an exact date has proved to be illusive to historians.\(^\text{177}\) The availability of early films in Africa varied substantially by region as a result of the differing attitudes and policies of colonial powers.\(^\text{178}\) When first introduced in the colonies, Europeans believed film could be used as a tool to assimilate indigenous people into European culture by introducing them to their cultural, economic, and political norms.\(^\text{179}\) Instructional and propaganda films were


\(^{179}\) Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, xiii. In French colonies, films were used to introduce Africans to Paris and European civilization as well as the reverse, films shot in Africa were shown to European audiences to convince them of the legitimacy of colonial expansion. See Dominic Thomas, *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 111.
created for African audiences, taken by British, French, and Belgian colonial officers by mobile cinema vans into remote communities, and shown to viewers in the hopes of indoctrinating the population in colonial ideology.\textsuperscript{180} Yet as evidenced in the writings of scores of officials, explorers, and settlers, the European colonizers initially doubted the ability of the indigenous population to understand film technology and the mimetic representations they produced.\textsuperscript{181} As film screening became more widely available in the 1920s, European powers closely observed the reactions of African spectators both anecdotally and in formal scientific studies, such as the film viewing experiments of William Sellers in Nigeria.\textsuperscript{182} The legacy of observing the African Other experience film is reflected in scenes from contemporary African films like the one described at the opening of this chapter.

The history of European colonialism and neocolonial relationships post independence continue to impact the African film industry today. In the book \textit{African Cinema: Politics and Culture}, Manthia Diawara examines the role of France in the development of film production, distribution, and exhibition in Africa.\textsuperscript{183} Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike provides cultural context to the arrival of cinema in Africa and provides in depth analysis of the differences between the development of cinema in francophone and Anglophone Africa in his book \textit{Black African Cinema}.\textsuperscript{184} Colonial African instructional cinema and colonialist African cinema discourse are the focus of \textit{Modernity and the African Cinema} by Femi Okiremuete Shaka.\textsuperscript{185} In a chapter of the

\textsuperscript{182} William Sellers was a medical officer in the Nigerian government who studied the reactions of African viewers to British documentary films. See Burns, \textit{Flickering Shadows}, 39.
\textsuperscript{184} Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, \textit{Black African Cinema} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
\textsuperscript{185} Femi Okiremuete Shaka, \textit{Modernity and the African Cinema} (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press,
book *Africa and France*, Dominic Thomas examines early African film in the diaspora and the production and financing challenges confronting filmmakers located on the African continent. While the following chapter draws from this substantial body of scholarship that examines the origins and nature of colonial and neocolonial relationships in African film production, the analysis primarily looks to African films themselves for representations of persistent relationships with Europe.

Each of the contemporary films examined in this chapter tackles one aspect of what has become a vicious cycle in African film: namely a foreign monopoly on film distribution that has resulted in an abundance of American and European films flooding the African market while only a handful of African films are available for viewing, thereby reducing consumption of African films due to barriers of accessibility. Yet, there is still a tremendous demand for film, and viewers watch what is available to them thus reinforcing the consumption of foreign films. In turn, the African film industry is not economically viable and filmmakers must turn to European funding sources; these funds, combined with interest in African films abroad, result in African filmmakers making films to be consumed primarily by foreign audiences and thus further alienating their African audiences. This simplified schematic description of the film industry accounts for many of the persistent problems described in the cinematic metacommentary of contemporary African films.

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187 Other cultural domains, such as literature and to some extent art, also suffer from similar cycles of foreign monopoly. But it must be noted that there are initiatives on the ground that combat the cycle of foreign dominance. For example, VHS sitcoms circulate widely up and down the West African coast and YouTube has become an effective outlet for low budget films. These alternative modes of film viewing will be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

In the introduction to his book *Cinema and Development in West Africa*, James E. Genoa writes, “African filmmakers today struggle to ply their craft under conditions that their predecessors would easily recognize from the 1960s.” As Genoa describes the situation, the film industry in Africa has yet to develop into an independent, profitable industry free of western control and influence. First, a lack of infrastructure to screen films—many capital cities in sub-Saharan Africa do not have a single movie theatre—as well as to make films in Africa, has resulted in a stagnation of the film industry. In addition to difficulties obtaining filmmaking equipment and accessing suitable postproduction facilities, “one of the greatest impediments to the emergence of a fully autonomous and self-sustaining African cinema has been the continued need to borrow the technology of filmmaking from those who monopolized it at the time of decolonization.” As a result, African filmmakers who try to make films in their own countries find themselves faced with extremely high costs and a lack of qualified technicians to facilitate production. Without the technology to make films, Africa therefore remains dependent on European resources and funding.

In the few remaining Cineplex facilities in the capitals, film distributors screen the most profitable films, and these are almost exclusively foreign made films. American, European, and Indian films dominate African films in profitability and ease of access. Bollywood films are distributed extensively on the African continent because Middle-Eastern and Asian communities actively promote this cinema. Following this model, if there were money and motivation to

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192 See Jean-Pierre Bekolo interview in which he discusses the prohibitively high costs of making a film in Africa and the lack of qualified labor: Olivier Barlet, “Being African and Modern at the Same Time” *Africultures* (July 2005).
promote African films in Africa, the films would likely become popular. Unfortunately, as the films discussed in this chapter demonstrate, there has yet to be a change in the current distribution model.

The one notable counter example that has defied the cycle described above and proved to be not only economically viable, but highly profitable, is Nollywood. The seeds of Nollywood’s development were planted in the early 1990s; born out of economic struggle that caused widespread unemployment of actors and film crews, combined with a flood of outdated VHS stock sold in Nigeria by Chinese and Malaysian business people, an “informal” film production industry developed to fill the high demand for film and television entertainment in Lagos at the time. Predominately shot using video technology, not film, intended for home viewing on small screens, and generally over three hours long, the plots and style of Nollywood films resemble low budget soap operas much more than feature length films from elsewhere in Africa. Nollywood films are, in many ways, seen as the polar opposite of what is sometimes called African “auteur” cinema; these oppositions include categories such as high/low, elite/popular, art/business, political/entertaining, progressive/regressive, and celluloid/video. Needless to say, not just the production, but also the quality, content, and objectives of Nollywood films are strikingly different than any of the films discussed in this project.

Since the initial development of Nollywood, technological advances such as satellite television, the Internet, and widespread piracy have all contributed to Nollywood’s rise to

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193 Jean-Olivier Tchouaffe and Sheri Malman, *Passion of the reel: cinematic versus modernist political fictions in Cameroon* (Bristol, Intellect Ltd, 2016), 170.
dominance and spread throughout Africa and the diaspora. Furthermore, the Nigerian film industry has served as a model for developing film industries in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. Part of the success of the economic model is that rather than rely on individual films to produce profits, large catalogues of many films together produce massive earnings for distribution companies. The size of Nigeria also contributes to the success of the industry as a media producer because it has a huge internal market for entertainment that can sustain production and distribution costs.

The striking difference between the film industry in Nigeria and in the three countries of focus in this project—Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—can, at least in part, be traced back to differences in colonial policies of the French and British. As film scholars such as Angela Martin, Manthia Diawara, Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike, and Femi Okiremuete Shaka have discussed at length, under French rule, African film production was controlled and restricted; later, following independence, France provided limited financing, technicians, and distribution outlets resulting in a small corpus of francophone African films but no lasting infrastructure to create a sustainable industry. The British, on the other hand, did create a film infrastructure during the colonial period but did not make an effort to support African filmmaking post independence. The fundamental difference in the availability of film infrastructure cannot be underestimated as it has produced striking contrasts in the viability of film industries throughout Africa.

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199 See Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008) for more on how film was deployed in colonies controlled by the French.
As a result of the inadequate film distribution in the majority of African countries, African filmmakers are reliant on film festivals to exhibit their films, which is “symptomatic of the lack of formal and robust distribution opportunities.” Without an African audience, African filmmakers depend on European and American audiences and “the festival circuit holds them hostage to the standards and conditions that canonized them. As a result, one sometimes finds that the African films that have won awards in Europe may be totally incomprehensible to the African audiences for which they were initially intended.” Incomprehensible not in the sense of an understanding of the action or message, but rather in appeal: African audiences do indeed find many African films uninteresting, distanced from their reality and pedantic, as the film *Le complot d’Aristote* demonstrates to comic effect numerous times. As previously mentioned, these “auteur” films are seen more as works of art as opposed to Nollywood films that are produced exclusively for entertainment and mass consumption.

Since the birth of postcolonial African film in the 1960s, the prevailing notion, initially among filmmakers and subsequently among critics, has been that African film is always, and must always, be socially and politically engaged. At the Second Congress of the Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) in Algiers in January 1975, a charter expressed the need for cinematic engagement as follows: “To assume a genuinely active role in the process of development, African culture must be popular, democratic, and progressive in character, inspired by its own realities and responding to its own needs. It must also be in solidarity with cultural struggles all over the world.” At this time, filmmakers viewed cinema as a means to educate and

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201 Lindiwe Dovey, *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.
203 This argument parallels the same imperative in African literature as expressed in Béti’s “Afrique noir, littérature rose” (1955).
empower African populations. Much has changed since the 1970s, and unsurprisingly, some filmmakers no longer want to make this type of film exclusively. Similarly, African audiences are undeniably ready for an African cinema that is entertaining, and not defined by an explicitly pedagogical agenda. As a result of the economic and cultural dynamics influencing African film, there is a fundamental detachment between filmmakers and their audiences. The films I explore here identify, address and, in some cases, even propose solutions to this disconnect.

While there has been extensive research and analysis of the challenges facing the African film industry, the question of how filmmakers themselves have tackled these issues remains underexplored. This chapter endeavors to bring together several representations of cinema and forms of metacinema as a way to understand the diverse ways each medium and individual filmmaker conceives of the fundamental challenges facing African cinema today.

**Representations of Culture in the Documentaries of Téno**

The films *Afrique, je te plumerai* (1992) and *Lieux Saints* (2009) are documentaries that foreground the Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Téno’s voice and vision of particular cultural challenges facing Africa in general, and African arts in particular.204 Both films focus on the ways that government and cultural institutions have failed to represent the interest of the average person and illustrate the inaccessibility of film in Africa. Téno’s documentaries have a highly distinctive style that combines footage from numerous sources, interviews with individuals, and extensive use of voice-over. Of all of these techniques, the voice-over is the most distinguishing. Téno’s films present his unapologetically subjective vision of the world, which he imbues with personal stories, anecdotes from his childhood, and the opinions of his

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204 Jean-Marie Téno is a Cameroonian director, filmmaker, and producer who studied audiovisual communications in France, worked as a film critic on television, and began making his own films in 1983. He was a visiting artist at Amherst College in 2007 and visiting professor at Hampshire College in 2009. Téno has made 16 documentaries, shorts, and feature films.
friends and colleagues.\footnote{When asked about his use of voice-over in his films, Téno responded: “Moi, je suis complètement subjectif dans ce que je fais. Je suis là en fonction de ce que je vois et de ce qui me touche. Je ne suis pas de tout objectif.” see Françoise Pfaff, “Entretien avec Jean-Marie Téno” in Cinémas africains, une oasis dans le désert ed. Samuel Lelièvre (Corlet-Télérama, 2003), 206.} Using a combination of exposition, actuality footage, narration, oral history, archival material, and reconstructions, Téno’s films include metacommentary that addresses questions of preservation and accessibility, and raise awareness about the challenges the medium itself faces in Africa.

In \textit{Afrique, je te plumerai}, Téno illuminates the limited accessibility of art, literature, and film to the Cameroonian people. By tracing the legacy of colonialism, he demonstrates the ways that the lasting impact of European colonialism has resulted in a cultural genocide in his country. Through a collage of interviews, reenacted conversations, historical film footage, and scenes of daily life, Téno creates a portrait of urban Cameroon and the challenges facing the nation in the postcolonial period. It must be noted that much of the footage of the colonial period and the Cameroonian resistance during this time had never been broadcast on Cameroonian television. Thus, by including this footage, Téno effectively demands that people remember colonial history and resist the current regime’s desire to forget this history of entanglement with Europe.\footnote{Alain Patrice Nganang, “Jean-Marie Téno ou comment filmer une société autocratique” in Cinémas africains, une oasis dans le désert ed. Samuel Lelièvre (Corlet-Télérama, 2003), 213.}

\textit{Afrique, je te plumerai} opens with scenes of the capital city of Yaoundé early in the morning. As the camera pans scenes of the urban center, makeshift housing at the periphery of the city, and motorbikes on wide dirt roads, Téno addresses the city as a “ville cruelle,” the title of a canonical francophone novel by Cameroonian author Mongo Béti.\footnote{Ville cruelle (1954) was published under the pseudonym Eza Boto.} By referring to Yaoundé as “ville cruelle,” Téno evokes the violence, exploitation, corruption, and injustice that characterize urban space in Beti’s novel. The opening scene serves to orient the viewer to the contemporary space of Yaoundé because much of the film consists of historical footage of the
city in times of protest, upheaval, and violence. Dedicated to “à tous ceux qui ont donné leur vie pour la liberté,” Téno uses the space of the capital city to present the Cameroonian struggle for independence and liberty in the postcolonial era. Scenes of violence that leave bodies strewn in the street abruptly replace the quiet morning scenes of the city and the film begins.

Throughout the film Téno shifts from images of violent uprising to scenes of contemplative interviews and personal reflection. In one such interview, Téno reenacts a conversation between himself and the director of the Cameroonian national television network. Téno’s film transitions from topic to topic, scene to scene, somewhat abruptly yet there is always a point of connection, although it is not always immediately evident. Just prior to the interview with the director of the national television network, footage of anti-censorship protests, free-press demonstrations, and footage of newspaper headlines highlight the Cameroonian struggle for the freedom of expression since independence. Although not explicitly stated, the juxtaposition of this footage with Téno’s experience with the national television network leads the viewer to think that Téno’s work is censored and prevented from reaching a Cameroonian audience because of messages that are critical of the government.

The scene begins with a shot of a man in a suit sitting at a desk working at a computer monitor that flashes and flickers between words and a black screen. The man has a photo of Paul Biya, president of Cameroon, hung above his desk and his nameplate reads “Directeur C.T.V. Television Nationale.” Téno, using voiceover,

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208 Scene begins at 12:53.
explains that it is extremely important to him that this film is shown on television in Cameroon and that he tried to meet with the director of the national television network to discuss this possibility. But, as is always his experience, Téno explains that he is asked how much he will pay to have his film shown. As the camera focuses on the man sitting at the desk, he turns toward the camera and asks: “Combien?” The man proceeds to list European and American television programs that are inexpensive to broadcast on Cameroonian television and that the people of Cameroon universally enjoy, such as “Dallas, Les films comme Dynasty, Châteauvallon, Mademoiselle.” The brief exchange between Téno and the director of the television network demonstrates the financial challenges African filmmakers face when trying to distribute their films in a market flooded with foreign made film and television. Connecting censorship of news media to censorship of his films, Téno establishes a link between politics and the arts.

In *Afrique, je te plumerai*, Téno repeatedly seeks to illustrate how the history of European interference and repressive postcolonial political climate of Cameroon have had lasting impact on film, literature, visual arts, and the oral transmission of history. Téno describes a process of cultural genocide in the postcolonial period caused by the inaccessibility to culture. Téno illustrates the lack of access to works of African literature and film by visiting three European cultural institutes—British Council, Goethe institute, and the Institut Français du Cameroun—and speaking with the staff there. Téno’s personal friend Marie, a young woman with a flair for the
dramatic, conducts the informal interviews. At each cultural center Marie asks similar questions: “Does the library have books written by African authors? Can I see this section? What percentage of the collection is made up of books of African origins?” At each library, the viewer watches Marie’s interaction with the library staff and sees adults and children using the facilities. The majority of the interviews that Téno includes in the film are indirect interviews, in which the viewer does not hear the questions asked the interviewee, but in the scenes at the European cultural institutes, Téno employs direct interviews in order to create the illusion that the viewers are themselves exploring these places, alongside Marie. Interestingly, neither Téno nor Marie provide commentary on the experience of visiting the centers, thus allowing the viewer to draw their own conclusions about the small collections of African works housed amongst significant collections of British, German, and French texts.

Following the visits to the three cultural centers, the focus shifts to multiple shots of the complicated mechanized stages necessary to print a book. The repetitive motions of the large printing press and men binding books by hands are accompanied by music, but not narration. For several minutes the viewer is mesmerized by the machines shooting out papers, slicing and folding pages, sewing bindings, and is allowed a moment of rest from the violent images and dense narration at the beginning of the film. The printing scene initially seems like a digression but is in fact relevant to the following scene in that it shows that there are facilities in Cameroon to print novels. Téno later explains, in a subsequent scene, that while such technology does exist, there is no demand for it because the vast majority of books are still imported from France.\footnote{Factors such as high taxes on paper, foreign monopolies on educational publishing, and limited distribution opportunities hinder the economic viability of African book publishers.}
The next scene begins with Marie reading a poem in which she describes Yaoundé as a “ville bijou.” Recalling the opening of the film, this poem remarks on the dynamic energy of the capital as the viewer is presented with scenes of urban life. There are naked children swimming in a creek, a child playing in dirt, taxi traffic, and finally Marie herself walking around the area outside the central market of the city. She looks at clothes, towels, and books displayed on the ground. The country has the infrastructure and ability to produce its own books, and Téno begins to express his frustration at the dependence on France for books. This will, he explains, cause the death of national culture. Citing a Chinese proverb, “People without a past do not have a present and cannot have a future,” Téno argues that without literature, collective memory will gradually disappear. For Téno, this constitutes a planned, organized death. The proverb therefore serves to convey his opinion that without cultural and artistic expression with which to document the past, Cameroonian society will be incapable of progress. The circulation of knowledge—thought art, film, and literature—is therefore fundamental for the survival of a civilization.

The camera continues to pan dusty, dilapidated books displayed in the market and focuses on three children’s comic books. At the sight of the books, Téno’s narration begins to turn towards a flashback as he describes how much he loved comic books such as Blek le Roc, Akim, and Zembla. Shifting to scenes of children frolicking in a schoolyard, boys playing soccer,

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210 Scene begins at 33:20.
211 Téno does not specify what exactly he means by “progress” or what changes he specifically would want to see.
girls singing and playing clapping games, and some children reading books, Téno reminisces about his own childhood. In a recreated scene from his youth, three young boys approach a movie theatre and discuss a poster for an upcoming film. The boys debate whether their mothers will allow them to attend and decide to meet up for the film. Clips of the film show young Indian women dancing and singing in Hindi, while wearing seductive outfits in a Bollywood production. The camera focuses on the face of one young man in particular, as he views the film, and shows a mesmerized look of pleasure as he watches beautiful women dance. Téno remembers dreaming of traveling to India as a child and speaks nostalgically about the freedom of his childhood. Film was a form of escape and a window into another world for young Téno. The memory of the Bollywood film is significant because not only does it represent the non-African productions that were screened in the theatres at the time, but also provides Téno with the opportunity to comment on how he related to these films as a child, and that they instilled in him the hope to travel to Europe and elsewhere. This brief scene in *Afrique, je te plumerai* provides important metacommentary on the availability of cinema for young people in Africa.

Very abruptly, jarring the viewer, the film then cuts to historical footage of several men being beaten by police officers in the streets of Yaoundé. The film goes silent except for inserted sound effects—exaggerated thuds and cracks—of the men being beaten with a police baton and kicked repeatedly in the back of the head. This violence jolts the viewer back to reality and
reminds them of the suffering of individuals who fought for free expression and independent thinking in Cameroon. By brusquely ending Téno’s dreamy reflections on his childhood, the violence also serves to remind the viewer of the purpose of the documentary: to illustrate the impact of a repressive government on individuals, freedom of expression, and the arts.

In many ways, my research intends to revisit the sites, and questions, of Afrique, je te plumerai, and my goals are similar to those of Téno’s documentary. I viewed the film Afrique, je te plumerai several times prior to a research trip I took to Cameroon in April, 2015. As a way to better understand how the accessibility to books has changed since 1992, I set out to visit the only bookstore in the city, all three of the cultural centers visited by Téno and Marie, as well as the informal book sellers found near the central market. I was truly taken aback by how little the situation had changed in Yaoundé. After several unsuccessful attempts at visiting the Librarie Messapresse bookstore during advertised business hours, I was finally able to gain access to the bookstore. On sale were primarily French novels, magazines, and a range of educational materials for school children. There was a small section devoted to books written by African and Cameroonian authors, but the selection was limited and outdated. The prices of the books were similar to the prices one would find in a European bookstore and thus, prohibitively expensive for the majority of the Cameroonian population. I was the only person in the store at the time and got the impression that it was far from a thriving business.

At the British Council, Goethe institute, and the Institut Français du Cameroun I found larger sections of African novels and histories of Africa than documented by Marie and Téno. What I had not realized prior to arriving in Yaoundé was just how remarkable it is to find a furnished, quiet, air-conditioned space with a publicly-accessible restroom. The European

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212 Examples of titles available for purchase included Yambo Ouologuem, Le devoir de violence; Mariama Bâ, Une si longue lettre; and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, L’Aventure ambiguë.
cultural centers were the only places where I encountered these types of facilities open to the public. The Institut Français du Cameroun is also the only place in Yaoundé where you can see a film in a theatre. A few restaurants have projectors to show soccer games and host movie nights, but there is no Cineplex in the capital.

While anyone can, in theory, visit the cultural centers for free, I found, unsurprisingly, that the visitors taking advantage of these resources were mostly adults and children who, based purely on my observation of their outward appearance, seemed to be wealthy and educated elites. Many of the children I saw at the cultural centers were working on homework for the language classes offered there and thus had parents able to pay for expensive extracurricular activities. While my observations of the three cultural centers are anecdotal, I do feel as though I acquired an accurate understanding of the way the spaces were used, and by whom.

The booksellers I visited, located in the neighborhood surrounding Université Yaoundé I and the central market, sold used, mostly outdated, textbooks and review materials from bed sheets spread out alongside the road. The books were in poor condition but were substantially more affordable than anything in Librarie Messapresse. Overall I was struck by how little the accessibility to books had changed in the 21 years since the film was released. Not only were new books very expensive, but there simply were no outlets to purchase, or borrow, books of any type. Téno’s narrative thread illustrating potential cultural stagnation due to inaccessibility to culture in *Afrique, je te plumerai* is taken up again in the 2009 film, *Lieux Saints*.

Téno’s documentary film, *Lieux Saints*, is set in St. Léon, a working-class neighborhood in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Ouagadougou is also the home of FESPACO, the Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou. Rather than concentrate on the activities of this renowned festival, the documentary instead follows the advertising and
screening of films in a close-knit urban neighborhood. Recognizing that most people in this community cannot afford the two dollar entrance fee at the Cineplex, Nanema Boubacar, a local film enthusiast known as “Bouba,” opens a “ciné-club” where he screens several films per week for a much more affordable fee, roughly the equivalent of ten cents. The documentary weaves together the stories of Bouba and Jules César Barnouni, a local artisan who makes drums by hand.

Téno, intermittently using voice over, interjects his own reflections on the state of the African film industry. Téno asks many rhetorical questions in the film: “Who is speaking in African cinema? To say what? To whom?”; “How can culture be compatible with business?”; “Can you make a living from film in Africa? Where is the place for African audiences in the economic model?”; and most significantly, “what is the future of the African film industry if Africans do not have access to films?” Throughout the film, Téno develops an extended metaphor in which film represents a modern griot. In West Africa, the griot is a poet, musician, and storyteller who transmits oral histories and plays a fundamental role of preserving traditions within a community. The development of the metaphor begins during a scene in which Jules César uses his djembe, a large handmade drum, to advertise the upcoming films at the ciné-club. He walks through the neighborhood loudly playing the instrument and singing the names and screening times of the films. Téno tells the viewer that the drum, like film, communicates messages to the community and brings them together for entertainment. While Lieux Saints and

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213 It must be noted that the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène has been considered a modern griot, thus Téno adapts a previous argument for his film.
*Afrique, je te plumerai* are both expository documentaries, in which the filmmaker speaks directly to the viewer, the message of *Lieux Saints* is more restrained and focused than that of the earlier film and thus requires more guiding and explanation from Téno throughout.

In the first of several interviews with Jules César, the artisan discusses the relationship between the drum and cinema.²¹⁴ He explains, “le djembe et le cinéma, c’est comme un grand frère et un petit frère. Le djembe, c’est le koro, le grand frère, c’est celui qui fait l’histoire, on peut aussi faire du cinéma, donc le cinéma est le dogo, qui veut dire petit frère.” Téno, speaking off camera, appreciates this comparison and carries the idea throughout the rest of the film by shooting Jules César making, selling, and playing his drums in the neighborhood. The parts of the film dedicated to portraying Jules César serve to illustrate the fundamental role of the ciné-club in the community as well as the power of film to bring people together.

Téno’s documentary portrays the inner workings of the ciné-club so that the viewer has an accurate understanding of what goes into screening a film in contemporary Africa. In an interview filmed inside the ciné-club, Bouba speaks about all of the genres of film he has shown.²¹⁵ He remarks that African films are the most expensive and that he has limited access to these films while it is substantially easier and less expensive to acquire American and European films. Yet, there is a demand for African films because the people in the community want to see their own actors and experience stories set in Africa. Bouba provides details of the cost of the films: to buy a VHS of an African film is $25 or 12,500 francs (he had previously mentioned his monthly rent is the equivalent of $60), while it costs 50 cents (500 francs) to rent a European film and around $2 to purchase a pirated DVD of an American or European film. Bouba reiterates that there is a demand and a market for African films, in Africa, but that the

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²¹⁴ Scene begins at 10:30.
²¹⁵ Scene begins 35:36.
distribution is flawed and the films remain inaccessible. The interview with Bouba puts the costs of showing and viewing films in perspective for the viewer unfamiliar with the context. Interestingly, Téno does not provide any information about how colonial history has impacted film distribution or the flows of global capital that make the foreign films more accessible, instead the viewer hears Bouba’s experience without necessarily understanding the larger historical, political, and economic structures underlying this experience.

Bouba’s testimony about the difficulties he faces in acquiring African films is remarkable considering his ciné-club is located in Ouagadougou, the location of one of the most important international film festivals in Africa. FESPACO was founded in 1969 and has taken place biennially in the city ever since. The festival is an opportunity for filmmakers from around the African continent to see each other’s work, promote upcoming projects, collaborate, speak to the press, and develop a film community in Africa. Téno’s film illustrates that while international film festivals often make gestures at inclusivity and outreach to the community, FESPACO and the African film industry as a whole need to recognize the fundamental barriers to successful distribution of their films on the African continent.

As part of the portrait Téno creates of the ciné-club, he shoots the space while it is not being used to show films. The ciné-club space, a one-room shelter made of wood and corrugated metal, functions as a location to show football matches, a place for Muslims laborers to pray during the day because there is not a mosque nearby, and a gathering point for children after

Figure 6: Boys watch a film in the Cine Club, *Lieux Saints*
school. Throughout the documentary, Téno shoots the faces of the people watching the films at the ciné-club. It is in these film spectatorship scenes, which are the most overtly “meta” moments in his documentary, that Téno connects the viewer of his film to the viewers in his film through their shared experience and emphasizes the powerful ability of film to both represent and elicit human emotion.

There is a remarkable absence of women in all scenes presenting film viewers. In fact, there is not a single woman seen attending the ciné-club screenings. Téno addresses this issue, implicitly, by speaking to a group of young women styling their hair along the street outside. He asks the group if they like film or if they have ever been to the ciné-club. The one woman willing to answer him says she does enjoy some films, mostly Indian films, but that she does not go to see them because women are harassed and fondled in the dark rooms. The viewer hears this answer but Téno does not comment on it and the question of women’s access to film does not come up again. Thus, while Téno’s documentary celebrates the ability of film to bring people together and create community, there is only a brief acknowledgement that this communal space is not safe for, or inclusive of, female members of the community.

In one of the only scenes not filmed in St. Léon, Téno interviews his fellow filmmaker, Idrissa Ouedraogo.²¹⁶ Ouedraogo is a filmmaker from Burkina Faso and is best known for his films Kini and Adams, Yaaba, and Tilai. Téno explains that after realizing that all the films shown at the ciné-club are in fact pirated copies, he decides to speak to his colleague about this situation. Ouedraogo offers two ways of looking at the situation. First, rationally, as he says, the people who put the time and effort into the films need to be paid and thus piracy and illegal presentations of films rob filmmakers of their livelihood. But secondly, on a philosophical level, filmmakers create their films to be watched by as large an audience as possible. Personally, he

²¹⁶ Scene begins at 58:40.
says he is happy that there is still an audience to see his films and that because of the ciné-club, new generations of viewers have access to his films. He understands there is a potential market in Africa and the key to successful African film distribution is to find a way to work with the existing structure of film screening.

Ouedraogo urges African filmmakers to ask themselves who they are really making their films for and how to make them more accessible to African populations. In a short essay entitled “Freedom: The Power to Say No,” Téno describes the impossible choice the African filmmaker must make “between immediate profitability, which condemns it [cinema] to participate in the organized brutalization of the continent, or making a contribution to the necessary reflection upon freedom, at the risk of becoming unpopular.”

The conversation between Ouedraogo and Téno in *Lieux Saints* illustrates the way that the preservation of the African film industry, accessibility to films, and economic viability of African film circulation are all issues contemporary filmmakers in Africa grapple with when deciding to make a film.

While *Lieux Saints* locates these issues in a specific community and calls for improved accessibility to films, the film does not go as far as to provide solutions to these problems. Ouedraogo gestures at a few possible ideas but there is never a concrete proposal for improvement put forth. The film ends with the following two quotations by two highly respected and influential African filmmakers, Sembene Ousmane and Djibril Diop Mambéty, which emphasize the connection between the griot and film:

> _le cinéaste africain est comme le griot, qui ressemble au troubadour du Moyen-Age, un homme de savoir et de bon sens, qui est l’historien, le raconteur, la mémoire vivante et la conscience de son peuple_. .... (Sembene Ousmane)

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The end of the film suggests looking back to the traditions of the griot to understand the function and possible future of film in Africa. Ultimately, a return to Africa, for the development, production, and distribution of film, seems to be the solution Téno proposes although he does not provide clear answers to the many questions he poses in the film. Even when faced with rapidly changing technology and economics of film distribution, Téno nonetheless turns toward the historical importance of the griot to provide hope for the film industry in Africa. Téno moves away from pressing global issues—such as piracy, disappearing movie theatres, and the dominance of foreign films—in order to prioritize the local impact of film. The ability of film to convey history and culture, and create community, will be the greatest assets in revitalizing African film.

While Afrique, je te plumerai suggests that the inaccessibility of books, films, and art in Cameroon will lead to a cultural genocide, Lieux Saints does not delve into the repercussions of the inaccessibility of African films. But Téno has addressed the impact of the limited access to film in a 2010 article entitled “Writing on Walls: The Future of African Documentary Cinema,” in which he explains how a lack of communication between one generation of filmmakers and the next is crippling to the progress of African films:

Isn’t it ironic that, fifty years after the first generation of African filmmakers began the struggle to challenge and rectify colonial representations of Africa, Europeans are back to train our youth to look at and represent themselves, often

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218 The second section of this chapter will demonstrate how new technologies, discussed only briefly by Téno, have “democratized” access and production to African film in some contexts.
taking as examples and references the ethnographic images they are familiar with, rather than the works of other African filmmakers?219

As this quote illustrates, without African films shown in Africa and filmmakers present in their own countries, there is no way for future generations of filmmakers to flourish and break the cycle that has gone on for decades. The cultural impact of film and lack of resources available to filmmakers in Africa are both issues reflected in Téno’s cinematic oeuvre.

The feature-length documentary films of Jean-Marie Téno represent the production, circulation, and reception of film in Africa. Téno’s films focus on the difficulties of preservation and accessibility to cinema, in addition to other cultural productions, through the use of traditional interviews, archival film footage, and voice-over to communicate messages to the audience. In much the same way, short form video productions from the Democratic Republic of Congo lament the status of cinema today and propose new models for film production in Africa.

Short-Form Filmmaking for Television and YouTube in DRC

Short documentaries produced for Radio Télévision Nationale Congolaise (RTNC) and a student documentary created in conjunction with the arts activism organization Yole!Africa, serve as points of comparison to the films of Jean-Marie Téno. The short form productions, all from the Democratic Republic of Congo, provide insight both into a new genre of film as well as another cultural and political climate for cinema. The series of short documentaries of Guy Bomanyama Zandu, produced in 2005 with RTNC, celebrate the history of cinema in Congo, highlight the importance of its preservation, and call for renewal of the film industry.220 The short documentaries about Congolese film are all approximately ten minutes long and feature

archival footage of colonial films and interviews with individuals who hope to revive filmmaking in Congo.

The first film, entitled *La mémoire du Congo en péril* (2005), features substantial footage of a dilapidated film archive in Kinshasa that houses many hundred of reels of films from the colonial era. As the title suggests, the film argues that these colonial films are an integral part of Congolese history and if they are destroyed, a fragment of history will be lost forever. The film opens with shots of the archivist, Divanamenga, hand-rolling reels of film, organizing deteriorating reel boxes, and speaking about the films in the archive. Then shifting to archival footage, the film shows elaborate colonial parades, colonial propaganda, and speeches by colonial administrators. The narrator explains that many of the films are unedited, in need of restoration, and contain irreplaceable information about the history of Congo. The short film emphasizes the vast, unexplored material in the archive that, if lost to lack of use and deterioration, would be a tragedy. Focusing on the preservation of film, *La mémoire du Congo en péril* makes a case for using films as historical documents and insisting that the colonial period must not be forgotten.
In *Le Congo, quel cinéma!* (2005), the focus is not preservation of films themselves but instead the preservation of an industry of film professionals—cameramen, editors, directors, producers—who bemoan the difficulties they face with outdated technology and challenges financing films. The film opens with the following quote on a black screen, “En 1950, le congolais Albert Mongita exprimait ouvertement que les congolais devraient réaliser leurs propres films. En 1951, ‘la leçon du cinéma,’ le premier film congolais et de l’Afrique Noire fut tourné. Démarré avec tant d’enthousiasme et de dynamisme. 55 ans après, qu’est devenu ce cinéma?” The seven-minute film attempts to answer this question through interviews with film professionals who signal a lack of governmental support as a particularly frustrating obstacle. The film includes an interview with the Secrétaire Générale du ministère de la Culture et des Arts, Monique Wakusomba, who simply explains: “on n’a pas le moyen.” Nevertheless, the film ends with an interview of the director of film production at RTNC who suggests that filmmakers must simply use the limited resources they have, continue to make films, and show these films as much as possible in order to revitalize the industry.
The third and final film in the series, entitled *Grand écran à Kinshasa* (2005), discusses the contemporary challenges of distributing and screening films in Kinshasa. Much like the ciné-club in Ouagadougou, most films are shown in ciné videos, also known as vidéothèques, set up in neighborhoods. This twelve-minute film demonstrates that there are many commonalities between the unofficial film screening cultures in Kinshasa and Ouagadougou. For example, the ciné video also show soccer games, create their own advertising for the film screenings, and serve a community of individuals who cannot afford the entrance to a movie theatre, although that is not actually an alternative in Kinshasa. There are films shown at the Belgian cultural center and embassy, for free, but the narrator explains that these films are not well attended. The short documentary ends with the narrator explaining that the Congolese hope to one day have the possibility of viewing films in a real movie theatre.

Guy Bomanyama Zandu’s three films represent the challenges of preserving historical film reels, reinvigorating the Congolese film industry, and creating viable options for people to view films in Kinshasa. Much like the films of Jean-Marie Téno, the message of the film is meant to raise awareness and inspire change. Voice over, interviews, and archival footage are combined to make documentaries that operate solidly within the established confines of the genre. Unlike these traditionally constructed documentaries, the short YouTube documentary

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221 Ciné video, in Congo-Kinshasa, is the same phenomenon as the ciné-club in Burkina Faso, portrayed by Jean-Marie Téno in *Lieux Saints*. There was a movie theatre in Kinshasa but it has been closed for six years.

Yolé!Africa is an art activism foundation in Goma, a city in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo near the border with Rwanda. In the past decade there has been an immense amount of violence in the city due to heavily armed conflict between the Congolese army and rebel groups backed by the Rwandan government. During these periods of conflict hundreds of thousands of people have fled their homes and an unknown number have been killed in the conflict. In this highly volatile and violent environment, the organization Yolé!Africa works to “empower young people to see themselves as agents capable of thinking critically and acting non-violently to shape their own realities; and to stand against all forms of exploitation and violation of human rights.”

Yolé!Africa offers activities, workshops, training in video arts, music, dance, and journalism as well as performance opportunities for young people in the community, always free of charge. One project that has been particularly successful at Yole!Africa, which is called Art on the Frontline, facilitates short video productions that are filmed, directed, produced, and edited by Congolese youth on topics relevant to their communities. The organization’s website describes the project as follows:

Art on the Frontline is a project of social criticism, local empowerment, and cultural celebration. It is our way of exposing injustice and violation perpetrated by the armies, rebel groups, and multi-national interest groups terrorizing the Great Lakes Region of Eastern Africa. […] This project grows out of our belief in the power of stories to dismantle negative stereotypes and to forge human connections across divides. The world is increasingly aware of the millions of

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222 See yoleafrica.org
victims of war and rape in the Great Lakes Region, the artists in this series bring you different stories from the frontline.

With the agency to decide what subjects they present to the world outside of Goma, the series has resulted in several extremely interesting short films. Six of the nine films take the form of music videos in which groups of young men sing, or rap, about the social, political, and economic situation in Goma. The eighth film follows Ashuza, a dancer, choreographer, and elementary school teacher, as he prepares for a dance competition in the community. The most recently released short film, called *Faraja on the FrontLine*, is about a remarkably entrepreneurial young boy who rents bicycles and gives riding lessons to other children in the neighborhood to make money for his family.

The short film *Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline*, by Ally Kahashi and Jobson Katondolo, is of particular interest for this study because of the way that it represents young filmmakers, the role of films in their lives, and the specific characteristics it displays as a film distributed exclusively on YouTube. As Hubert Banke, one of the two protagonists of the film, walks down a street, looking directly at the camera, he introduces himself, says that he is from Goma, DRC and studies cinema at Yolé!Africa. Hubert discusses the recent outbreaks of violence that have shaken the city and explains that his greatest fear is that something would happen to his family or he would not be able to realize his dreams of making films. The film then cuts to footage of Hubert filming an outdoor rap concert, part of his work for Yole!Africa.

![Figure 10: Hubert Banke introduces himself, Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline](image)
Next a young journalist, named Laye Uwera, describes going on to the roof of her house to see the fighting and, during the entire conflict, used Facebook and Twitter to provide updates on what was occurring around her. During her profile, the documentary includes Laye’s footage in the process of being edited in computer software. In foregrounding the filmmaking process, *Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline* emphasizes the way the films bring meaning and structure to the lives of young people living in a highly unstable political environment. Laye, like Hubert, expresses her fear that her film project would die with her. Following these two short profiles, a message concludes the film: “During the bombing in Nov-Dec 2012 the M23 rebels took Goma for 10 days. Many people were killed and houses destroyed. Despite this situation, Hubert Bonke and Laye Uwera continue to pursue their passion. They believe film and journalism can shape the world for the better.”

Unlike the other films in the *Art on the Frontline* series, this film directly engages with the way that the films are distributed and the impact the films have on the youth in Goma, as well as people who view it elsewhere in the world. In the article “Online Documentary,” Danny Birchall asks two questions: First, what distinguishes online documentary from traditionally distributed, feature length documentary? Secondly, what are the characteristics of documentaries produced for distribution on the Internet? Three of the primary differences Birchall identifies—the creation of new communities, access to ‘dirty reality,’ and video diary methods—are valuable to consider in relation to *Dream Under Fire*. 223

The films that Hubert and Laye make at Yolé!Africa serve multiple communities. First, through the entire production of films the youth of Goma learn valuable technical skills, they are able to express themselves in an environment in which they are frequently silenced, and they share their personal vision of the world with one another. The second community served is that of the Congolese diaspora who cannot rely on international news media to cover events in Goma. Laye, in particular, speaks about how important it is to her to communicate events of violence to friends, family, and her social media followers who expect updates from her. Finally, once posted on YouTube and the Yolé!Africa website, the work of students like Laye and Hubert are available to anyone in the world, and is followed particularly closely by American college students who view their work as part of efforts by Yolé!Africa US which raises awareness about conflict in the Congo and facilitates exchange between American and Congolese youth.\footnote{According to website, Yole!Africa US is “an educational non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness among American youth about the current situation in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo while inspiring change through artistic and international exchange.”}

The film \textit{Dream Under Fire} demonstrates the way that new communities are brought together through film when obstacles of distribution are overcome. Documentary posted, shared, and viewed exclusively on the Internet can reach a widespread audience without dependence on the film industry apparatus whatsoever. What is lost, however, when the films are distributed this way, is any possibility of profit, thus perpetuating many of the problems discussed in Téno’s films.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure12.png}
\caption{Footage of M23 rebels taking the city of Goma, \textit{Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline}}
\end{figure}
Distribution of documentary film on the Internet facilitates the circulation of unedited footage of events—such as scenes of war, criminal activity, political speeches—footage Danny Birchall calls “dirty reality.” *Dream Under Fire* contains several clips of footage of the 2012 attacks carried out by the M23 rebels showing tanks rolling into the city, people fleeing, and gunfire throughout the city. This kind of footage, coupled with techniques of video diary which present one person’s thoughts and opinions in intimate conversation with the camera, create portraits of Goma, the people who live there, and the violence that punctuates their lives; when posted on the Internet these types of short films have the potential to be viewed by an impressively large audience. While the short film *Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline* is readily available for viewing on YouTube, it has only been viewed approximately 670 times since it was posted on October 25, 2013. In the world of Internet “hits,” this is a very small number indeed and indicates this film has not, in fact, circulated widely on the Internet.225

The most considerable barrier to access to films like *Dream Under Fire: Art on the Frontline* in Africa is Internet access. Unfortunately, the available data on Internet access in Africa is often incomplete or methodologically faulty, yet these imperfect statistics are the only way to begin to understand the potential impact of films that circulate on the Internet. The data sources on Internet access fall into two categories: for-profit companies that release their market research data and non-profit organization that gather data from governments and international trade organizations. The company Akamai is a “content delivery network” that releases an annual report of Internet connectivity speed each year but, while this data is useful in comparing Internet infrastructures across African countries, the report does not indicate the number of people able to actually access the Internet.226 The powerful trade organization GSMA represents

225 Number of views on March 7, 2017.
226 See https://www.akamai.com
international mobile phone operators and releases a report entitled “The Mobile Economy in sub-Saharan Africa” each year that provides data and projections for Internet access. While market data can provide insight into indicators of Internet access, the most reliable sources for Internet data in Africa are organizations that use numerous sources of data for their analysis.

The organization WEBIndex, funded by the World Wide Web Foundation, uses categories such as universal access, relevant content, freedom and openness, and empowerment to give countries a numerical value that measures how the Internet contributes to “social, economic and political progress in countries across the world.” In 2014, of the 24 African countries surveyed, the three countries with the highest overall rating were Tunisia, Mauritius, and South Africa and the three lowest ranking countries were Ethiopia, Cameroon, and Mali. The WEBIndex data is highly reputable, as it combines data from World Bank, International Technological University, and World Economic Forum, but analysis of the African continent as a whole is impossible because only 24 of the 54 countries on the African continent are surveyed. Considering the three countries of focus in this project—Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo—Cameroon was the only one surveyed. According to WEBIndex analysis, Cameroon received an overall value of 9.71 and ranked 83rd of all countries in the study. For perspective, Denmark ranked first with an overall value of 100.00 and the United States ranked 6th with an overall value of 94.52.

The website Internet World Stats collects data on Internet usage, population statistics, and Internet market research in order to create a profile for all countries in the world. The site estimates that 28.7% of the population on the African continent is an Internet user and 12.4% of the population is a Facebook user. In Cameroon, 17.7% of the population uses the Internet and

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227 See http://www.gsmamobileeconomyafrica.com
228 See http://thewebindex.org
229 See http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm
8.6% has a Facebook profile. The data listed on the website for the Republic of Congo raises suspicion because both the percent of Internet users and Facebook subscribers is listed at 8.2% and because the raw number is questionably round at 400,000 exactly. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Internet users are 3.8% of the population and 2.6% uses Facebook. Given inconsistencies and the opacity of data collection methods, it is challenging to know how much confidence to place in these statistics. What can be determined, undoubtedly, is that the vast majority of the population in sub-Saharan Africa does not presently have access to the Internet.

Yet, with the explosion of “SmartPhone” technology that facilitates mobile access to the Internet without a computer, there is no doubt that more and more of the population on the continent will be able to use the Internet, and thus will have new accessibility to films.

The documentary films of Jean-Marie Téno, the short-form films produced by Guy Bomanyama Zandu, and films of students at Yole!Africa represent cinema and the challenges of producing and distributing films, yet reinforce the appeal and importance of film in Africa. Focused on the medium itself, rather than the particular content of films, the documentaries address the political and economic structures that impact film viewing in Africa. The films of Jean-Pierre Bekolo diverge from these documentary films by explicitly addressing the content of African films and the objectives of film production in Africa.

**Testing Limits of Genre and Form in the Films of Jean-Pierre Bekolo**

The films of Jean-Pierre Bekolo challenge, provoke, and coerce the viewer to consider the purpose of making films and the role of film in conveying ideas, emotions, and influences to a public. All at once, Bekolo’s unconventional films can be funny, peculiar, mystifying, ironic,

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ostentatious, and poignant. The films Le Complot d’Aristote (1996) and Le Président (2013) both exemplify the way that films of Bekolo test the limits and probe boundaries of traditional film genres. The films of Bekolo blur cinematic genres and foreground the production of cinema within films in order to challenge established ideas about what it means to create relevant and meaningful contemporary African films, for African audiences.

Le Complot d’Aristote was commissioned by the British Film Institute in order to celebrate the centenary of cinema. Along with Bekolo, filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Martin Scorsese, and Bernardo Bertolucci also submitted entries. The opportunity to be in such distinguished company conferred upon Bekolo significant respect and consideration. Filmed in Zimbabwe with South African actors, the film tells the story of two men engaged in a struggle to promote different kinds of films. Essemba, or E.T., a filmmaker, returns to his hometown and finds that the movie theatre has been taken over by a group of thugs—named Cobra, Bruce Lee, Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, Nikita, and Saddam—led by the film enthusiast, Cinéma, who only shows American films and actively disparages African cinema. E.T. manages to throw the thugs out of the theatre, with the help of the police, but they pillage all of the African film reels. Cinéma and his followers retreat to the countryside and set up a makeshift movie theatre where they show the villagers the African films. Meanwhile, E.T. tries to reclaim his African films, resorts to violence, and as a result, the two men are arrested. A work of conceptual art, this film tries to reconcile the demand for politically engaged cinema, primarily consumed in the West, while also addressing the African public’s taste and desire for entertainment.

and Les Saignantes (2005) were featured at several international film festivals. He also taught film in the United States at Virginia Tech, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Duke University.

231 The names of Cinéma’s crew—Cobra, Bruce Lee, Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, Nikita, and Saddam—represent cultural icons that operate as symbols of the global economy. These symbols signify postcolonial/neocolonial threats to African culture, particularly the film industry, as it struggles to compete in the global marketplace economy.
The film opens with a scene of a police officer leading two men, handcuffed to each of his arms, across train tracks. The film begins with a voice-over that sets the scene for the rest of the film. In heavily accented English, Bekolo tells the following story:

It started in the African bush, where I was with my grandfather chewing kola nut. I heard the drums telling me that I had a phone call from London. The British Film Institute wanted me to make a film to celebrate the centenary of cinema. One hundred years of cinema? My grandfather wanted to know who else was on the list. Martin Scorsese, Stephan Frears, Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, George Miller. Hmmm. Then I started to wonder: why me? Was it Christian charity or political correctness? Was I accepting a challenge from someone already standing on the finish line?

Bekolo plays on several stereotypes of Africa—kola nut, drums, ancestral guidance—that permeate the kinds of films that he attacks in *Le Complot d’Aristote*. He foregrounds the commissioned origins of this film because of his seeming uneasiness with the power dynamics it sets up and the ensuing controversy it created. Bekolo’s voice-over introduction to the film sounds much like the exposition at the beginning of a documentary film in which the narrator explains the issues, context or problems the film will represent. From the very beginning of the film, viewers are challenged to identify the genre, thus leaving them guessing as to how to understand the action that follows.

Figure 13: The opening scene of the film showing two men handcuffed to a police officer, *Le Complot d’Aristote*
During the production of *Le Complot d’Aristote*, Bekolo discovered that the budget he had received was substantially smaller than that of his European counterparts, and so he severed his ties with the British Film Institute, found a new producer, and made the film without their backing.\textsuperscript{232} The final questions of the introductory voice-over speculate that there is a paternalistic motivation behind the request for Bekolo to make a film for the centenary. As he explains in the following exchange from an interview, the inspiration for the film was the power dynamics inherent in the commissioning process:

It is the first film that I’ve ever been commissioned to make, and it is, as you are aware, to celebrate a hundred years of cinema. In considering all these elements, I decided to make a film according to what the occasion meant to me being African, the subject of a paternalistic attitude, and how I was positioned in all that. I was asked to celebrate a hundred years of cinema, of African cinema, when African countries have been independent less than a hundred years. All these contradictions, for me, are parts of the elements which shape the film.\textsuperscript{233}

As this interview illustrates, Bekolo envisioned *Le Complot d’Aristote* as a conceptual work that would represent and respond to the particular circumstances of the film. His position as filmmaker is foregrounded by both the voice-over throughout the film but also by emphasizing the choices that African filmmakers have made in the past, and why he himself has elected to reject these traditions.


Following the introductory voice-over, the scene continues and the camera focuses on the three men—the police officer and two handcuffed men. One man says, “they call me ‘Cinéma’ because I have watched 10,000 films.” The other handcuffed man responds, “and how many of them were African?” The man called Cinéma replies, “very few. Because they are shit.” To which the other man replies, “if they are shit, then you are shit because you are African.” The police officer interrupts the squabbling and says, “watching films is not a job. He’s a filmmaker, what do you do?” We learn later in the film that the police office is charged with investigating how it is possible that a person can die in one film but reappear in another one. Simply, the police officer represents the government, Cinéma represents the audience, and E.T. represents the filmmaker. The message being that all three—government, audience, and filmmaker—are bound together, quite literally in this scene, because of the politics and economics of film in Africa.234

The establishing shot of the film is strange and confusing to the first time viewer. With minimal explanation, a narrator questions the very purpose of the film and the unknown characters fight about film in the presence of a police officer. There is no context to the scene and the dialogue is highly unusual. Thrown right into the action, the viewer knows nothing of the men, their background, the source of their conflict and, as a result, must infer much based on the discussion of film. The film capitalizes on the disorientation of the viewer, particularly the lack of clarity on the genre itself, in order to disrupt expectations. Initially, the visual presentation and dialogue of the characters suggest the film is a fictional story. However, the voice-over has qualities of a documentary. In an interview about the film, Bekolo explains that this effect is entirely intentional and serves a particular purpose: “Africa is always young or very old but

never in-between. With the voice-over I try to show that people in Africa exist individually, not always through the community or group and to insist on my story, or perception of cinema. So, while the voice-over gives a documentary feel, the visuals and other technical elements point towards fiction, a sort of action film.”

The voice-over thus serves to express Bekolo’s individuality as a filmmaker, his unique experience in making this film, and how that relates to institutions of power in the film industry such as the British Film Institute.

Shortly after the argument between the two men, the police officer asks Cinéma for identification documents. Cinéma removes a handful of cards from his pocket revealing that each card bears the name of an African filmmaker. The cards all have the same black and white headshot of Cinéma but the names are all different: Djibril Diop Mambety, Gaston Kabore, Med Hondo, Ousmane Sembene, Haile Guerima, Kwah Ansah, Souleymane Cisse, etc. The identification cards operate as a kind of index of all the great African filmmakers who have come before Bekolo and whose films have shaped the landscape of African film. The irony of this scene is that Cinéma, who is in possession of these identification cards, expresses his distaste and disdain for African films. The meaning and significance of these name cards are thus unclear but sets the scene for other techniques of metacinema employed later in the film. Of course, an uninformed viewer of the film could completely miss this subtle moment of metacommentary. For this reason, it seems likely that Bekolo includes this short shot as a gesture to the fact that Le Complot d’Aristote is intended to celebrate the past, and future, of African cinema. The names on

the identification cards create a genealogy of great African filmmakers and, in doing so, reminds the viewer of the place of *Le Complot d’Aristote* in the trajectory of African film. So while the rest of the film disparages much of what has come before, he gives a little nod to those who have paved the way for him.

Following the identification card scene, the action flashes back to explain how the two men ended up in handcuffs in the first place. Once E.T. discovers the movie theatre has been taken over by African film-hating thugs, he manages to get the police to help him kick them out. After Cinéma and his gang are thrown out of the city and lose control of the movie theatre, they flee to the countryside where they build a makeshift theatre out of junk metal and pieces of wood. A large group of people is gathered at the recently established cinema called “New Africa” movie theatre. The camera pans the faces of the audience and one of the spectators exclaims, “I can’t watch this it is too slow!” Another person says, “they do nothing, walk slowly, it’s an African film!” A third person says, still during the film, “and they don’t even drink from a calabash!” The people disrupting the film are thrown out and continue their conversation outside the makeshift theatre. Much of the discussion about African film in *Le Complot d’Aristote* is centered on stereotypes. The reference to the “calabash” in this scene is therefore a way of signaling that the speaker in the scene does not appreciate the slow pace of films within a genre called “Calabash Cinema.” Made during the period just following

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236 Scene begins 38:30.
independence, films categorized as “Calabash Cinema” represented the gained independence of African nations, yet these films were still bound to European norms of filmmaking that showed the indigenous population in a highly stereotypical and degrading manner. The films largely took place in rural villages, very little occurred in the plot, and any action happened in a slow and drawn-out style. In an interview, Bekolo explains his interest in these films as follows:

I was interested in how some African films, like calabash cinema, for example, sustain certain myths about Africa. It was important for me, without pointing to any specific film, to address that somewhat. I think the gang’s comments show some critical savvy. African cinema seems to have reached a point where somebody just sets up a camera, goes walking, then comes back and has a film! When you look back to things like ceremonies in Africa, the performance, drama, stories are all elements of cinema which have been in the continent for centuries, and I am just wondering where the goats and chicken are coming from.237

As Bekolo explains, he uses the film to explore tropes repeated in many African films made in a generation before him. By making fun of the films, he presents the criticisms of a younger generation and uses them to define the kinds of films this generation does want to watch and enjoy.

Employing techniques of metacinema, mainly staging a conversation about film within a film, Bekolo makes space for young Africans to express their taste in film. The conversation about the pace of the film continues outside the movie theatre as one man complains about how Africans are portrayed like “aliens” and another criticizes the pace of the film when he says, “hey with these movies you go out to take a piss, have a meal and they are still doing the same thing they were doing when you come back.” Someone sticks his head out the window of the

theatre and says to the men outside, “Gentlemen, you are missing out on some great genuine African action!” In the next scene they have returned to the movie and several people contribute to the following conversation:

“Action!”
“African action! Chickens chasing goats and goats chasing chickens!”
“With traditional music!”
“That’s classic!”
“You are always against African films but they show what’s life is like!”
“Slow, like a chicken!”

During this scene the viewer can see the faces of people in a dark room, with only the light from the film illuminating their faces and the sounds of the film in the background. This is an important scene in Le Complot d’Aristote because the characters address how the reality represented in the films has nothing to do with the reality they live. The disconnect between the two is one of the primary criticisms Bekolo has of African films because people cannot identify with the plots, characters, and setting of films since they have no relation to their lives. As a result of this, the characters in the films turn to American and European films in order to find more relevant entertainment that can excite them. The African films are meant to educate or to tell a moral tale, but what audiences really want is entertainment, pure and simple.

Bekolo blames the inability of African films to capture the attention of Africa audiences partially on the slow editing that was typical at the time. He explains, “people always criticize African films as too slow because of the editing. Most of the editors who work on these films are

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238 This scene of film spectatorship in Le Complot d’Aristote is reminiscent of a scene in Bertrand Tavernier’s 1981 film Coup de Torchon in which colonial administrators watch African viewers as they view a film projected on a large white bedsheet. Positioned on the other side of the sheet, opposite the African viewers of the film, the White spectators see the film reversed as well as an African man who, standing next to the screen, acts as a translator for the African audience.
French women. Editing for me is a heartbeat, a pulse, the rhythm. What can a French woman tell me about the beat, the pulse or the rhythm of my film?...Editing is about freedom, so I think Africans should be the best editors of their own films.”

The slow pace of editing which so irritates Bekolo, as well as his fictional characters, is a misguided effort to be explicit to audiences who do not have a high level of film literacy. Bekolo’s films challenge this misconception by illustrating that, particularly the younger generations, do indeed possess film literacy and yearn for faster paced films. In the interview, Bekolo emphasizes the way that editing sets the tone of the film and the pace is essential to the commercial success of a film.

In a scene shortly following the one at the movie theater, sitting at a bar, the group of thugs discusses the film they watched the night before and the type of films they would like to see made in Africa. One man says, “let’s kick ass. We want African movies that kick ass. Wesley Snipes. Black Stars. Spike Lee. Boyz n the Hood. Hardcore items.” Another man chimes in, “you want Wesley snipes? Me, I want Whitney Houston.” Looking directly in the lens of the camera, someone says, “hey, we don’t want fucking Jean-Pierre Bekolo” to which another person replies, “he’s not a filmmaker, he’s a gravy maker!” causing the whole group to laugh heartily.

The comments in this scene take the viewer out of the action and very deliberately remind them of the filmmaker, his role, and how this self-deprecating joke is related to the initial intent of the project, to celebrate African film. It is a moment when the techniques and norms of filmic genres are yet again blurred. As the scholar Akinwumi Adesokan points out, Bekolo’s blurring of genres “is an extravagance possible only in a commissioned or sponsored work, and this fact underscores the vexed question of the accessibility of African cinema. The self-

239 Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 224.
240 Scene begins at 46:33.
conscious director who can do this is not so worried about the commercial viability of his undertaking, and the metropolitan provenance of the film’s conception already determines its appeal.” Bekolo is able to challenge established norms, test generic boundaries, and criticize the industry precisely because he is exempt from the rules of the game. Filmmakers under normal finance, timeline, and commercial pressure could never have made a film like *Le Complot d’Aristote*.

The special funding circumstances of *Le Complot d’Aristote* certainly allowed Bekolo a degree of flexibility not afforded to a filmmaker like Jean-Marie Téno, for example, but as the film *Le Président* illustrates, Bekolo makes radical films regardless of circumstances. *Le Président* (2013) is a mockumentary that represents a fictional president, his supporters and political opponents, the news media, and the average person in Cameroon during a period of instability. A mix of interviews and action, the film follows the president, named Aladji, as he leaves the capital to seek the comfort of his deceased wife and the council of his allies. During this time, there is much speculation about his whereabouts, who will succeed him, and what desperately needs to change in Cameroon.

The extremely fast-paced film jumps between many voices—journalists, members of the president’s staff, the president’s friend from his youth, political prisoners, the president’s dead wife, his advisors, and a rapper—as well as different settings within Cameroon. Mirroring the inclusion of many voices, *Le Président* combines scenes of urban life and rural Cameroon, perspectives of the young and old, clips from television, and other journalistic sources as well as conversations between the president and his closest allies. The editing of this film jars the viewer, switching quickly between topics and scenes and including many inserts and split-screen

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techniques that highlight the combination of disparate sources. In both content and form, this film is flashy and highly contemporary. The mockumentary form itself is a genre that flirts with the boundary between fact and fiction and is inherent playful.

Shortly after it was released, *Le Président* was banned in Cameroon and the network Canal+ AFRIQUE, who helped finance the film, has yet to show the film on television elsewhere in Africa for fear of backlash. The film is a very thinly veiled attack on Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon who has been in power since 1982. The film ends with the following message, “a quand la fin? 1982 – 201?”. It is hardly surprising that the outward expression of political discontent in *Le Président* was not tolerated by the repressive regime of Biya. When asked about his reaction to the refusal of the director of l’Institut français to screen the film, Bekolo responded,

Le directeur, que je connais, ne voyait a priori aucun problème à le projeter dans sa salle, la seule de Yaoundé. Mais après l’avoir vu, il a préféré en référer à sa hiérarchie qui a craint l’incident diplomatique dans un contexte tendu par la prise d’otage de la famille française dans le Nord.[…] Mon but n’était pas de créer une polémique, mais cette forme de Françafrique où le cinéaste ne peut aller au-delà d’un périmètre défini me fait un peu froid dans le dos.

While he claims he has no intention of creating a “polémique,” there is no real chance that Bekolo imagined a different reception for this film. The mockumentary genre, which “appropriates documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject.”

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242 Olivier Barlet, “*Le Président*, de Jean-Pierre Bekolo” *Agricultures* (June 8, 2013).
244 Just as African filmmaking was restricted under French colonial rule, Bekolo demonstrates that neo-colonial power, which he refers to as Françafrique in the interview, continues to exert power on African film production.
could be used to subtly critique the Cameroonian president and his government if not for the fact that Bekolo constructs a fictional subject that is so close to reality the viewer forgets the “mock” and thinks they are watching a documentary. Particularly in interviews with individuals who discuss the repression and human suffering experienced under the regime, the film seems highly documentary in nature. Much like *Le Complot d’Aristote, Le Président* also shifts between genres and plays with viewer expectations.

As the film follows the journey of the president from the capital to the countryside, there are several interviews with people as they react to the possibility of a change in power. One such person is Jo Wood’ou, a young Cameroonian journalist, who introduces himself and presents his objective of investigating the president, his whereabouts, and his search for a successor. As Wood’ou explains, “I was born when the president was already the president, I learned to walk when then president was already the president, I learned to speak, go to preschool, go to elementary school, go to university, and the president was still the president, I am making television and the president is still the president. You understand, right?” The sentiment expressed by Wood’ou is shared by a generation of young Cameroonian people who have never lived under another regime. Avoiding an open attack on the president, Wood’ou presents his objective of covering the news of the president’s presently unknown whereabouts.

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246 Scene begins 9:04.
This scene looks very much like a news broadcast. Wood’ou presents his position to the audience directly and mentions he is reporting for the news channel, Canal-D at the beginning and end of his clip. The broadcast is inset on the screen and is imbedded in the center of another moving image of children reaching their hands up towards the camera as they play in a schoolyard. The insert effect results in the broadcast looking as though it is being viewed on the Internet rather than a television. The multiple screens, showing different images, simultaneously echoes the proliferation of voices in the many interviews that make up the film. Similar to the cross-cutting technique of editing, which suggests simultaneous action by toggling between scenes, the multiple inset screens have the effect of showing what many people are doing at one particular moment. In interviews Bekolo has said that experimenting with different editing techniques was crucial in his search for his voice and tell his own story in film. The multiplicity of image and voice serves to overpower the singular, totalitarian authority of the president in the film through the use of technology and new media. In many ways, Le Président explores new ways to broadcast opposing opinions and dissenting voices, and how these techniques could serve as a pathway to enacting change.

While much of the film features multiple voices, there is a particular moment when the president and one other person have a conversation without the disruption of inset screens,

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music, or quick editing. In this unusual scene, the fictional president and a young man, who is in fact a “real person”—the famous Cameroonian rapper Général Valsero—discuss the current economic and social situation for the youth of the country.249 Sitting in an alleyway, with graffiti on the surrounding walls, the two men share their concerns about young people in Cameroon. Speaking frankly and relatively informally to the president, Valsero expresses dismay about the lack of employment opportunities following university studies. He describes a proliferation of “informal commerce” (call boxes, taxis, prostitution) that has occurred as a result of high unemployment among the youth. He is frustrated by the lack of effort shown by both the president and his ministers to remedy this situation. He mentions that the youth does not have a place for concerts, to see movies, or to watch football games and that he is tired of seeing the government ministers in the clubs with young girls who work as prostitutes. He accuses the president of knowing of all these problems and doing nothing. The president seems to listen but does not take responsibility for these issues and, instead, simply says they are outside of his control.

Much of Valsero’s monologue to the president mirrors the lyrics of his popular song entitled “Lettre au président.” In the first verse of the rap he protests rampant unemployment, the behavior of government ministers, and sexual exploitation of young women. The song begins:

Excuse moi prési, mais il faut que je te parles
A ton nom ils parlent tous; et au notre personne ne parle
Ils disent défendre ta politique, paraît qu'ils suivent ton programme
Mais c'est toi qui as décidé de nous exclure de la gamme
Je veux savoir prési pourquoi pour nous ça ne marche pas
J'ai fais de longues années d'études et j'ai pas trouvé d'emploi

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249 Scene begins 29:30.
Tu te rappelles t'avais promis qu'on sortirait du tunnel
On n'y est toujours ce sont les mêmes qui tiennent la chandelle
Regardes sur le trottoir ces fillettes n'ont pas le choix
Elles n'ont pas seize ans, elles vendent leurs corps elles n'ont pas le choix
Il paraît que l'école ne sert plus à rien, les gars se pètent les cacas
Pendant ce temps tes ministres friment dans nos rues en prado "C.A"

Addressing the president as “prési”, and demanding to speak with him, Bekolo seems to use Valsero’s song as inspiration for the informal conversation between the two men in the film. Overall, rap music plays a significant role throughout the film by signaling the discontent of the youth and highlighting one of the artistic avenues they have to express this discontent. In addition, the rap music, and certainly the appearance of the extremely well loved rapper, both add appeal for a younger generation of viewers.

One of the last scenes in the film is a close up shot of Valsero, standing in the street, singing his song “Je suis jeune” which laments the economic and social struggles of young people but encourages young people to be strong, essentially a “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” message. The appearance of Valsero, an internet-like aesthetic that includes numerous simultaneously playing videos, and the broadcast of the young man Jo Wood’ou all contribute to the sense of youthful revolt in Le Président. The film demonstrates the ways that young people can and will act against repression, using various media, including film. In the end, Le Président
is a film about the potential of film; the thinly veiled mockumentary inspires young people to find their voice in the film medium.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the varying types of metacommentary that African filmmakers have employed in order to tackle questions of preservation, accessibility, production, and purpose of African film. Jean-Marie Téno’s films use the documentary techniques of voice-over and interview to confront issues of preservation and accessibility of films. The selection of short form documentary films from the Democratic Republic of Congo illustrate the many financial obstacles filmmakers face and how Internet technology may offer new possibilities for film distribution. In the final section, the metacinema of Jean-Pierre Bekolo subverts genres and borrows from Internet aesthetics in order to challenge issues of production and purpose.

The comparison of representations of cinema across several film genres allows for observations about how metacommentary operates within each type of film. The films that employ a combination of traditional interview techniques, archival footage, and voiceover, primarily tackle questions of preservation and accessibility. Operating within the established conventions of documentary filmmaking, the films of Téno and the short-form films all seek to express the specific power and appeal of film in order to find ways to break through the obstacles that prevent widespread screening of films in Africa. These films focus primarily on the economic and political challenges that filmmakers face rather than critique the quality of African film.

In contrast, the films of Jean-Pierre Bekolo test the boundaries of the film medium itself by mixing genres and introducing other media such as rap music and news broadcasting. Bekolo uses not only the content, but also the form of his films, to challenge the conventions of cinema.
that, in part, have resulted in the stagnation of production and consumption on the African continent. Bekolo’s films are more audacious and subversive than the documentary films in part because the fictional genre more readily allows for ambiguity and interpretation. The documentary films, which are ostensible reportage about “reality,” have far less flexibility to make daring political statements or satirize film production itself.

Representations of cinema created by African filmmakers not only provide insight into the ways that filmmakers see the contemporary cinematic landscape but also demonstrate the unfulfilled potential of the film medium to reinvent itself and reinvigorate the film industry. Perhaps the awareness raising techniques of the documentary films provide the first step in the process of expanding film access in Africa while the fictional films offer a vision of the film form that, once free from foreign funding structures, responds to the tastes of African audiences. All of the films discussed in this chapter demand change—in the distribution, production, and content of film—and, by and large, the filmmakers only see the possibility of these changes actually occurring once there is a break from European funding and influence and self-sustaining film industries are established within African nations.
CHAPTER THREE

Art and Authenticity: (Self-)portraits of Contemporary African Art

The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it [an art object] must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes.—Jonathan Culler  

The vibrant, joyous, and dynamic figures in the painting *Kiese na kiese* [*Happiness and Joy*] by JP Mika danced on the walls of the Paris metro during the summer months of 2015. The painting, depicting a male and female figure smiling and holding hands as they sway across a vivid floral background, was featured on advertisements for the exhibition *Beauté Congo—1926-2015—Congo Kitoko*. Anyone in Paris during that summer viewed the ubiquitous advertisement for the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, which featured art from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Curated by André Magnin, the exhibition included works produced between 1926 and 2015 and featured primarily paintings as well as a few examples of sculpture. Illustrating the evolution of Congolese painting throughout the 20th century while also focusing on contemporary works, the exhibition *Beauté Congo* provided Parisians, and thousands of tourists, the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the exciting visual arts of Congo over the summer and autumn months.

The exhibition *Beauté Congo* was exceptional both in that it presented exclusively Congolese art and that it included artistic production from a period of 90 years, thus including

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both modern and contemporary art. Among the works included in the ambitious exhibition, many contemporary paintings explicitly represent the figure of the artist or art itself, and thus comment on art from inside the medium. Likewise, questions of audience, reception, and authenticity are foregrounded in these paintings thus drawing attention to the power dynamics that influence the circulation of African arts today.

The exhibitions *Beauté Congo* and *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*, a small exhibition shown at espace doul’art in Douala, Cameroon, will provide the focus of this chapter in which I endeavor to illustrate how African visual artists use their work to represent art. These two contemporary exhibitions place emphasis on individual artists in order to showcase their oeuvre, present their personal trajectories, and portray their artistic individuality. I concentrate on a selection of the paintings in order to demonstrate how works of contemporary African art represent their own history and reception as well as the future of their medium. First, drawing from the works of Chéri Samba, Cheik Ledy, and Monsengo Shula (included in the *Beauté Congo* exhibition), I demonstrate how Congolese contemporary art uses both text and image to problematize the historic consumption of African arts and to represent questions of authenticity that circulate around African works. Secondly, I contend that young Cameroonian artists use the portrait, and the paradoxes it evokes, in order to represent their own personal, “authentic” vision of life in urban Africa.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word “authentic” serves as a fitting point of departure for a discussion of authenticity because the word, much like the theoretical concept itself, has numerous meanings, uses, relevance to disparate fields and possible interpretations. The definition of “authentic” includes the following meanings: “possessing original or inherent

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252 *Beauté Congo* was the first exhibition of exclusively Congolese art to present art from such an expansive period of history.
authority,” “authoritative,” “unfeigned,” “legally valid,” “genuine,” “trustworthy,” and “authorized.” What do all of these definitions have in common? Where do they overlap?

Reduced to their core, each of these definitions makes some claim to Truth. The definitions “unfeigned,” “genuine,” and “trustworthy” locate that Truth in an internal honesty or sincerity. The idea of Truth can be distilled from definitions like “possessing original or inherent authority,” “authoritative,” and “authorized” which suggest power, assurance, officially approved ideas.

This relationship between authenticity and Truth has plagued theorists from wide ranging disciplines. In their works, philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger debate questions of authenticity in relation to societal pressures, modes of living, and the search for personal Truth. In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor W. Adorno theorizes the “split” of authenticity between reality and the singularity, truthfulness, and originality that he believes is implied by authenticity.

Definitions of the modern ideal of authenticity are elusive and shifting in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, but Lionel Trilling does replace the concept of sincerity with the concept of authenticity, which means, most simply, being true to one’s self. For both of these theorists, and many more, the relationship between authenticity and Truth is problematic, unstable, uncomfortable, in other words, messy.

As a result, contemporary scholars of authenticity have taken up the paradoxes of authenticity as a way to understand the weighty implications of the concept. In the introduction to the collection *Paradoxes of Authenticity*, Julia Straub identifies the dichotomy between inside and outside as one of the fundamental, lasting paradoxes of authenticity that has the ability to bridge the many disciplines that struggle with questions of authenticity. Straub writes, “to speak

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253 See Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments,” Vol. I* (1846) and Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927).
of the externalization of the internal or the making visible and graspable of what is private and on the inside are ways of conceptualizing the eternal conflict of authenticity.” Straub’s conceptualization of the problems of authenticity is particularly interesting when considering works of visual arts because not only does the artist expose him/herself though artistic production but the works selected for this chapter deliberately display the nuances of what makes art authentic, or not.

Moving away from questions of personal or eternal “Truth,” contemporary scholars are now more interested in the cultural demands for authenticity and how the concept is employed in our daily lives, as well as in personal, literary, and artistic realms. In The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World, Russell Cobb writes that, paradoxically, “the democratization of culture as enabled by digitization and globalization has led to a greater desire for authentic cultural products.” In addition, Cobb observes that cultural productions that are criticized for being “fake” do not receive this label as a result of aesthetic quality but rather out of the reduced monetary value. For example, a work initially believed to be painted by Rembrandt is praised and celebrated but once discovered to have been painted by another artist, loses its value and is dismissed as a fake. As this example demonstrates, commodification “is a phenomenon that destroys the artifice of authenticity, even though all cultural products have a market value.”

While Cobb considers monetary value of authenticity, Geoffrey Brahm Levey considers cultural value of authenticity. In Authenticity, Autonomy and Multiculturalism, Levey curates a collection of articles that study how multicultural politics involve claims of cultural authenticity intended to help groups and individuals gain legitimacy and public recognition in the face of discrimination.

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256 Cobb, The Paradox, 6.
Discussing the utility and pitfalls of the concept of authenticity, contemporary studies of authenticity are less concerned with the origins and significance of the term and more focused on the implications.

For the purposes of this study, authenticity is considered within the field of aesthetics and applied to works of visual art. By studying how artists use their work to represent and confront questions of authenticity, the following analysis hopes to illustrate the specific ways both text and images within paintings are used to interrogate the production, dissemination, circulation, reception, and consumption of African arts.

**Tracing European Preoccupations with African Authenticity**

Questions of authenticity are raised repeatedly in the exhibitions *Beauté Congo* and *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*. Knowing many of their viewers are familiar only with “traditional” arts of African such as masks, carved wooden figures, and patterned textiles, the artists of the two exhibitions respond to the prescriptive and outdated expectations of foreign viewers of their work by exposing this obsession with what makes a work “authentic.” There are a variety of preconceived notions about African arts that continue to circulate such as the idea that works must have devotional uses or spiritual significance in order to be considered authentic or that works are somehow more authentic if produced prior to European intervention in the African continent. In this context, the quality of being “authentic” is, often, code for aesthetic categories such as “folkloric” or “naïf” used to describe African arts. The large-scale paintings in both exhibitions destabilize these age-old constructs of authenticity by directly engaging, visually and textually, with the concept or by making their own claims to authenticity by foregrounding their individual artistic mastery. In order to understand the persistent concern with authenticity it is useful to trace the history of reception of African art in Europe.
In the early 19th century, African objects, as well as objects from all over the non-western world, began to be exhibited in public spaces. In part, Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt (1798-1901) helped transition private collecting to public presentation as evidenced by the 1827 exhibition of Egyptian antiquities in the Louvre. In addition, after the 1830 conquest of Algiers, similar displays of Roman antiquities from North Africa, as well as Arab and Berber artifacts, were mounted in Paris. Public interest in foreign art and artifacts was ever increasing and by 1878, an ethnography museum devoted to “primitive” art and objects opened at Place du Trocadéro. It was at this museum, Le Musée de l’Homme, that Pablo Picasso viewed the African masks that would later become inspiration for many of his Cubist works.257

The opening of the ethnography museum also coincided with a range of other display practices such as colonial expositions, “human zoos,” and scientific displays that presented African people and objects to the public. The French government had a vested interest in exposing the French public to the wonders of the colonies in order to garner support for their political missions abroad.258 Selling the idea of “Greater France” required the careful presentation and representation of overseas territories to citizens living in France. One of the primary modes of disseminating information about the colonies was the universal expositions in Paris which sought to reproduce “authentic” communities, present “real” specimens of the culture, and thus offer the visitors the experience of visiting “exotic,” far off lands. For example, the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris featured an exhibit called “Rue du Caire,” which was a

257 Robert Aldrich, “The Difficult Art of Exhibiting the Colonies” (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 440. There are varying accounts of Picasso’s first encounter with African art. Another version of the story is that in 1906 Matisse purchased an “African curiosity” from Emile Heymann, one of the first art dealers to sell African objects in Paris, and it was Matisse who showed the work to Picasso. For further details see Louise Tythacott, Surrealism and the Exotic (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.
258 The colonies were marketed to the métropole in order to gain political support for imperialist politics as well as create a market for the goods imported from abroad. See Lemaire and Blanchard.
representation of an “Oriental bazaar” that included four hundred “native extras” such as jugglers, merchants, veiled women, and artisans, as well as animal participants like monkeys and camels. Reproductions of colonial spaces, like the “Rue du Caire” or replicated villages of various African countries, were supposed to convince the French public of the need for colonial expansion and sell the adventure and exoticism of these endeavors.

The first expositions took place at the beginning of the twentieth century in Marseille (1906 and 1922), Lyon (1894 and 1914), Bordeaux (1907) and Paris (1906 and 1907). These events, organized by the robust colonial lobby and the Ministère des Colonies, were designed to encourage consumption of colonial products, inspire nationalism through images of heroism and adventure, suggest tourist destinations, and display the necessity of the civilizing mission for the indigenous peoples. In addition, French citizens learned of the colonies through travelogues, postcards, and exotic literature recounting adventure abroad. Yet the single most influential event in the establishment of French colonial culture is undoubtedly the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 which sought to educate the population about overseas colonies, as well as convey the message that buying colonial goods was an essential contribution to national prosperity. On May 6, 1931, French citizens found Bois de Vincennes, just outside Paris, transformed into a spectacle of colonial products, people, and culture. For six months, French citizens could visit different pavilions in order to learn about, and experience, France’s many colonial territories. Arts and crafts, architecture, cultural artifacts, and even human “natives,” were put on display for the

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enjoyment of the population.\textsuperscript{261} The 1931 exposition served the political, economic, and cultural agenda of educating the French nation about the Empire.\textsuperscript{262}

Following the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, there was a veritable invasion of colonial images, sounds, smells, and tastes in France. The political goal to associate colonial and imperial interests was successfully achieved through the introduction of the colonies into the everyday life of the population living in the Metropole.\textsuperscript{263} The average French person now encountered the “authentic” products of the colonies on a daily basis and knew at least some rudimentary information about the people who produced it abroad. At this moment in history, there was a marked rhetorical shift from a focus on war and conquest to a discourse of civilization and humanitarianism that emphasized the mutually beneficial relationship between France and its colonies.\textsuperscript{264} On an individual level, French consumers were encouraged to believe that the new products that had appeared in their stores from far off lands were not only useful to them and their families, but also advanced the people abroad who produced the goods.

In addition to the political, economic, social, and cultural efforts to change French taste and inspire the desire for colonial products, imagination and fantasy played a momentous role in the construction of colonial culture.\textsuperscript{265} Opening the eyes of the French people to specific


\textsuperscript{264} The documentary film \textit{La France est un empire} (1939) represents the pride and good-will felt by French citizens executing the civilizing mission of colonialism just prior to WWII.


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representations of different cultures, geographies, landscapes, food, dress, and ways of life roused great interest in the colonies. Through the production of a ubiquitous colonial culture, political and economic powers shaped a colonial imaginary that was self-sustaining. The images that the public were provided foregrounded adventure and conquest and emphasized cultural differences that were fantastic and, at times, shocking to the public. Children, a population significant for the future of the Empire as well as conveying information to their parents in the meantime, received messages about the colonies at home, at school, and during playtime. Children were taught that, as French citizens, the colonies were their personal possessions and would “contribute to their personal wealth as well as that of the country.”

Essential to all representations of overseas territories at the time was the idea that the French public was observing and experiencing authentic versions of these places, people, and objects of their culture. The belief in this authenticity was fundamental in creating the illusion that visitors were transported to these places and were truly experiencing another culture. While it may seem somewhat outlandish today, this illusion was vital in the French government’s mission to promote colonial expansion. The representations of overseas territories presented to the French people were based on repeated stereotypes as well as essentialist and orientalist versions of other cultures.


268 In The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha elaborates on the impact of ceaselessly repeated stereotypes. In the chapter titled, “The other question: stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism,” Bhabha illustrates that the stereotype exposes the fact that the division between colonizer and colonized is not a clear, fixed line between the two groups. The stereotype provides a seemingly stable image of the Other that is ceaselessly repeated. According to Bhabha, the unending repetition of the stereotype exposes the fact that the stereotype can never be completely proved. The ambivalence of the stereotype is the fact
Produced as part of the massive marketing campaign constructed to convince the French people of the benefits and virtues of the colonial mission, images of Africa flooded the métropole and French imaginations alike. The images, all of which were mediated by the French government, were intended to present the colonial subjects as uncivilized peoples desperately in need of the resources and services brought to Africa by the French, thus reinforcing the “humanitarian” justification for colonial expansion. The repeated, stereotypical images and narratives of “authentic” African cultures capture what Julia Straub calls the “double bind of the authentic” which describes the ability of something authentic to simultaneously “send off signals both of immediacy and mediation, genuineness and performance.”\textsuperscript{269} As evidenced in many of the contemporary paintings themselves, the stereotypes breed out of the mass circulation of “authentic” images of Africa people during the colonial period persist today.\textsuperscript{270} Each in their own way, the artists in \textit{Beauté Congo}, \textit{Jeunes Regards Urbain II}, and several important African art exhibitions that preceded them, respond to the lasting impact of the stereotypes of African people and the legacy of preoccupations with cultural authenticity that endures.

**The Evolution of African Art Exhibitions**

In the past forty years there has been substantial change in the ways that African arts have been exhibited in the United States and Europe. In order to understand the curatorial context and motivations of the exhibitions \textit{Beauté Congo} and \textit{Jeunes Regards Urbain II} it is essential to understand the evolution of exhibitions of African art. Three historic exhibitions are generally

\textsuperscript{269} Straub. \textit{Paradoxes}, 10.

\textsuperscript{270} See Jean-Loup Amselle’s \textit{L’Art de la friche} for a discussion of the ways in which, according to him, African artists take advantage of stereotypes by alternately claiming identities of both global artists and African artists (10).
credited with changing the way the west perceived, and had access to, African art. The 1989 exhibition at Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande halle de la Villette, titled *Magiciens de la terre* is remembered as a significant yet highly controversial show of African art in Europe. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, the exhibition was intended as a response to both a Museum of Modern Art show in New York entitled *‘Primitivism’ in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984) and the Colonial Expositions that introduced Europeans to African cultures in the late 19th, early 20th century. One goal of the exhibition was to present western and non-western art together, and to value them equally. Bringing together 100 artists from around the world, the purpose of the exhibition was to present the public with a radical collection of international art. *Magiciens de la terre* was widely accused of not only failing to dismantle artistic hierarchies but many found that non-western works were exoticized and over all the exhibit was “the embodiment of a neocolonialist attitude that allowed the contemporary art system to colonize, commercially and intellectually, new areas that were previously out of bounds.” Causing much outrage and raising many questions about how to ethically display non-western art, *Magiciens de la terre* was highly influential to curators in the decades to follow and, often, served as an example of how not to exhibit African art.

The exhibition *Authentic/ex-centric* presented at the 49th Venice Biennale, June 2001,

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272 Interestingly, a private collection in Philadelphia known as the Barnes Foundation was staging western and non-western art in the same context beginning in the 1920s. Albert C. Barnes was an avid collector of both 20th century modern art and African art and exhibited the works in close proximity in “wall ensembles” which allowed for comparisons across history and geography.

was intended to address the historic lack of African artists included in this event. In the forward to the *Authentic/ex-centric* catalogue, Damien M. Pwono of the Ford Foundation and Els van der Plas of the Prince Claus Fund write that African artists and curators are still marginalized and excluded from many “cultural platforms that could amplify their voices.” They go on to explain that this underrepresentation and lack of visibility is due to “the exoticizing taste of gatekeepers of international cultural platforms and the lack of cooperative engagement of concerned bodies inside and outside the continent.” In addition, curators Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe hoped to underscore the reciprocal patterns of influence between Africa and the rest of the world. The works selected for the exhibition are a sampling of “conceptual interventions” in contemporary African art. The exhibition brought together works by artists from Africa and the diaspora to create a highly diverse and varied picture of the ways contemporary African art participates in a global arena while maintaining specific grounding in history and experience of Africa.

The traveling international exhibition *Africa Remix* included works of contemporary art from 70 countries and was shown in Düsseldorf (2004), London (2005), Paris (2005), Tokyo (2006), Stockholm (2006), and Johannesburg (2007). The exhibition was designed to introduce audiences to significant artists who had not received exposure in Europe, who had yet to be “discovered” by the powerful machinery of the western art world. The exhibition aimed to create an eclectic range of art “that is made to be seen in galleries and art that is created for other

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276 According to Hassan and Oguibe the goal of conceptualism is to make art “that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artist’s hand and uniqueness of the art object as fetishized in the West, as well as problematizing the desire for coherence and narrative consistency” (10).
introspective, religious or communal purposes.” Working to understand the vast space in which African art is produced, the exhibition asked questions such as “what is Africa? What does contemporaneity represent within this geographical entity? How is it defined?” Africa Remix brought together contemporary works of art from vastly different cultures in order to piece together a vision of Africa today. Magiciens de la terre attempted to alter the way African art is viewed in relation to European art, Authentic/ex-centric represented African art in an international arena for the first time, and Africa Remix broadened the public’s perception of contemporary African art by including numerous new media. The objectives of each of these historic exhibitions, and the successes and failures of each show, continue to inform the work of curators of African art today.

The exhibition Beauté Congo—1926-2015—Congo Kitoko, the subject of this chapter, was influenced by the history of African art exhibition and attempted to curate a different kind of exhibition of African art. The curator André Magnin, describes three goals he had for the exhibition: first, to share with the Western public his passion for the art of Congo-Zaire which he has spent 30 years of his life discovering, writing about, collecting, and exhibiting in museums; Secondly, to tell the story of 90 years of Congolese art from 1926 to 2015; Finally, he writes, “j’ai pensé cette exhibition comme un voyage” and he hoped to allow visitors to the exhibition to experience something novel. In addition, in an interview with Anne Bocandé, Magnin says, “je serais fier que les gens ne parlent pas d'art africain mais retiennent des noms, j’aimerais faire entrer des noms dans une histoire de laquelle ils sont effacés. Certains disent

278 Njami, Africa Remix, 20.
279 Prior to this exhibition, in 2004, also at The Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, the show J’aime Chéri Samba included forty-two works by Samba and focused specifically on portraits and self-portraits.
280 André Magnin was an associate curator for Les Magiciens de la terre.
‘y’en a marre de l'art africain’ mais c'est parce qu'on ne retient pas de noms. Si Lubaki et Djilatendo entrent parmi les noms d'artistes que les gens vont retenir, c'est formidable.” Magnin insists on the individuality of the artists while, most obviously with the contemporary artists, emphasizes how the artists form a community of support and influence. Central to the atmosphere of collaboration in the contemporary Congolese art scene is one man: Chéri Samba. The prominent artist Chéri Samba emerges in the exhibitions as a fundamental influence on all contemporary Congolese artists. Focusing on Samba’s works that represent art, the artist, and the international market for African arts, the following section seeks to demonstrate how questions of authenticity influence African arts today.

**Congolese Art and Its Image**

Chéri Samba was born in 1956 in Kinto M'Vuila, in what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a young man he moved to Kinshasa where he worked as sign painter. In 1975 Samba opened his own studio and began working as an illustrator for the magazine *Bilenge Info*. It was during this period he began to develop a unique style, which he calls “peinture populaire.” Samba first gained recognition abroad after his work was included in the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. Since this show, Samba has gained international fame and his work has been shown at the Fondation Cartier, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Venice Biennale, Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, National Museum of African Art in Washington DC, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and Provincial Museum Voor Moderne Kunst in Ostende, as well as in smaller international galleries.

Samba’s work tackles quotidian realities such as corruption, illnesses, social inequality, and sexuality and frequently communicates practical messages or social observations about these
topics with lengthy captions explaining his message. The artist named his style “peinture populaire” because “elle vient du peuple, concerne le peuple et s’adresse au peuple. Elle est tout de suite comprise par tous et le peuple s’y reconnaît. Au contraire de la peinture académique que le peuple ne comprend pas.” The communication of messages is of utmost importance to Samba as is the way his work is grounded in the daily life of urban Congo. Samba’s work has important connections to the bande dessinée (BD) tradition in the way it combines text and image and reaches a wide audience of viewers. When considered for the utilitarian purpose of communicating messages, Samba’s art is highly accessible to all kinds of viewers who speak different languages, have varying levels of literacy and cultural capital. Combining discursive modes, Samba collapses any distinction between the “high art” of painting and the popular BD printed in daily newspapers.

Looking at Chéri Samba’s oeuvre, the viewer observes changes in the artist’s style, use of color, transitions in choice of written message in addition to the man himself maturing from a thin, energized young artist to a majestic

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patriarch of Congolese arts. Since the 1980s Chéri Samba has been using self-portraiture and the written word in his paintings as a way to engage with art, its reception, and its function in society. In the 1981 painting entitled *The Draughtsman, Chéri Samba*, Samba describes his representational technique and the difference between caricature and portrait. With his head tilted to the side, Samba smiles slyly at the viewer as he sits, relaxed and casual, on a burgundy colored armchair that resembles a throne. Behind Samba’s right shoulder is a television displaying the words “Sur le podium aujourd’hui avec Chéri Samba une emission de Hemdi M-MB.” The title of the painting, “The Draughtsman, Chéri Samba” is written in the bottom left hand corner of the painting, engulfed in the green-brown shag carpeting of the room.

Below the portrait, in English, French, and Lingala, the following message is written, “le dessin caricatural n’est rien, car n’importe qui peut le faire, mais il renferme une richesse car il transmet un message surtout s’il y a des bulles. Moi, j’utilise deux techniques ; ‘caricature (humour) et portrait.’ Cela, pour faire une leçon à ceux qui ne font que des humours. Pourtant, je suis artiste autodidacte.” The text of the painting serves to explain the two techniques that contribute to Samba’s style and the purpose of this style. Samba distances himself from “le dessin caricatural” because this is not a respected art, anyone can do it. He insists on the ways his work is different, more complex, and the result of his own experimentation. This text, coupled with the central portrait of the artist, tell of Samba’s origins, originality, and personal style all of which lay claim to his authenticity as an artist.

In an interview, when asked why he included his own image in so many of his paintings, Samba replied, “je me place le plus souvent en tant qu'observateur, comme un présentateur

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282 Lingala, although rarely transcribed in the public domain, is spoken in a large geographic area (throughout northwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo, a significant part of the Republic of the Congo, and to some extent in Angola and the Central African Republic) and thus is likely chosen in order to reach the largest audience. Lingala, a lingua franca used by the Belgians and their Force Publique, remains a language of oppression in the eyes of many living outside of urban areas in DRC.
d'émission télévisé mais parfois c'est une façon de m'adresser directement au public ou à une personne précise.”

This explanation of his use of self-portraiture throughout his oeuvre refers specifically to the painting *The Draughtsman, Chéri Samba* in which he sits facing his public as if about to be interviewed for a television program. There is a sense of contact between artist and viewer in the work of Samba and he cultivates this connection by inserting his eccentric personality into his painting. Of his use of self-portraiture Samba says, “ma vie et mon œuvre sont tout un ensemble…. J’avais mon look, mes publicités mes banderoles devant l’atelier, lettres à en-tête et cartes de visite avec photo, mon cachet ‘Chéri Samba’…je voulais faire une communication maximale. On n’est jamais mieux servi que par soi-même.”

The portrait of Samba, looking into the eyes of his viewers, and the intimate interior of a living room in which the artist sits both facilitate the “communication maximale” Samba describes.

The painting is an early work that combines a portrait of the artist and a message about his art, written within the painting. The combination of these techniques is used frequently by Samba and has become the signature of his work. Samba tells varying stories about how and why he started to insert himself into his work, but one version is of particular interest for a discussion of authenticity. In an interview with André Magnin, Samba describes an encounter with a historian as follows: “Pour mon premier collage, j’ai inséré ma photo. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, un historien de l’art canadien, en a déduit que j’étais incapable de reproduire fidèlement mon visage et que je mettais des textes dans mes tableaux pour masquer leur

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285 Most notably, paintings such *Une peinture à defender* (1993), in which the artist Ekomi is pulled at from many directions to represent the competing demands on the artist, and *Quel Avenir Pour Notre Art?* (1997), which is part of series in which Picasso and his lasting influence on African art are interrogated, both use the portrait and textual messages to communicate ideas about the status of African art.
According to Samba, Jewsiewicki accused him of creating derivative works and questioned his skill as a painter. Samba responded with the painting entitled, *Samba corrige l'historien Bogumil Jewsiewicki* (1997), which features Jewsiewicki, the cover of his book, a long text politely discrediting the historian’s analysis and pointing out Samba’s skill at portraiture, a photo of Samba, and a beautifully and precisely painted self-portrait based on the photo. The painting is remarkable in its composition and the message is tremendously comic.

While undoubtedly amusing, Samba’s exchange with the historian reveals the way an artist uses his own work to respond to what he considers unjust criticism and how the repetition of his self-portrait has led to a “cult of self” in Samba’s work. In suggesting Samba was in some way using collaged photographs to hide his shortcomings, Jewsiewicki questions Samba’s authenticity as an artist. In the book *Chéri Samba: The Hybridity of Art*, Jewsiewicki makes claims about Samba’s personality, ambition, religion, origins, and artistic motivation that are bold in their characterization of the artist’s personality. For example, writing about three “contradictory” personalities of the artist—Samba “the man,” Samba “the painter,” and Samba who “is a reverend by upbringing, straight out of the Protestant culture of his father’s village”—Jewsiewicki claims, “if he is authentic, it is in and through the contradictions he cultivates and integrates into his creed. He attracts us because he dares to depict himself as a contradiction of

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287 In a review of Jewsiewicki’s book, Allen F. Roberts describes the portrayal of the artist as follows: “Jewsiewicki moves from a view of the artist as ‘spokesman for the collective memory or….aesthetics of his society’ that some have found a ‘comforting’ approach to contemporary African Art (p. 12) to close scrutiny of Samba the individual. The resulting portrayal is anything but ‘comforting.’” It is this “close scrutiny” that Roberts describes to which Samba responds in the painting *Samba corrige l'historien Bogumil Jewsiewicki*. 

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Throughout his career, Jewsiewicki has championed Congolese artists and produced significant scholarship on their work yet this did not prevent Samba from responding to what he considered inaccurate analysis of his work.

In an interview, Samba clarifies that without reading Jewsiewicki’s book—he explains “je suis paresseux en lecture”—he distributed *Chéri Samba: The Hybridity of Art* in his Kinshasa studio along with other publications about his art. One day, Samba’s brother called him because, as he puts it, “il ne comprenait pas que je fasse la publicité d’un livre dans lequel j’étais ridiculisé.” As a result of his brother calling attention to Jewsiewicki’s critique, Samba used his work to both foreground his artistic authenticity—namely his skill as a portrait artist and the originality of his style—and served Jewsiewicki his own share of public condemnation. More than anything, the exchange between Samba and Jewsiewicki illustrates the artist’s concern for defending his authenticity as well as the way he employs self-portraiture in order to magnify his artistic persona.

As previously mentioned, Samba’s paintings made after the early 1980s often feature his self-portrait, either as the central focus of the painting or as a secondary onlooker to the central focus of the painting. Scholar Jean-Pierre Jacquemin characterizes Samba’s use of self-portraiture as a “cult of self” in which the artist practices self-promotion, not out of narcissism, but rather a need to differentiate himself from other artists. Jacquemin contends that Samba’s “systematic exaltation” of self is also evident in “meticulous, baroque care with which he uses various gadgets to consecrate his trademark; headed writing-paper, a rubber stamp bearing his

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own image, banners, the flags that decorate the façade of his studio.”

Through the creation of trademark artistic elements, Samba preserves the authenticity of his art by ensuring that he, and only he, can produce his signature markings and include his portrait in paintings.

In another painting by Samba, titled *Hommage aux Anciens Créateurs*, the theme of authenticity is not related to his own work but instead the work of previous generations of African artists. In the 1999 painting *Hommage aux Anciens Créateurs*, Samba interrogates curatorial practice and the qualifications of “traditional” African arts.

Seated behind a wooden table, the artist wears dark sunglasses, a bright red suit coat, and several rings on his fingers. In front of him, placed on the table, are six wooden objects, to be understood as art, or devotional objects, depending on your perspective. Unidentified in the painting but easily found in the catalogue for the Han Coray collection at Voelkerkundemuseum der Universitat Zurich, the objects are classified as follows, left to right: “Kuba cup in the form of a male figure,” “Kuba double-headed cup,” “Kongo vessel with anthropomorphic head,” “Luba

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woman with bowl,” “Kuba mask,” and “Tèke ancestor figure.”291 The objects are lined up in front of the author but he looks up, facing the viewer of the painting. The title of the painting is centered above Samba and the blue square that serves as a background to his portrait. On each side of the central image of the artist seated at the table and the objects displayed on the table, there are symmetrical columns of text and a geometric pattern colored yellow and burgundy.292

The text in the painting is small and appears in white lettering on a grey background. To the left, the text reads as follows,

En visitant par demande officielle la salle d’exposition de Voelkerkundemuseum der Universitat Zurich se trouvant dans le sous-sol d’un jardin plein de bamboux, j’étais frappé par le grand nombre d’objets antiques (masques, textiles, statues..) tous de très haut niveau, que renferme cette salle. Je sentais comme si quelques uns de ces objets me faisait des frictions au corps. J’étais alors persuadé que ces objets avaient toujours leurs pouvoirs surnaturels et c’étaient des vrais.293

On the right side of the painting, the text continues, “Puisque cette époque le marché n’était pas concurrence et il ne devait donc pas y avoir de fausse pièce. J’étais tout de même étonné d’apprendre que Mr. Coray qui avait monté cette impressionnante collection n’avait pas connu l’Afrique d’où provenaient les œuvres de sa collection pour rencontrer les créateurs à qui je rends hommage.”After a break in the text, the passage ends with the following question, “Y a-t-il d’autres collectionneurs semblables à Monsieur Coray?” The passage included in the painting is brief but densely packed with meaning. Raising questions of authenticity, the power still

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291 Descriptions and origins of objects taken from the catalogue African Art from the Han Coray Collection 1916 -1928.
292 The geometric pattern resembles, in both color and shape, textiles made by the Kuba people included in the collection of Han Coray.
293 All text is reproduced exactly as it appears in the painting including punctuation, grammar, and alternative spelling of words.
contained in art objects originally used for worship, the unknown origins of African art objects, and European intervention in African arts, the painting demands a specific kind of engagement from its viewers.

Samba confirms that the objects are authentic because, after feeling “des frictions au corps” caused by the objects, he became convinced of their supernatural powers and thus, their legitimacy as “real” African works. In the text of the painting Samba characterizes authenticity as something that is felt or intuited on a bodily level but does not make it clear if anyone would be able to “sense” the authenticity of these objects or if only he, as African or as an artist, is able to do so. Regardless, for Samba, the works retained their power even when held in “le sous-sol d’un jardin plein de bamboux” of a museum in Switzerland. Since 1999, when this painting was made, scholars, artists, and communities have engaged in heated international debates over the power of objects exhibited in museums as art or artefact but contain devotional qualities to certain peoples. Samba’s painting hints at these complicated questions but does not take a stance on the ethical implications of housing these powerful objects in a museum basement.

The six objects on the table are examples of Han Coray’s collection that Samba reproduces for his audience and offers as representatives of the very large collection. When asked about this painting in an interview, Samba speaks about the artists who made the objects and the little information we have about them; he says, of the objects,

ils ne sont pas signés parce que ceux qui les ont rapportés n’ont pas cherché à en identifier les auteurs, qui étaient pourtant de grands artistes connus de toute leur régions. Ceux qui ne reconnaissent pas cela ne savent rien de notre culture. Je suis fier d’être africain, il est inacceptable de dire qu’il n’y avait pas d’art en Afrique.

294 For an excellent summary of the ethical issues at play in this debate see Kathleen S. Fine-Dare, Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
Chéri Samba est un des grands artistes du monde, et je suis africain. Qu’est-ce qui ferait que moi je sois accepté et pas les anciens?"²⁹⁵

Samba’s comments on the unidentified authors of the objects in Coray’s collection are, perhaps, a subtle critique of way western conceptions of authorship are applied to objects originating from cultures in which the notion of authorship is irrelevant to the identity of devotional objects because of the collaborative nature of their production or their ultimate purpose as spiritual vessels. On the other hand, Samba’s comment could also be a critique of the western exhibition technique of using the name of the ethnic group, rather than the name of an individual artist, to describe African objects and obscure the fact that early European collectors of African art often acquired the art by nefarious means thus precluding the acquisition of information about the particular origins of the works. In either case, the sentence “ceux qui ne reconnaissent pas cela ne savent rien de notre culture,” points to the cultural misunderstanding common in the classification and interpretation of African art.²⁹⁶

The question “qu’est-ce qui ferait que moi je sois accepté et pas les anciens?” mirrors the final question of the text in the painting, “Y a-t-il d’autres collectionneurs semblables à Monsieur Coray?” Both questions wonder at the differences between the consumption of African art in the past as compared to the contemporary art world today as well as the scope of power wielded by central decision makers, creators of taste, who decide what art is exhibited and which artists become successful. There is such a marked contrast between Samba’s work which intentionally foregrounds the artist, his personality and his appearance, and the anonymous artists/craftsmen who made the objects now in the Coray collection. The question, “Y a-t-il d’autres

collectionneurs semblables à Monsieur Coray?”, also suggests Samba wonders about other European collectors who amassed huge collections of art yet know remarkably little about its origins.

As the text indicates, the objects displayed on the table belong to the collection of Herr Han Coray, one of the most important collectors of African art from the early 20th century. Most of the works in the collection were acquired in the 1920s from the Parisian art dealer Paul Guillaume. Coray never traveled to Africa, as Samba tells us, and yet had a significant impact on the consumption and exhibition of African arts in Europe. This painting, as well as a series about Pablo Picasso, represents an individual who had tremendous, lasting impact on the status and perception of African art. Samba uses his work to raise the awareness of his viewers about the fact that a small number of people have had the responsibility of presenting African art to the rest of the world and that their representations do not necessarily please Samba.

Similarly, in the painting *La Vraie Carte du monde*, Samba tackles the way the work of cartographers subtly influences our beliefs about Africa. The large-scale painting

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298 See the three paintings all titled “Quel avenir pour notre art?” (1997) that make up a series about the relationship between Picasso and African art.
La Vraie Carte du monde (2011) is an impressive 200 by 300 centimeter canvas that features a large self-portrait of the artist and a map of the world on a plain navy background. Pursed lips, furrowed brow, and tears gathering at his bottom eyelids all give the author the appearance of contained emotion. The artist wears a blue-purple jacket patterned with abstract shapes that mirror the shapes of countries, continents, and islands of the world map. Samba, with grey in his beard and shallow wrinkles on his forehead, looks regal and worldly, like a patriarch who has gathered a lifetime of knowledge. The Congolese novelist In Koli Jean Bofane writes of Samba, “c’est celui qui interpelle, c’est le roi de la satire élégante, mais c’est aussi le maître qui enseigne.” In the painting La Vraie Carte du monde, Samba cultivates this perception of himself in roles such as “roi” and “maître” as he lords over his own work, an omniscient presence observing from above.

Shrunken and distorted at points, the map features an inverted world order in which the continents of South America, Australia, and Africa are at the top and North America, Europe, and Asia are at the bottom of the painting. Countries are unlabeled and are shaded red, green, blue and/or yellow. The bust of Samba emerges out of the space between continents and is framed by the seemingly amorphous shapes of countries. In the bottom left hand corner of the painting the title, La Vraie Carte du Monde, is written above smaller text that reads, “texte tiré du livre mes étoiles noires de Lilian Thuram.” Below the title, on a black band of a background that spans the length of the painting, in small white lettering, there is a quote from a book by Lilian Thuram, former French soccer player turned anti-racism activist.299 The text in the painting reads as follows,

299 Since retiring from professional soccer, Lilian Thuram has established a foundation dedicated to educating against racism, written two books and numerous prefaces, curated Human Zoos: The Invention of the Savage at the Musée du quai Branly, and has been active in the fight against racism and racist rhetoric.

On a visual level, the small size of the text compels the viewer to approach the canvas and focus on the small details of an otherwise grand and dominating visual experience. Discussing the
small size of the text included in his work, Samba explains, “il faut parfois du temps pour rentrer dans un tableau. Les gens ne doivent pas se presser. Ils doivent pouvoir rester longtemps devant une œuvre et la présence du texte est aussi un moyen de les inciter à s'arrêter sur la toile. Ce n'est qu'ainsi qu'ils pourront percevoir les différents niveaux de lecture qu'elle propose.” As Samba describes, the small lettering in *La Vraie Carte du monde* is an attempt to determine and define the viewer’s experience by drawing the viewer towards the massive canvas and demanding their time in order to be understood.

The text of the painting discusses the inconsistencies of cartographic norms and suggests that these norms perpetuate hierarchies of race, wealth, and privilege. The thesis of the passage can be summed up in one line of the text, “rien n’est neutre en termes de représentation.”

Employing a citation from Lilian Thuram, Samba uses the painting to explicitly challenge representation, received ideas, and the language of history. The inclusion of text in his painting is what Samba calls “la griffe sambaïenne” and explains that his use of text distinguishes from other artists:

Dans ma peinture, il y a toujours un peu de texte parce que, même si l'image peut expliquer des choses, le texte l'enrichit. J'entends souvent dire que les images peuvent parler d'elles-mêmes mais je trouve que l'image seule ne contient pas toujours le “bon parler”. J'ai donc choisi d'introduire le texte dans mes tableaux pour aller au bout de ce que je veux communiquer. Le texte ajoute un peu de piment à l'image tout en permettant que le message ne soit pas erroné. De plus, la présence du texte sur la toile a fait ma particularité, ce qui me distingue de la plupart des autres artistes.

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301 Andriamirado.
In *La Vraie Carte du Monde*, it is more accurately the image that supports the text, instead of the other way around. The image, which seems upside-down because of our familiarity with other versions of the map, requires the text in order to be fully understood. Suspended over both image and text, Samba considers the viewer as he or she reads the text and understands his message.

The painting urges awareness about what is “real” and what is representation. The conventions of representation, in this case, are loaded with the historical baggage of racism, belief in cultural superiority, and colonial conquest. Samba’s alternative rendering of the world highlights the bias in global representation. In countering a dominant narrative, Samba’s artistic authority is leveraged to convey a more authentic version of the map of the world. It is not coincidence that Samba appears like a hovering, all-powerful being in this painting. His portrait lends authenticity both to the painting and to his message. Unsurprisingly, the larger than life figure of Chéri Samba and his highly regarded works have had significant influence on other Congolese artists. Both Cheik Ledy and Monsengo Shula are influenced by Samba and rework his styles to make them their own.

The Congolese artist, and younger brother of Chéri Samba, Cheik Ledy was born in 1962 in Kinto-M’Vuila and died of complications from AIDS in 1997 in Kinshasa. Cheik Ledy began
working as Samba’s assistant in 1977 and opened his own atelier in 1988. Influenced by the “peinture populaire” movement created by his brother, Ledy’s works often feature text and present a specific social or political message to the viewer. In the painting *Non! Comprendre* (1995), which depicts two men viewing art hung in a gallery space, Ledy’s painting represents a young man’s experience of viewing art in a museum. The colorful palette and crowded composition of the painting are similar to Samba’s’ work but the placement and framing of the text is distinctive.

There are two men in the painting but the figure in the foreground is the focus of the painting, the viewer understands that we are learning of his thoughts and experiences inside of the museum and the other man is just a bystander. The secondary figure considers a painting in the museum with his back turned to the viewer while the other man, wearing a look of concern on his face, asks, “Je n’ai comprend rien? C’est quoi ça? C’est ça qui fait l’honneur de ses artistes?. .en tout-cas la vie appartient à celui qui met ses connaissances en pratique…moi aussi veux créer...” . The figure whose words are captured in a speech bubble at the bottom of the canvas, is turned towards Ledy’s representation of a large painting by Picasso titled *Mandoline et guitare* (1924). The other three painting in the space are not immediately identifiable but are all abstract, colorful and modern. The man who speaks, who wears a blue shirt and a patterned bandana hanging down his back, questions what the paintings represent and expresses frustration with his inability to understand the meaning imbedded in the works while also aspiring to be able to create art, or “mets ses connaissances en pratique.”

The text and the perplexed look on the face of the young man convey confusion in the face of Picasso’s large still life painting. The title of the work, *Non! Comprendre*, and its

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302 The rather informal French in the painting prioritizes the way people actually speak the language over the rules of technically correct grammar.
ambiguous meaning, add the sense of confusion of the human figure in the painting. Without subject or conjugation, the title gives no indication of who, or what, is not being understood. Alternatively, “comprendre” could function as an imperative, therefore commanding understanding, which would be very strange indeed, as one cannot mandate comprehension. Without providing clarity on who or what is to be understood, the title simply presents the concept of comprehension in juxtaposition with the museum space.

Ledy’s work implicitly asks, “what does it mean to understand art?” In many ways, the style developed by Samba and adopted by many others seeks to combat the sense of bewilderment experienced by the young man in this painting. The artistes populaires strive to create clear, concrete, and socially relevant works of art that are accessible to all people. Their primary goal is for their works to be understood yet, this painting indisputably leaves much room for interpretation. Ledy’s choice of a cubist work to represent the opaque and abstract meaning of art is of course significant because the origins of cubism can be traced to Picasso’s experience at the ethnographic museum in the Palais de Trocadéro where he is thought to have viewed African art for the first time. Additionally, the inspiration for Picasso’s work Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) is a postcard of African women carrying water, which he acquired while visiting the colonial exhibition in 1906. In a way, Ledy’s painting creates a cycle of incomprehension: African objects were exhibited in Europe and viewers had no way of understanding the culturally specific meaning of the works, Picasso viewed the works and was inspired to paint cubist works like Mandoline et guitare which in turn make no sense at all to viewers like the young man in Ledy’s painting.

Non! Comprendre is a metapicture that probes the reciprocal relationship between African and European art as well as alienation experienced in the museum space. In his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, W. J. T Mitchell writes that metapictures provoke a double vision of the work of art and in doing so, a double relation between language and visual experience. Mitchell explains, “if every picture only makes sense inside a discursive frame, an ‘outside’ of discursive, interpretive language, metapictures call into question the relation of language to image as an inside-outside structure. They interrogate the authority of the speaking subject over the seen image (68)”.

Cheik Ledy’s painting creates a double vision of *Mandoline et guitare* because the viewer sees Picasso’s work from their personal frame of reference as well as through the eyes of the young man in the foreground. Not to mention that all viewers, inside and outside of the painting, are actually experiencing Cheik Ledy’s reproduction of the original work by Picasso. The layers of viewing and understanding (or not understanding, as the case may be) created in *Non! Comprendre* derides the authority of the viewer of the painting, just as Mitchell describes, and ultimately, returns the authority to the artist. As the text in the painting explains, “en tout-cas la vie appartient a celui qui mets ses connaissances en pratique,” meaning that questions of “understanding” are secondary to artists who authentically represents their experiences and “créer.”

Ledy’s painting simultaneously valorizes artistic creation, regardless of understanding, while also representing the feeling of confusion when an individual is faced with a lack of understanding. Unlike Cheik Ledy, the artist Monsengo Shula does not guide his viewers to understanding or misunderstanding. His paintings can be interpreted any number of ways and he does not seek to direct them in any particular direction with text or speech bubbles. Shula

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305 In 1972 President Leopold Senghor organized an exhibition of Picasso’s work in Dakar and the 2006 exhibition “Picasso and Africa” exhibition in South Africa sought to revalorize the role of African art in Picasso’s work.
borrows less obviously from Samba’s style than Ledy, yet still cites him as an influence.\textsuperscript{306}

Born in 1959 in Kioki, Monsengo Shula came to Kinshasa to begin his artistic career in 1975. Shula is the cousin of the acclaimed Congolese visual artist Moke, and much like the relationship between Cheik Ledy and Chéri Samba, the older, more established artist took his family member under his wing and introduced him to the popular art scene in Kinshasa. Rather than focus on local matters impacting society, Shula tends to gravitate towards more global problems such as international politics and environmental destruction in his works.

Shula’s 2012 work \textit{Roi satellite} features two African astronauts maintaining a satellite on a background of the black night sky peppered with small white stars. The astronauts are wearing brightly colored, bold patterned space suits and helmets made of glass and metal. One figure erects a green flag on the satellite, which bares the image of the satellite itself. The other figure, holding a can of paint and paintbrush, paints the bottom portion of the satellite. The satellite itself appears to be made out of metal but is shaped like a carved wooden figure. The bright

\textsuperscript{306} See YouTube video from \textit{Beauté Congo} [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEa8IoCTIvk]
colors on the black background of the large scale painting (140 x 140 cm) are eye catching and
draw the viewer in to
contemplate the fantastic
scene it depicts. The work is
undoubtedly visually
appealing but rather
ambiguous when it comes to
its meaning. Unlike Samba
or Ledy’s paintings which
foreground a precise message
of their work, Shula’s art
requires more pointed reflection in order to understand its significance.

Quite similar in composition and subject matter to *Roi satellite*, Shula’s 2014 painting *Ata Ndele Mokili Ekobaluka (Tôt ou tard le monde changera)* also features astronauts in brightly
colored space suits surrounding a satellite in outer space. The main differences between the
paintings are that in the latter there are five astronauts and most significantly, there is a large
wooden sculpture standing on the satellite. Four men circle around a satellite as a fifth man
appears to drift off in the distance. A large carved wooden statue is perched on top of the
satellite; the lack of gravity that impacts the humans does not hinder the sculpture. As in *Roi satellite*,
the facial expressions of the astronauts are neutral and unemotional, with the exception
of the man who drifts into space looking notably distressed.

Twelve years prior to Shula’s work, astronauts in cloth space suits was the focus of
British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE’s instillation “Vacation” (2000) at the 49th Venice
Biennale. The installation featured life-size fiberglass astronauts in full space suits made from wax print fabrics. This wax print fabric is sold in Europe as “traditional African handiwork” but is made most often in Indonesia and sometimes produced in Britain. According to the exhibition catalogue, “the astronauts’ attire evokes the notion of ‘going native’, while speaking to the possibilities of a dominant ‘Other’. Shonibare MBE’s suggestion that one can embody the paradox of alien/other and colonist/explorer demonstrates the complexity of power dynamics between groups.”

Tropes of exploration and discovery of new territories are turned on their head, as Africans are the ones in the position of colonist/explorer. Other critics of “Vacation” (2000) find the significance of the work in the way it tests the viewer’s expectations about the future and the role of Africans in this future asking questions such as “Where is the future located? And who is there?”

Shula’s two paintings build upon the problematized power dynamics in Shonibare MBE’s “Vacation” (2000) but shift the focus to questions of “progress” and technological advancement. The most striking element of the paintings *Roi satellite* and *Ata Ndele Mokili Ekobaluka (Tôt ou tard le monde changera)* is the juxtaposition of technology and the discovery of new worlds with symbols of “traditional” African culture and art. In both paintings, the form of carved figures, representing the past, temporal and ancestral, are specters lingering unrecognized by the astronauts. The satellites represent the technological future as well as global networks of communication. In *Roi satellite*, as the title indicates, the past and future are fused in the satellite that is half machine, half carved figure. In *Ata Ndele Mokili Ekobaluka (Tôt ou tard le monde changera)*, the wooden figure is perched precariously on the satellite, gazing down at the five

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307 For more on African print cloth, see exhibition catalogue for exhibition “Yards of Style, African-Print Cloths of Ghana” at the Fowler Museum.


astronauts. Shula’s paintings depict the tension between past and future for African arts and the way the two temporalities can collide. Looking simultaneously forward and backward, these paintings call for artists and viewers to maintain perspective, respect both ancestors and artistic origins, as well as pursue the opportunities of the future. Using symbolic images, namely the juxtaposition of satellites and the carved wooden figures, Shula questions the significance of “traditional” arts in the ever-changing contemporary world of the Internet, globalization, and new technologies. As with the work of any artist, each viewer of the paintings may understand this message, or something entirely different, when considering the striking composition of Shula’s work. Similar to Shula’s style of representation, the works in the exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* are ripe with the possibility of numerous interpretations.

**Portraits of Urban Cameroon**

Located just off of the bustling Place du Gouvernement, the gallery, workshop, and café that make up espace doual’art create a calm and quiet oasis in the hectic city of Douala, Cameroon. When the visitor is greeted by large, colorful murals surrounding the gallery, tidy landscaping, and students seated in groups quietly talking, it is immediately clear that espace doual’art provides a respite from the traffic, noise, and pollution of Place du Gouvernement. Ironically, the art housed inside the walls of the gallery often seeks to represent the gritty urban reality that surrounds the peaceful interior of espace doual’art. This was certainly the case when I visited the gallery in April 2015, during the exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*.310

The small gallery space at espace doual’art was filled with colorful canvases depicting the frenetic energy that is characteristic of Douala, but is noticeably absent within the gallery courtyard. Founded in 1991 by Marilyn Douala-Bell, the non-governmental organization

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310 I was able to visit the exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* in Douala, Cameroon because of the generous funding I received from the Harry and Yvonne Lenart Graduate Travel Fellowship.
Doual’art supports artistic articulations of urban realities and organizes exhibitions, workshops, symposiums, and artist residencies addressing the topics of space, history, and identity in Douala. The temporary exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* ran from March 28 to May 2, 2015 and featured the work of three young Cameroonian artists. An exhibition of 25 works total, shown in a relatively unknown gallery in urban Africa, *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* was clearly a much smaller scale exhibition than *Beauté Congo*. Yet the focus on artists from a single country, and the goal of introducing new artists to the public, are both commonalities between the shows. But of even more significance is the preoccupation with questions of authentic representation evidenced in the works of each exhibition.

The three artists featured in *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*, Jean David Nkot, Ajarb Bernard, and Abdias Ngateu, are all under thirty years old, and as the introduction to the exhibition tells the visitor, “cette exposition marque le temps zéro du travail de 3 artistes émergents.” Interested in both urban cultures and digital techniques, the three artists “présentent l’aboutissement de leurs recherches… leur identité première.” The introduction to the exhibition insists upon the personal qualities of the work exhibited, all of which was created during the early stages of the artists’ careers. The visitor to this exhibition is told to expect a window into an authentic urban Africa as experienced by young people today. By capitalizing on the youth of the artists, the gallery both provides the impression that the visitor is getting a glimpse at undiscovered talent and gaining access to the personal perspective of young people. The works of art themselves manipulate questions of authenticity and viewer perspective through the use of

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311 Doual’art has organized public art festivals such as “Le Salon Urbain de Douala,” meetings of an interdisciplinary group of scholars at a conference entitled “Ars and Urbis,” a youth group encouraging artistic practices known as “Project JEVAIS,” and a project intended to increase the presence of Cameroonian topics on Wikipedia, as well as an initiative to position memorial sculptures and informational plaques, known as “Arches de la Mémoire,” at twenty-four historically significant, and largely unacknowledged, locations throughout Douala.

312 Introduction to exhibition by Marilyn Douala-Bell.
portraiture. By depicting young people other than themselves, the artists present their vision of contemporaneity from a distance.

Walking into the single room exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*, I was overcome by the many faces staring back at me. Every single canvas in the exhibition featured a portrait of at least one human figure. Some highly realistic, others abstract, and many somewhere in between these poles, the portraits created a striking ensemble of young African individuals. What drew the three young artists featured in the exhibition to the portrait format? How do the artists use the portrait to express their personal urban reality? These questions guide the following analysis and the argument that young Cameroonian artists use the portrait, and the paradoxes inherent to the genre, in order to represent their own personal, “authentic” vision of life in urban Africa.

Broadly, the work of Jean David Nkot, Ajarb Bernard, and Abdias Ngateu represents both daily life and moments of conflict in urban Africa. Using mixed media, frequently combining traditional painting methods with collage and printing techniques, each artist has a signature style evident in the selection of works displayed in *Jeunes Regards Urbains II*. Faces are covered by repeated patterns of letters and numbers in the work of Jean David Nkot; vibrant colors, exaggerated pixilation, and collages of advertisements are the signatures of Ajarb Bernard; Abdias Ngateu fuses human figures and urban landscape in his emotionally charged portraits. The following analysis describes the different techniques and styles of each artist and will focus specifically on how each artist exploits and manipulates the portrait format in order to represent their vision and experience of urban space in Africa.

The work of Jean David Nkot documents acts of terrorism committed on the African continent. Each of his square canvases is formatted like a postage stamp depicting the face of an individual, often with an expression of extreme sorrow or pain, and the geographic location of
the terrorist act. According to the artist, the postage stamp represents the calls for recognition of
victims of terrorist violence. Nkot explains,

Les timbres postaux que je peins sont les échos des cris et agonies des rescapés de
la barbarie du terrorisme. Des cris qui émanent des lieux qui sont inscrits dans les
timbres. A l’image des timbres postaux destinés à affranchir les envois confiés à
la poste, ceux que je peins voudraient affranchir les visages de la violence
terroriste de cette indifférence qui caractérise le silence complice du reste du
monde face aux États victimes.313

The repeated format of a square canvas, white border, and “Poste 250f” marker make Nkot’s
works immediately identifiable

As Nkot explains, the postage stamp format conveys the
attempts of victims to call for help, make contact with the
world outside the violence they are experiencing. Interestingly,
Nkot uses the verb
“affranchir”—which means both ‘to stamp’ as well as ‘to liberate’—to describe his motive
in painting the faces of victims of terrorist violence. On one hand, the meaning to stamp or to

313 Personal interview. March 5, 2016.
mark the faces evokes the artist’s repeated use of postage stamp imagery throughout his work, while on the other hand, the alternative meaning of “affranchir” would suggest that Nkot paints the victims so they are *liberated* from the violence. The ambiguity of the verb, and Nkot’s explanation of his motives, indicates his reasons for choosing the highly emotional subject matter of his work are manifold.

The sense of crying out for help is duplicated in the facial expressions of the individuals in Nkot’s portraits. The painting *Po. Box. 0245.Maiduguri (2015)* features a close up of the face of a young child, it is not clear if the child is male or female. The background is lime green and is printed horizontally with the repeated word AK-74. This background bleeds through the portrait of the child at numerous points on the face. Printed on top of the portrait, in blue, yellow and magenta paint, the word AK-74 appears in patches over the left hand side of the child’s face. The child’s lips are parted and he or she looks directly at the viewer of the painting with an air of both innocence and exhaustion. In the bottom left hand corner of the painting is the word “Maiduguri,” which is a city in northeastern Nigeria where, since June 2013, the terrorist organization Boko Haram has executed school children, bombed and assaulted the city, and most recently launched five suicide attacks killing scores of residents.

In the painting *mpeketoni@5555.cm (2015)*, the cries of the victims are so visceral they are practically visible. On a violet background printed with the word MIG-31, two female figures throw their heads back in apparent anguish. The two figures are joined together at the cheek, neck, and upper body. Like most of the portraits Nkot paints, the head of his subject(s) is positioned in an unusual way, at seemingly uncomfortable angles. As the artist Hervé Youmbi, a

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314 AK-74 is a Russian assault rifle developed in the 1970s.
315 The titles of Nkot’s works play with advances in communication technology, either taking the form of an email address or post office box address.
mentor and commentator to Nkot’s work, explains, le visage généralement levé pendant la pose photographique offre un cadrage en vue de dessous qui plonge l’architecture de la tête dans un intéressant raccourci pas toujours évident à reproduire. La bouche béante et les yeux mi-clos accentuent l’expression des visages des modèles portaiturés par Nkot. Ces gigantesques visages qui s’offrent au contemplateur de l’œuvre sont grimaçants de douleur, criards, à l’agonie ou plongé dans un calme schizophrénique.

The facial expressions of Nkot’s subjects, in addition to the strange positioning of the head and shoulders, contribute to the disturbed and pained quality of the individuals.

Printed over the faces of the figures in mpektoni@5555.cm, the MIG-31 pattern appears in black, yellow, red and blue. At the top left hand corner of the painting there is the word “Mpeketoni” written inside the postage stamp-like border. Mpeketoni, Kenya was the site of two terrorist attacks on June 15th and 17th 2014, which killed more than 60 people. There are opposing accounts of the attacks and disagreement over the identity of the perpetrators but the Kenyan government contends the attacks targeted Christians and were carried out by the Islamist militia Al-Shabaab.

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317 Exhibition text.

318 A MiG-31 is a supersonic interceptor aircraft developed and used by the Soviet Air Force.

Printing techniques, combined with portrait painting, creates both literal and figurative layers to the painting. Visually, the faces of the individuals appear scarred and discolored by the printed words. And upon further inspection, the viewer sees that the words are in fact describing the very weapons that caused the violence impacting the individual depicted. Nkot explains that these “codes” represent the impact of violence,

À travers ces codes j’interroge sur l’impact de la violence dans le monde aujourd’hui et nous convie à la découverte des visages de la terreur qu’elle engendre. Alors les inscriptions qui sont en toile de font dans mes œuvres ne sont que le symbole de la violence (TATP, MIG-31, AK-74) pour ne que citer ceux-là les portraits que je peins. Il n’est point question ici de s’intéresser à l’identité de la personne portraiturenée comme c’est assez souvent le cas dans la pratique du portrait classique. Mais, plutôt, la mise en exergue de l’expression de terreur qui l’habite.320

The printed words are yet another way Nkot seeks to depict the impact of terrorist violence. The plane of printed word forms a sheet that weighs on the individual, preventing them from escaping the field of violence. As fellow artist and commentator of Nkot’s work, H. Youmbi

320 Personal interview. March 5, 2016.
writes, “ces vocables semblent recouvrir le personnage porträturé d’un manteau de terreur.”

While Nkot paints individuals in moments of extreme emotion, the identity of the individual is largely unimportant. The people portrayed in his work represent the collective violence that occurred as a result of terrorism, just as the printed words stand in for all the death and injury inflicted by the weapons.

In *Po.Box.7081 Kampala* (2015), the blue-purple face of a young man, in profile contrasts with the salmon colored background printed with a repeated pattern of the words AK74. The neck and cheek of the man also has the pattern of words creeping towards his face. The man’s face is turned upwards and he looks serene. In the upper left hand corner of the square painting “30f” is written and contributes to the postage stamp appearance of the painting. At the bottom right hand corner of the painting, barely visible, the word “Kampala” appears in yellow print. Kampala, the capital of Uganda, was the site of multiple suicide bombings on July 11, 2010. Al-Shabaab, the Islamist militia based in Somalia and affiliated with Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks on civilians viewing the 2010 FIFA World Cup Final. The attack, which killed 74 people and injured 70 more, was

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321 Exhibition text.
allegedly in retaliation for Uganda’s support of the peacekeeping mission called African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

When one learns of violence abroad in the news, the focus is on the death toll and the identity of the perpetrators. In many ways, the victims are faceless, without an identity and their deaths are tallied, but the impact cannot be conveyed. By using portraits to represent terrorist violence, the focus is returned to the individual who experiences physical and emotional pain as a result of such events. In the following quotation, Nkot explains how he began painting portraits and the development of this interest in the genre,

Le portrait, le lien que j’ai avec ce sujet est très banal et rigolo car il faut savoir que tout jeune avant même d’intégrer dans l’école des beaux-arts je voulais peindre un portrait je me disais que le faire j’aurais attiens mon n’objectif. Mais avec le temps et l’expérience et les discutions avec les portraitistes comme Hervé Youmbi et Jean Jacques Kanté j’ai compris qu’il y avait une autre motivation que je ne cernais pas encore très bien ; tout que je sais à travers mes portraits je m’identifie d’une manière ou d’une autre je partage leurs afflictions, peindre le portrait devient pour moi une forme de thérapie personnelle. Les noms des villes inscrits sur les toiles nous renseignent sur les théâtres de la violence et l’horreur des attaques terroristes dans la sous-région Afrique et pourtout ailleurs.323

The portraits of others are in fact representations of Nkot himself, his engagement with violence on the African continent, and his desire to raise awareness about the suffering of victims. The portraits represent the political concerns and desire for action of a whole generation of young people in Africa. By painting the experience of violence as it can be seen on the human face, Nkot can convey suffering much more effectively than a news report about the same event. Nkot

323 Personal interview. March 5, 2016.
successfully harnesses the power of portraits to “concentrate memory images into a single, transcendent entity [and] consolidate many possible, even legitimate, representations into one.”324 There are undoubtedly hundreds of images depicting the scenes of devastation, victims, and survivors of the terrorist attacks Nkot represents, yet his portraits seek only to represent one aspect of the larger context: the human suffering experienced as a result of violence. By using the image of an individual to represent a larger incidence of violence, Nkot’s work conveys authentic personal reactions to tragedy that have immense impact on the viewer.

Unlike the work of Nkot, the portraits of Ajarb Bernard are not realistic, photographic representations of people. The faces are pixelated, collaged, and crowded in with other background images and words. Scenes of daily life are reimagined in Technicolor and urban backdrop is as important at the human figure portrayed in the large-scale paintings. There is a frantic quality to the overlapping, mixing, and varied size of human figures and urban setting.325 The artist Hervé Yamguen provided commentary to Ajarb Bernard’s work for the exhibition at espace doual’art. In his introduction, Yamguen explains the relationship between artist and environment when he writes, “Douala lui offre la possibilité de mêler les objets et les situations afin de rendre visibles les regards éveillés de ceux qui transpirent entre klaxons de voitures et amas de chaussures sur les trottoirs. À Arjab, il reste de plus en plus à se perdre dans la ville pour mieux nous faire percevoir le concert permanent des humeurs urbaines.” His paintings do the work of showing how the individual fits in amongst the confusion of the city.

The text that introduced the exhibition Jeunes Regards Urbains II described a process of

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325 See articles by Joanna Grabsky, such as “Urban Claims and Visual Sources in the Making of Dakar's Art World City” and “The Dak’Art Biennale: Exhibiting Contemporary Art and Geopolitics in Africa,” for more in the use of collage in contemporary African Arts, particularly at the influential Dak'Art Biennale.
masking that was shared among the three artists. The author of the text, and president of the organization doual’art, Marilyn Douala-Bell writes,

Trois artistes par lesquels les couleurs explosent dans une écriture graphique et expressive qui masque la réalité et la profondeur des blessures, à la manière camerounaise où l’apparente gaieté - le rire - désamorce le découragement.

Effectivement, derrière ces visages, ces postures du corps ou du visage, nous sont offerts des lectures très personnelles

de l’asphyxie

de la solitude

de la colère

de la douleur

de la violence

…

... caractéristiques de notre monde contemporain,

de notre actuelle urbanité,

de notre mal d’exister en ce 21ème siècle

According to Douala-Bell, many of the qualities that make these paintings striking—the bright colors, the expressive faces, and busy composition—function to disguise a reality that is deeply painful and dark. She explains that this is a characteristically Cameroonian way of communicating a message in which laughter is used to neutralize strife and discouragement.

Douala-Bell’s analysis of the exhibition, particularly her description of the way artists use laughter to conceal more complicated emotions, resonates with the work of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, whose ideas have been so widely influential that they are now

326 Exhibition text introducing artists and their work.
entangled in the way Cameroonians articulate their own cultural specificity. It is difficult to say if the average reader of the exhibition text would be able to identify how Douala-Bell’s description of the exhibition is indebted to Achille Mbembe’s work *De La Postcolonie, essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine* (2000), in which he describes the dynamics of power and resistance in postcolonial Cameroon and Togo. Mbembe seeks to understand how political regimes create their own systems of meaning and how the oppressed react to, and transform, these systems. According to Mbembe, the postcolony is characterized by political regimes based on violence, “political improvisation,” and plurality of signs that is ultimately highly chaotic.

Mbembe argues that there is a “banality of power” characteristic of the political environment of the postcolony which he defines as the presence of obscene and grotesque acts of power inherent in all systems of oppression. Expanding on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Mbembe demonstrates that in the postcolony the grotesque and obscene are used by the ruler to display power *and* by the ruled in order to subvert the ruler’s power. In the postcolony, the ruler seeks power by establishing himself as a fetish yet while the ruler exhibits power through excessive displays of violence and physical grandeur, the oppressed use humor, obscenity, and the scatological to reduce the ruler to the status of the commoner. Violence in the postcolony occurs as a public performance that creates drama and suspense for the observers. Displays of violence in the postcolony contribute to the “stylistics of power” of the ruler and his party. Therefore, jokes and word play related to the bodily functions of the ruler transgress taboos and “unpack” official rhetoric of the ruler and his party. By removing the ruler from his pedestal, the postcolonial subject is able to “dismember” the ruler and reduce his power. Thus,

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327 Writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopès, etc have extensively exploited these kinds of strategies in works of fiction.
the power of oppressed rests in their ability to reveal the grotesque and obscene underpinning of state power.\footnote{Fundamental to Mbembe’s argument about the role of humor in the postcolony is the demolishing of the binary of dominant and submissive groups as well as the division between public and private space. In the postcolony, the ruler and ruled have a convivial relationship because they exist in close proximity and share, exchange signs. Conviviality of ruler and ruled creates what Mbembe calls a simulacrum and postcolonial power becomes a “regime of unreality” as a result of shifting, contradictory, and unstable meaning.}

Mbembe’s work on humor, subversion, and political power dynamics has been highly influential in postcolonial studies and as a result, numerous fields have appropriated his theories. Evidently, Douala-Bell believes the subversive power of humor and laughter is a quintessentially Cameroonian tactic when she describes the way, “à la manière camerounaise,” that artists use playfulness to represent difficulties of life in contemporary Cameroon. In the works presented in *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* by artists Ajarb Bernard and Abdias Ngateu, there is a dual function of the concealment that occurs through the use of joy and levity—expressed primarily though color—in the works. The reality of suffering, in an abstract sense, and the artist’s experience of this suffering, on a personal level, are both disguised by the portraits of unidentified individuals, cloaked in bright and exuberant colors. Both artists convey their personal experiences of life in urban Cameroon yet do so by employing the portrait format so as to obscure their identities and avoid overtly exposing themselves in their work.

The camouflaging of self that takes place in the portraits of Ajarb Bernard and Abdias Ngateu is built on two fundamental, and related, paradoxes of the portrait. First, the idea that a person’s appearance—their exterior qualities—tells the viewer about the subject’s interiority, in other words, their personality, experiences, and status in the world. Secondly, the paintings challenge our understanding of what can be “captured” in a portrait and how viewers of the portrait perceive this “essence.” By capitalizing on the human tendency to equate a person’s...
appearance to their inner being, both artists depict the complicated and contradictory nature of their urban surroundings. Harn

Harn

The painting Elf before then (2015) is representative of Ajarb Bernard’s portrait technique that situates the subject within the busy activities of the city. In the foreground of the painting, a young woman’s portrait dominates the composition. Her entire face, excluding her lips and eyes, are covered in a multicolored, pixelated pattern. Her hair is short and yellow, red, blue, and green throughout. Her full, bright yellow lips are parted. She looks to her left, outside the boundaries of the painting. The background of the painting is a market scene in which faceless figures circulate around two callboxes, a makeshift sandal vendor, and bar in the distance. A billboard for perfume hangs above the scene in the light blue sky, amongst power lines.

The painting is vibrant, energetic, and appears jubilant despite the reserved expression of

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329 I do not intend to suggest a false universal or negate other conceptions of personhood, rather I am gesturing towards the fact that within the specific cultural and historic context of these works, the artists are using portraiture to represent the interiority of their subjects.
the only figure with a face. The portrait of the individual in *Elf before then* contradicts the energy of the painting as a whole. The tension between the opaque meaning of the subject’s facial expression and the colorful energy of the rest of the painting leaves the viewer guessing about how the artist experiences urban Douala. Disguise takes on a literal sense in this painting because the face of the individual has mask-like qualities such as an exaggerated border and flat, rigid surface. Figuratively, the painting hides the interiority of all the people in the portrait by leaving their faces blank or making their facial expression difficult to read. In all likelihood, the opacity of the painting, particularly the subject’s facial expressions—conflicted, puzzled, and evasive—in fact depicts the artist’s own personal, authentic vision of the city.

The work *Around the New Liberty* (2015) is an unusual piece in the exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* because it depicts a seminal work of public art that has come to represent the city of Douala. Cityscape, advertisements, public art, and a large, looming figure come in the work *Around the New Liberty*. At the center of the work is a human figure made entirely out of the photocopied covers of pirated movie and television shows which are sold on the street throughout Douala. Cut and pasted together, the collage of advisements features French, American, Mexican, and Nigerian productions. The
figure is a representation of a celebrated work of public art called *La Nouvelle Liberté*. Standing twelve meters high in the center of a busy roundabout and made entirely of scrap metal, the sculpture by Cameroonian artist Joseph Francis Sumégné has become a symbol of the city of Douala. To the right of the collage sculpture is a large, colorful face covered in abstract shapes. Below and to the left of the central figure are elements of the city such as cars, shops, street signs, a hotel, and advertisements for soda. The composition of the work is cluttered, hectic, and vibrant.

Much like Nkot, Bernard’s interest in the portrait format can be traced to his childhood. He explains his training in portraiture in the following quotation:

> Pour commencer j’étais déjà bon dessinateur lors de mes études primaires, de cette prédisposition, j’ai toujours été attiré par les portraits des sérigraphes que je voyais sur le parcours qui allait de notre domicile familial à mon établissement scolaire. A force d’admirer ces travaux, je me mis à essayer d’en faire autant sur des morceaux de contreplaqués avec de la peinture email qui est conditionnée dans des petites boites de 100 g.⁴³⁰

Exposure to traditional portraiture as a child led both artists to pursue the portrait format, although transformed and manipulated, in their adult work. Nkot and Bernard use the portrait to insert an individual into scenes that resist identification of a particular person: Nkot uses the facial expression of one person to represent the wide sweeping pain of an entire community impacted by terrorism and Bernard focuses on a single figure amongst the crowded bustle of the city. While the identities of the individuals are unknown in both cases, the simple identification with a particular person allows the artists to convey the intended effect of the painting. Their personal vision of the city is projected though the portrait of an anonymous young person who

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⁴³⁰ From exhibition flier.
stands in for them. The youth of the artists emphasized throughout the exhibition texts, and foregrounded in the works themselves through the choice of exclusively young people as the subjects of the portraits, serves to frame the exhibition *Jeunes Regards Urbains II* as an opportunity for the viewer to access an “authentic” vision of urban Douala through the eyes of young people.

Similarly, the work of Abdias Ngateu uses a central but anonymous individual to convey his personal vision of the city of Douala. The paintings of Ngateu fuse the body and the cityscape in order to create striking portraits of primarily young women in unusual poses. Power lines and graffiti traverse background and foreground of the painting as they intermingle with the human body. In *Propriété privée* (2015), the subject of the portrait looks aggressively at the viewer, her chin raised at an angle, her lips pursed, and arms crossed. In the background telephone wires bisect the painting, creating numerous blocks of space. Modest one-story buildings stand behind the female figure and are marked with the following graffiti: “Maison sous surveillance video” and “INTERDIT d’uriner ici et tout le long du mur.” Both of these warnings gesture at the problems of crime and inadequate sanitation facilities that plague the city. The sky is yellow-white with hints of orange and red at the peripheries. Below the buildings, surrounding the upper body of the woman, multicolored brush strokes are visible and spatter the woman’s hands.
In the painting *Privé!* (2015), a young woman stretches, both her arms behind her neck and arching her back, as she looks over her shoulder. The woman is behind buildings lining a city street that runs waist level to her body. Below her waist a white and orange striped pattern spans the length of the painting. A small sign that says “PRIVE!”, at her bust line, is evidently the source of the painting’s title. The artist Achillekà Komguem describes the painting in the series as representing violence but fostering hope; he explains, “Abdias peint la violence et la précarité de son quotidien, non pas pour traduire la misère et la douleur, mais pour semer la joie de vivre, l’envie de réussir, la force de vaincre.” The environments in the paintings represent the dark side of urban life through graffiti, which is used as a marker of urban decay, and deserted landscapes, which are dark and foreboding. The messages of hope come through via the human figures, particularly the bright clothing, defiant stances, and intentional eye contact. It is important that the linking of foreground and background illustrates how the city and figure are interdependent and inseparable.

The painting *Regard Urbain (I)* (2015) is a portrait of a young woman wearing sunglasses on a background of a few generic urban buildings and a mess of telephone and electrical wires. Although the woman appears to be standing in the foreground her body in fact is fused with the roofs and wires behind her in the scene. Head held high, arms behind her in a contemplative pose, she looks into the distance. This is a figure who embodies the way Abdias
uses his work to “balayer la haine pour laisser place à la justice et à la joie de vivre.” Composed and confident, the young woman in the painting looks like a force to be reckoned with. Achillekà Komguem, commentator of Abdias’ work for the exhibition, sees the accessibility of the portraits, and the emotionality of the individuals represented, as the most admirable qualities of the oeuvre. He explains,

Figure 32: Abdias Ngateu, *Regard Urbain (I)* (2015)

on n’a pas besoin d’effort supplémentaire pour comprendre son travail, encore moins pour l’aimer. Les œuvres d’Abdias savent elles-mêmes forcer l’admiration et trouver bonne place dans les cœurs. Parce qu’elles disent nos peurs, en riant de nos faiblesses, et montrent notre intimité en saluant notre personnalité. Elles sont vraies et gaies, expressives et suggestives, bien en place pour diluer le côté énigmatique de l’art et procurer à tout observateur, un délire émotionnel inattendu.

The portraits have an ability to elicit an emotional response and communicate complex realities of urban life. The strong personalities of the young women in the paintings are evidenced in their bright clothing, strong stance, and powerful gazes. Yet the expressions of each subject can be interpreted in various ways, evoke different emotions for different viewers, thus Abdias’ portraits play with the fundamental paradox of portraiture which questions the ability of viewers to connect the interiority of a subject to his or her exterior representation. Whether the subject’s appearance masks their emotions or displays them faithfully, the viewer of the portrait must draw

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331 Quote from artist in exhibition text.
332 Taken from exhibition flier.
their own conclusions about how the work represents the urban environment of Douala.

The temporality of the Abdias’ portraits, the specific moment in which each subject strikes a precise pose, lends a sense of immediacy to the work because the scenes depicted are fleeting and the landscapes impermanent. The presence of an individual in a “fugitive moment” of a portrait is a common trope in portraiture and calls attention to the production of the portrait itself.333 Linked both to a specific moment and a unique individual, the portraits exhibited in Jeunes Regards Urbains II project authenticity through their choice of subject, which represents a youthful vision of urban Douala.

Considered together, Beauté Congo and Jeunes Regards Urbains II, present a broad range of contemporary African art that is engaged with its own history, reception, and circulation. The contemporary art by Congolese painters Chéri Samba, Cheik Ledy, and Monsengo Shula use both text and images in order to problematize the historic consumption of African arts and the preoccupation with authenticity. The Cameroonian artists Jean David Nkot, Ajarb Bernard, and Abdias Ngateu use the portrait tradition in order to represent their own personal, “authentic” vision of life in urban Africa while maintaining their anonymity. Examining the works selected for this chapter, the viewer discovers challenges facing African arts today such as reconciling “traditional” and contemporary art, navigating the prejudices of critics, and representing individual experiences of mass violence. While diverse in both style and content, the works of art discussed in this chapter all have self-conscious elements that place both the artist and the painting within a global network of production and reception of African arts.

My ultimate goal is to suggest that looking to works of art themselves, as the object of analysis, is a valuable and productive methodology when working to understand and theorize the

present state of contemporary African arts. Although the work of scholars analyzing the trends and influences, pressures and challenges, of African arts is of course highly valuable, I hope to have demonstrated that by examining the meta-representations imbedded in works of contemporary African art, we are able to access the complex ways artists engage with tradition, challenge expectations, and demand consideration from within their works. The viewer is provided intimate access to the artistic process, and the artists’ vision of the function or purpose of art, through works of meta-representation.

Authenticity, and all the baggage of monetary and cultural value it carries with it, is a criterion of a work of art imposed from the outside; it is usually an art critic, scholar, or gallery owner—some arbitrator of value—who labels a work of art as ‘authentic.’ What makes the works contained in Beauté Congo and Jeunes Regards Urbains II so distinctive, is the various ways these paintings preempt the label of authenticity by engaging the topic, directly and indirectly, within their composition. In reading the ways these works of art challenge authenticity, the viewer is able to understand the pressures, challenges, and frustrations artists experience in creating their art.
CONCLUSION

Looking across the artistic mediums of literature, film, and painting, this study has endeavored to understand how strategies of meta-representation are used to portray the process of artistic production and the pressures of authenticity in contemporary African cultural productions. In works of contemporary literature, the analysis of metafiction reveals how three young writers struggle with the creative process, negotiate pressure to live up to literary predecessors, and discover the challenges of becoming a writer. Nganang, Mabanckou, and Tchoungui all employ techniques of meta-representation that expose the artistic process of their protagonists and give the reader insights into the pressures of authorship. In contemporary African films, including documentary films, feature films, and short documentaries, depictions of cinema and techniques of metacinema are used to engage with the challenges facing the film industry and film viewing structures in Africa. In particular, meta-representation is used to portray both the status of film production, distribution, and circulation on the African continent as well as in evaluating the impact of foreign intervention on the content and quality of African cinema. The works of visual art included in this project use strategies of meta-representation to recall the history and reception of African arts and often preempt criticism of the viewer. While the strategies and goals vary among the mediums and authors of individual works, all of the cultural productions included in this dissertation deploy techniques of meta-representation in order to inform the reader or viewer of an untold account of the realities of audience, authorship, or authenticity that impact African arts.

Representation of foreign demand, influence, and consumption of art unites the works in this dissertation even though each medium confronts varied challenges in the face of foreign intervention. Within works of contemporary literature, foreign monopolies on publication and
expectations of filling a particular role as an African writer are paralyzing to the young writers at the center of metafictional novels in this dissertation. The lack of film distribution infrastructure and the dominance of foreign made films not only stifle African film production but also distance African viewers from the foreign funded African films that do manage to reach fruition. The heavy baggage of expectation that impacts the reception of contemporary African visual arts is addressed and challenged in meta-representational paintings from Africa. Each medium works to address the challenges of artistic production and in doing so, works towards overcoming foreign intervention by identifying it within works of art. In concluding this project, I would like to explore how technological advances and access to the Internet offer possibilities for addressing many of the challenges raised within the meta-representational works discussed in the preceding chapters.

At a time when African authors disperse throughout the world, technology is making great strides in connecting people. The Internet not only facilitates communication between people in far-off places but also has completely transformed accessibility of news and information. The explosion of Internet-based communication platforms has the potential to democratize the access to information and facilitate new pathways of communication that circumvent certain power structures, such as print censorship and the dominance of European publishing.

Today African writers can communicate with their audiences through social media platforms such as personal blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. Unlike the media that surrounds book promotion, these forms of communication and personal presentation are not curated by publishers. Writers present themselves as they wish and have the possibility of direct exchange with their readership. In a 2008 interview with his colleague and friend Dominic Thomas, Alain
Mabanckou explains how his popular blog allowed him to make connections across continents: “one of the main advantages of a blog is the feeling of presence. When people in Brazzaville connect to the Internet they have the impression of having the writer right there in front of them on the screen, and of being in a conversation or a dialogue with the writer himself. As far as they are concerned, I am speaking to them directly, except for the fact that there is a third eye watching, namely, the other visitors.” As Mabanckou explains, a blog can create a sense of proximity between a writer and his or her followers abroad through direct communication on message boards and comments on posts.

In addition to facilitating communication with an author, literary blogs also serve as a source for book recommendations and the promotion of other authors. According to Mabanckou, the advertisement of books on blogs, rather than in traditional outlets like newspapers or magazines, is “gradually transforming patterns of information gathering, consumption, and product announcement.” Moreover, when writers themselves have the power to promote both their work, and the work of fellow writers, to a public that has a high appreciation for their opinions, this dynamic has the potential to shift the importance away from the literary establishment and the media exposure previously necessary for writers to be successful.

Since 2005 when Mabanckou started his blog, his online presence has largely shifted from blogging to Twitter. Mabanckou’s Twitter feed includes political commentary, links to his articles and interviews published online, retweeted posts by fellow writers, and photos from his travels all over the world. Mabanckou has over 14,000 followers and maintains a very active profile, often tweeting several times a day. While Twitter provides a window into the

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336 Mabanckou had 14,000 Twitter followers as of March 10, 2017.
international movements and daily thoughts of the writer, this platform provides fewer opportunities for readers to engage in conversation with him. Nonetheless, social media gives the reader substantial access to the writer, anywhere in the world, without the mediation of the publishing industry.

The Internet facilitates access to writers and also has the potential to greatly increase the accessibility of their works through online libraries. Projects such as the African Digital Library seek to provide “digitized full text resources to learners in Africa via the Internet” in order to contribute to “the revitalization of education and life long learning on the continent and alleviation of the digital divide between First and Third world countries.” Containing 9,808 eBooks accessible to anyone on the African continent for free, the African Digital Library works to “facilitate access to library resources without the expense of developing and maintaining a physical infrastructure.”

The African Digital Library receives funding from the World Bank and donations from numerous publishers so as to provide texts regarding topics such as arts, crafts, astronomy, mathematics, technology, engineering, medicine, health, education and, to a small extent, works of literature. Although, it must be noted, the texts included in the African Digital Library are primarily in English, thus excluding a vast portion of the African population.

Similar to the African Digital Library, but based in Africa rather than both funded and directed from outside the continent, the collection at Centre Æquatoria à Bamanya in the Democratic Republic of Congo offers online access to their collections of books and archives related to language, culture, and pre- and post- colonial history. Also based in DRC, the publisher Editions Nzoi offers published works, in French and Lingala, in digital editions that can be saved and read in a “Librarie Numerique” on their website. Both the Centre Æquatoria and publishers like Editions Nzoi offer free or substantially reduced prices for access to books.

337 See mission statement at http://www.africandl.org.za/about.htm
online. By facilitating access to books online, and providing points of connection to writers through social media, the Internet has produced new networks that create the possibility of promoting and circulating African literature without a dependence on European publishers.

As discussed briefly in the second chapter of the study, the Internet has allowed for progress in democratizing the production and dissemination of short films in Africa and may create potential pathways to circumvent power structures and economic disadvantages that have historically hindered circulation of films on the African continent. As demonstrated in the analysis of the films produced through the organization Yole!Africa, young filmmakers are using YouTube and social media platforms like Facebook to share films about their experiences of violence in Goma, DRC. The circulation of “dirty reality” film footage from DRC recently made international news headlines when video surfaced of uniformed members of the national army opening fire, and killing, a group of civilians. Both uncut footage and edited and produced films from Africa now have the ability to reach wide audiences throughout the continent and the world. While YouTube provides possibilities for wide circulation of films, this free and open platform does not solve problems related to the lack of funding for films as it does not produce revenue.

While Internet circulation does not provide the promise of increased profitability for the film industry, artists in Africa who use the Internet to display and advertise their work have had success in gaining attention for, and sometimes selling, their work. By using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, African artists are able to gain followers, fans, and can market their work to both gallery owners and individual art collectors who would otherwise be unlikely to view their work. A New York Times article, entitled “Technology Expands the

World for African Artists,” describes several success stories of artists from sub-Saharan Africa who have used social media to contact critics, curators, and gallery owners, as well as to build an online presence in order to compete for international artist residencies. Without substantial physical infrastructure such as contemporary art museums, galleries, and art schools on the continent, African artists stand to benefit considerably from the communities created through online magazines, archives, and art websites. Similar to the lines of communication opened between African writers and their audiences, Internet networking opportunities facilitate a sidestepping of the western “taste makers” who, until now, have played a crucial role in launching the international careers of contemporary African artists.

Technological developments in the realms of literature, film, and art are all tempered by the challenges related to Internet accessibility. Limited access to the Internet, which is summarized using several data sources in chapter two, is just one barrier to widespread success of new technologies. In the past five years, repressive governments, recognizing the power of the Internet to organize revolt, have censored or cut access to the Internet in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in a recent interview published in Le Monde, Abdourahman Waberi and Jean-Pierre Bekolo discussed what is known as “la crise anglophone”—the growing unrest of a marginalized Anglophone minority in the north-western and south-western regions of Cameroon—and acknowledged that following a series of protests in December and January, “le gouvernement a coupé Internet dans les deux regions.” Both selective shutdowns surrounding particular events, and widespread surveillance and filtering of the Internet, hinder the possibility of greater circulation and access to the arts through the new outlets discussed in this

conclusion.\textsuperscript{341} The most frequently censored topics on the Internet include criticism of authorities, corruption, political opposition, satire, social commentary, blasphemy, mobilization for public causes, LGBTQI issues, ethnic and religious minorities, and “conflict,” broadly defined.\textsuperscript{342} Under these restrictions, many of the works discussed in this dissertation could be perceived as a threat to order and removed from the Internet. While a free and open Internet has the potential to democratize access to film, literature, and art in Africa, this possibility remains unattainable until governments stop the aggressive surveillance, censorship, and filtering of the Internet.

Ultimately, the works of art included in this dissertation demand an understanding of African art, literature, and film that originates within artistic production and recognizes the power dynamics that have shaped contemporary cultural production. It is my hope that the analysis of meta-representation in African arts can be used to excavate, appreciate, and critically engage with the ways that writers, filmmakers, and artists use their work to portray the complexities of cultural production in our present moment.

\textsuperscript{341} See Rebekah Heacock, “Sub-Saharan Africa,” \textit{Open Net Initiative} \url{https://opennet.net/research/regions/ssafrica}

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