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Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film

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Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film

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Dedication

For all the women in Côte d'Ivoire and the United States who have taught me the values of hard work and female solidarity.

For Dr. Lisa L. Moore: If I am just a distant echo of what you are, I will be the best!

For my all formal and informal teachers, with gratitude

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Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film

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This dissertation calls attention to three important contemporary texts from West Africa that resist the tacit cultural taboo around questions of sexuality to imagine empowering images of female sexuality. Using postcolonial feminist approaches, queer theory, and cultural studies, I analyze two novels and a film by T. Obinkaram Echewa, Frieda Ekotto, and film director Jean Pierre Bekolo to retrieve moments in which women characters turn the tables on denigrating views of their sexuality and marshal its power in the service of resistance. I show how in these texts, women bare their nether parts, wield menstrual cloths, enjoy same-sex erotic acts, sit on men's faces, and engage in many other stigmatized practices in a display of what I call "genital powers." These powers are both traditional to the cultures analyzed here and called into new forms by the pressures of decolonization and globalization. Through more complex representations of female sexuality, these texts chart a tradition in which stale binaries of victims and oppressors, the body as an exclusive site of female subjugation or as a site of eternal female power are blurred, allowing a deeper understanding of women's lived experiences and what it

means to be a resisting subject in the postcolonial space. By broadly recovering women's powers and subjectivities, centering on sexuality and the body, I also examine the ways in which this mode of female subjectivity has thus far escaped comprehensive theorization. In this way, my project responds to Gayatri Spivak's call to postcolonial intellectuals to unlearn privileged forms of resistance in the recognition of subjectivity, and to develop tools that would allow us to "listen" to the voices of disenfranchised women - those removed from the channels of knowledge production. However, my study cautions that the recognition of genital powers should not be conflated with the romanticized celebration of female bodies and sexuality, since West African women continue to struggle against cultural, political, existential, and physical assaults.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Genital Powers: Bodily Forms of Resistance and Their Discontents

> "Eh Amama, ni ce were ma deki ka ne taafe dayere, furu ni kanabo" Malinké.
> "Dear Amama, God of Right, if no man other than Anbara has been allowed to open my skirt, this marriage will not take place."
>
> Adama Drabo's *Taafè Fanga* (*Skirt Power)* (1997)

> "It is time to think of sex as a gift, to recover, therefore the potential of joy and happiness embedded in it."
>
> Achille Mbembé (2003)[1]

In this introductory chapter, I explain my interest in shedding light on women's aggressive uses of their sexual bodies and also define the key term "genital powers," which serves as the backbone of this dissertation. My use of the term departs from conventional understandings such as performance or potency during sexual acts. As defined here, "genital powers" refer to a range of genitally-centered practices that women and female characters use to resist male domination. Using anthropological and folk media, I explore public undressing also known as genital cursing and genital strike as examples of genital powers. Since to speak about the body and more specifically to position women's genitals as a possible site of resistance is challenging in the West African context, the chapter analyzes the trope of the hypersexualized black female body in the racist colonial ideology, the theoretical instability of the body as a material entity, and

[1] Closing remarks at Sex & Secrecy: the 4th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society in 2003, South Africa. Quoted in "The Conference Report" by Reid and Walker (*Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 1.1 (2004)).

the heteropatriarchal framework of the postcolonial nation states as some of the arguments against this project. As the dissertation focuses on novels and films, I explain why it has been so difficult to bring genital powers into novelistic and cinematic representations. To conclude, I propose we unlearn the privileges of our position as postcolonial intellectuals in order to develop mechanisms of listening to the voices of women who resort to their bodies as a site of speech and thus enrich our understanding of various subjectivities in the postcolonial space.

Patriarchal cultures typically stigmatize female sexuality as inferior, repugnant, unclean, even terrifying, and such stigma often underwrites the denial of social, legal, and human rights to women.[2] Women's resistance to this epistemic and often physical violence can take the form of offering positive images of their own sexuality. In the West African cultures examined in this dissertation, literary and cinematic artists document other traditions, those in which women appropriate what their societies consider to be the soiling, terrifying power of their bodies and sexuality in order to resist oppression. In these texts,

[2]Several African scholars including Catherine Acholonu and Oyeronke Oyewumi have contested the organic existence of patriarchy in several West African contexts, arguing that before colonialism, gender was not the dominant variable in social structuring in societies such as the Yoruba. And since patriarchy is predicated on gendered hierarchy and oppression, the insignificance of gender among, say, the Yoruba explains the absence of patriarchy. For more on the irrelevance of patriarchy in Africa, see Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) and Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). Although Oyewumi's illuminating study debunks the universalism of patriarchy, her discussion focuses on the precolonial Yoruba society. An equal emphasis on the postcolonial Yoruba society in which Islam, Christianity, and colonialism have introduced major changes would have enriched the study; for there is no denying that today, patriarchy and its undergirding principles permeate and structure social relationships.

women bare their nether parts, wield menstrual cloths, enjoy same-sex erotic acts, sit on men's faces, and engage in many other stigmatized practices as a form of what I call "genital powers." These powers are both organic to the cultures analyzed here and called into new forms by the pressures of decolonization and globalization. "Genital powers" are West African forms of women's resistance that require a supple African feminist lens to bring them into focus.

It is necessary to showcase these forms of women's resistance because the crippling structural and material realities in which women often use genital powers may teach us important aspects of what it means to be a resistant subject in spaces that Achille Mbembé so compellingly theorized as the "deathscapes."[3] Several scholars, including V.Y. Mudimbé, Achille Mbembé, and Christopher Miller among others, have provided insightful theorizations of African subjectivities and/or modes of resistance. However, what has been left out is the connection between women's uses of their sexuality, resistance, and subjectivity. The reason for this misrecognition is that when questions about female sexuality in the West African context emerge, they tend to be bound up in issues of ethics, the paradigm of victimization, and/or an uncritical celebration. So, through the texts examined here, this dissertation seeks to expand existing scholarship on

[3] In "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembé provides a most compelling definition of "Necropower," a sovereign power built for the maximum destruction of lives and the creation of deathscapes. Deathscapes themselves are defined as spaces in which humans are marked for death and/or living in a state of the living dead. Once the hallmark of the second and third worlds, Mbembé argues that deathscapes are increasingly becoming normalized, even in the first world. He finds Rwanda, Bosnia, and Gaza as exemplar deathscapes.

women's sexuality by raising a set of questions related to the recognition of female bodily forms of resistance in the postcolonial nation-state.

How does one structure the regime of recognition in order to apprehend moments of female genitally-constructed agency in the postcolonial state? How does a text imagine a woman's use of sexuality outside the regime of fertility, procreation, and heteronormativity? Entitled "Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film," this dissertation closely reads three important fictional and cinematic narratives from Cameroon and Nigeria to show how the genital body can be a potential site of a resistance model of female subjectivity.[4] I attempt to bring to the forefront T. Obinkaram Echewa's 1992 novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, Frieda Ekotto's 2001 *Chuchote pas trop* (*Whisper Not Much*),[5] and Jean Pierre Bekolo's 2005 film *Les Saignantes* (*The Bloodletters)* because they excavate, imagine, or re-create (non)traditionally- and culturally-sanctioned corporeal forms of female empowerment. Herein, I argue that these texts move beyond the paradigm of victimization, questions of morality, and the unexamined celebration of the body to inscribe a more complex regime of female agency in colonial and postcolonial spaces and against multiple regimes of power, local and foreign. As I analyze these texts, I also explore why it has been so difficult to

[4]I put the words "Nigerian" and "Cameroonian" in quotation marks to problematize them. Here they refer to the settings, not necessarily to the novelists' and the director's nationalities nor the works' places of publication and release.

[5]The novel has not been translated into English, and I choose to translate its title as "Whisper Not Much" rather than the literal "Do Not Whisper Too Much." The economy of words and the poetic sound of "Whisper Not Much" justify my choice.

bring women's aggressive uses of genital powers into novelistic and cinematic representations and the ways in which most scholarly discussions of power and subjectivities have occluded them.

This introductory chapter is divided into four major sections. The first section, "Relevance and Genealogy of the Project," discusses how I became interested in exploring genital powers and the project's contribution to the larger conversation on West African sexuality and gender studies. The second section, "Genital Power and Its Discontents," defines the expression "genital powers" and explains the rationale behind the choice of terminology. In that section, I also examine the historical construction and dissemination of the trope of the supersexed black female body in colonialist and West African texts, the widely-discussed mind and body split, and the reality of the deathscapes as some of the challenges against the conceptualization of the genital as a potential means of resistance for the black female body. In section three, "Aggressive Uses of Genital Powers in Folk Media and Anthropological Texts," I discuss how patterns of genital cursing and public undressing, sealing vaginal openings, and using abortifacients have been taken up in non-novelistic genres. In doing so, I seek to show the longstanding nature of the practices within specific West African communities. Finally, in section four, "Performatives of Victimization and the Unrepresentability of Empowering Images of Female Sexuality," I explain the dearth of literary sources on women's aggressive uses of genital powers. I

propose that the attempt by writers of fiction to "sanitize" the hypersexualized image of the black female body, the exceptional situations required to bring out some of the forms of resistance, intellectual imperialism, and the effects of internalized colonialist and patriarchal cultures all contribute to explaining why it has been so difficult to bring empowering images of women's sexuality in the cinematic and novelistic genres. By juxtaposing sections three and four, I argue that the novel form and cinema lagged behind folk media[6] in representing empowering female sexuality. To conclude, I discuss the possible limitations of using the genital as a site of resistance and the emerging trend of subversive fictional narratives and cinematic texts featuring more complex images of female sexuality.

Resisting the belief in the stability of power relations and the lure of reifying women's aggressive uses of genital powers as indefinitely empowering,[7] I caution that the recognition of the genital and its retrieval for moments of female agency should not be conflated with a romanticized celebration of the body since the embodied subjects are locked in an ongoing dialectic of resistance and

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[6] By folk media, I mean literary and oral traditions such as proverbs, rituals, folktales, myths, epics, and songs. In order to account for the widespread use of genital power in West Africa, I culled examples from different ethnic groups. (Côte d'Ivoire): Malinké proverbs: "Woman can never be completely known," "God created woman for treachery" (Hoffman 2002, 6); (Sénégal) Jola Mask ritual: "Kankurang Mask ritual of Basse Casamance" (Langeveld 2002, 80-100); Ghana, Akan folktale: *The Ananse Tale* (Opuku-Agyemang 1998, 87); and (Mali) Malinké: *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* (Conrad and Condé eds., 2004).

[7] Tendencies to reify women's powers can be found in Teresa Washington's *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts* (2005); Chikwenye Ogunyemi's *Africa Wo/Man Palava* (1996); Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) and *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism* (2000).

subjugation. I also hasten to say that my focus on women's genital powers should not be misconstrued as an argument for the aggressive uses of genital bodies as the only and most important avenue of female resistance. The diversity of modes of resistance and the spirit of this project, which is to transcend dichotomies and to learn "to learn from below," resist such positioning.[8]

I-Relevance and Genealogy of the Project

This dissertation has its point of departure in two facts: my frustration with the predominant images of African women circulating and being consumed in national and international spaces and the observation that questions related to sovereignty, power, and subjectivities in West Africa either ignore or over-celebrate female embodied forms of self-empowerment.

My idea of analyzing genital power began in 2007, three years after I entered the Program in Comparative Literature at The University of Texas at Austin. Then, I was frustrated with my assigned readings and their images of West African women, continuously caught in the semiotic of cutting (clitoridectomy and infibulation), violation (corrective rape, rape as weapon of war, marital rape), pathology (HIV/AIDS), and over-reproduction, all practices I

[8] I use the phrase after Gayatri Spivak. She uses it in "Righting Wrongs," (2004), an essay that explores the consequences of specific modes of readings in the Humanities and how those may impact international activism and human rights.

have come to call the pervasive picture of negative sexualities.[9] To be more specific, an overwhelming number of pre-1990 fictional narratives from West Africa feature a wide spectrum of acts of violence against female bodies. In other words, these imaginings "restage" or "perform" the paradigm of victimization of women's lives.

I also observed that most published scholarly works replicated comparable images. For example, in *African Women: A Modern History* (1997), prominent French historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch described African women as an undifferentiated mass of sameness, the quintessential beasts of burden when she opined: "They are so overburdened with tasks of all kinds that they hardly have time to bemoan their fate and even to wonder about it" (74).[10] Through her generalization, it seems that women's lived experiences and moments of agency beyond constant victimhood eluded the historian's recognition. No doubt, these inflammatory statements were meant to bring attention to women's poor living

[9] It is a challenging task to compile the list of West African novels whose primary subject matters are acts of oppressive physical violence against women. However, the canonical ones include Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979), Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1980), *Double Yoke* (1983), Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* (1982), Regina Yaou's *La révolte d'Affiba* (1985), and Boris Boubakar Diop's *Les tambours de la mémoire* (1991). To be more specific, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) imagines female sterility and the angst of motherhood. The protagonist Nnu Ego complains: "I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood" and the narrator to add: "Her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery" (148). Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous la cendre le feu (There is No Smoke without Fire)* (1990) features the objectification of the female body and how the protagonist, Mina, loses her sanity because of her inability to express the pains associated with her daughter's rape by her husband. In *Une Vie de crabe* (A Crab's Life) (1990), Tanella Boni tackles the question of dowry and women's objectification while in *Rencontres essentielles* (*Essential Encounters*) (1969), Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury imagines questions of infertility, failed marriage, and adultery.

[10] For a critique of Coquery-Vidrovitch, see Mojubaolu Okome's "What Women, Whose Development?" 2003. 67-98.

conditions, even if they denied them self-consciousness and therefore the possibility of resistance. My attempt to explain Coquery-Vidrovitch's rhetoric reflects my understanding that the overexposure of scarred bodies in fictional texts and other critical works is probably well-intentioned because representing and theorizing the "real face" of Africa is believed to potentially help improve the lives of "victims." So, I do not mean to downplay the importance of such enterprises, but I suggest that a step back from them and their paradigm of victimization and/or moral standpoints would allow us to catch a richer and a more nuanced glimpse of the "real" and diverse faces of Africa.

Having moved from Côte d'Ivoire to the United States in 2004 to pursue my doctorate, I was especially vulnerable to these images of wounded and violated West African women's bodies. As a Malinké woman whose local culture was shaped by a misinterpretation of Islamic principles, I became convinced that my body was and always would be the locus of my subjection to the Malinké patriarchy, erroneous versions of Islam, the heteropatriarchal modern state, and global configurations of discursive and material powers. Just like Nnu Ego, the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), I considered myself a "prisoner of my own flesh." Then, I had a eureka moment. But wait! I had been exposed to other traditions, particularly to the ones in which the power of the female genital is relevant in curtailing the prerogatives of patriarchal and state forms of domination. Growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, I witnessed how non-

literate and economically-challenged women resorted to the aggressive uses of their bodies in order to exercise agency when negotiating through multiple and interrelated dynamics of power. Of course, women also found other routes to resistance. Then, I wondered, "Why can't I read even intermittently about echoes of my life in narratives that purport to imagine West African women?" Similar to but unlike Limatkazo Kendall, who went to Lesotho looking for her kind [lesbians], I went on the "mission" of identifying and locating echoes, glimpses, and parallels of my lived experiences in fictional narratives from West Africa. Unable to locate these parallels in my closest environments, I sent out multiple emails to approximately ten hnet listservs: H-Africa, H-Français, H-French Colonial, H-Minerva, H-West Africa, H-Caribbean, H-African American, H-Women, H-MedAnthro, and H-History of Sexuality, hunting for fictional texts on genital cursing and genital shaming.

Typically referred to as "sexual insult," "genital cursing" consists of a woman's exposure or attempted exposure of her genitals in public as a "gesture of contempt" towards (a) male offender(s) (Bastian 2005, 46). This contemptuous and insulting act is considered more powerful when performed by a mother, aunt, or grandmother, against her son, nephew, grandson, or other male relative. Slightly different from genital cursing, genital shaming seeks to remind the offenders of their own shortcomings. To shame a man, an offended woman may

engage in anti-social behaviors such as public undressing or using vulgar language.

My project to bring genital power out of epistemic obscurity was compounded by calls from several African intellectuals to consider sex(uality) as a compelling category of analysis that can help deepen our understanding of modern African societies. The fact that Achille Mbembé, one of the most respected postcolonial African intellectuals, made this call back in 2003 bespeaks of the political urgency of the task. The invitation is even more meaningful because in his pre-2003 writings, Mbembé glaringly avoided questions of resistant sexuality.

In *On the Postcolony* (2001), one of the most sophisticated theorizations of power and subjectivity in Africa, Mbembé positions the postcolonial space as predominantly devoid of structures of resistance. His claims rest on the pervasive conviviality between what he calls the *commandement*[11] and its subjects: "[T]he postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space" (104) or interacting within the "same episteme" (110). Highlighting the "convivial" nature of the relationship allows Mbembé to inscribe a more nuanced

[11] Mbembé uses the French "*commandement*" to account for the transposition into the postcolonial state of the colonial administration's model of governance, which was predicated upon exploitation and coercion. During the colonial period, the colonial authority was designated as "*commandement*" in Francophone Africa.

deployment of power in Africa, thereby transcending the sterile dichotomy of sacrificial victims and dehumanizing dictators. However, in this account, one misses the opportunity to witness the creative ways in which women may use their bodies to carve out temporary spaces of resistance. For, even if the postcolonial "relationship is not *primarily* a relationship of resistance" (my emphasis), I think that it may still be necessary to provide a sense of moments of resistance for a more accurate representation of power dynamics. It seems to me that Mbembé's reliance on structures, so characteristic of postmodernist critical methodology, takes him away from embodied subjects and into a pure conceptualization of power.[12]

As expected, African American scholar Bennetta Jules-Rosette has pointed out two important omissions, gender and gendered forms of embodiment, as categories of analysis in Mbembé's "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2002). Responding to the essay, she critiques the theorist's silence on gender in his

[12] Several scholars have critiqued Mbembé's omission of the possibility of resistance in the postcolonial space. For example, in "Bound to Violence? Achille Mbembé's *On the Postcolony*," *West Africa Review* (2001), Adeleko Adeeko problematizes Mbembé's account of power using the possibility of the slave resistance in the Hegelian master/slave dialectic: "I know that Hegel blamed the slave for his fate. I should, therefore, not be misconstrued to be making Hegel into a model of radical postcolonialism. My point is that if Hegel indirectly entertained the possibility of the slave's self-directed revolt, those of us who are fully invested in the slave's destiny, like Mbembé, have no tenable excuse for our ambivalence." (2002). Adeeko's observation is truly compelling, however, as postcolonial critics, should we not acknowledge the limitations of even the ideological positions that we espouse. I think that acknowledging the contradictions is the starting point of an ethical scholarship. In the same vein as Adeeko, Jeremy Weate critiques Mbembé's disengagement from the street and his flight into the theoretical: "Mbembé's interest seems to be in locating theoretical and political engagement in the writerly sphere of academic, juridical and overtly political texts, not on the street, the *bidonville* or within the practices of everyday life. In unison with his underdeveloped theory of bodily resistance, his thought does not engage with demotic modes of resistance and the micropolitics of daily practice" (2003, 12).

conceptualization of selfhood and the resourceful means by which women, for example, Nigerian market women and Congolese *cambistes* (street bankers), have changed the course of history. She writes:

> Mbembé avoids any systematic discussion of gender as an aspect of selfhood or subjectivity. Instead, he privileges dominant ideologies, institutions, and public instruments of power over private sources of resistance. The absence of any treatment of women's initiatives and unique inscriptions of selfhood is both a theoretical and empirical lacuna in Mbembé's argument. (2002, 604)

Jules-Rosette's analysis of gender and women's misrecognized contributions to history is certainly a most welcome addition to the ten published responses to Mbembé's essay. On a more general note, by bringing a feminist lens to bear on the ten essays, one realizes that Mbembé's essay was not the only one that overlooked gender as a significant variable in the exploration of power in Africa. With the exception of Arif Dirlif's fleeting mention of "women's labor" (611), no other scholar, from Ato Quayson and Françoise Vergès to Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Paul Gilroy, commented on gender or embodied forms of contestation.[13] Perhaps in 2002, gendered subjectivity still occupied second-class scholarship behind more "important" questions such as cosmopolitanism,

[13] In 2002, *Public Culture* 14:3 published ten response essays by leading postcolonial theorists including Ato Quayson, Paul Gilroy, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Jane I. Guyer, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, Françoise Vergès, Arif Dirlik, Kimberly Wedeven Segall, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, and Candace Vogler.

postcolonialism, and power. Yet, as insightful as Jules-Rosette's observation is, it may have fallen into the trap she sets out to unmask. In fact, she collapses two categories of analysis: gender and the distinction between the private and public spheres. In doing so, she unwittingly ghettoizes "gender" by associating it with women and by consigning it to the private sphere, home, and domesticity.

Despite this ideological glitch, Jules-Rosette's critique allows us to understand the cultural misrecognition of corporeal modes of contestation, and more specifically of female forms of resistance. But, as I suggested above, since "African Modes of Self-Writing," Mbembé has somewhat revised his thinking and expanded his categories of analysis to include questions related to bodies and sexuality. An opportune point occurred during his closing remarks at the 2003 Sex and Secrecy Conference in South Africa, when he invited scholars "to look into sex and…publicness, the publicness of sex, the public faces of sex, and sex in the public imagination" (quoted in Reid and Walker 2004, 101). In that line of thinking, this dissertation heeds Mbembé's and Jules-Rosette's calls by bringing into focus sex, embodied subjects, and female forms of self-empowerment. However, rather than focus on sex through the oft-used lenses of HIV/AIDS or female genital surgeries, this project is concerned with how the genital constitutes a useful site for expanding our understanding of forms of resistance.

My attempt to locate fictional narratives on genital shaming was my way of answering Mbembe's and Jules-Rosette's calls. However, the feedback I

received from my digital investigation was mixed. On one hand, I was directed to several anthropological works on the practice, which I had already consulted. On the other, only a fictional text and a collection of folkloric materials, respectively Echewa's novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, both published in 1992 in the United States, were brought to my attention. The scarcity of fictional representations confirms my observation that very few literary sources dare touch women and their genital cursing. But, I thought that the innovative text, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, will be enough to start a useful conversation on empowering and women-centered forms of resistance.

Although I elaborate on the question later, here I will briefly explain that several economic and cultural structures explain why it is has been so difficult to bring genital cursing and shaming into novelistic representations. Some of the challenges against imagining, say, genital cursing include taboo and secrecy around questions of sexuality, intellectual imperialism, a male-dominated publishing industry, and the postcolonial heteropatriarchal state and its refusal to imagine women's uses of their sexuality outside the regime of procreation and fertility. Since I read female characters' bodily forms of self-empowerment as "genital powers," it is worthwhile to explicate my choice of terminology.

II-Genital Power and Its Discontents

1-Definitions and Rationale

The term "genital power" is not a new invention, and naturally its meaning has shifted across temporal and geographical terrains. The first recorded use dates from 1833 in James Gregory's *Conspectus Medicinae Theoreticae.* Therein, it was used in a medical context to designate enhanced sexual and/or procreational activities. From the mid-eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, the term was widely used in medical and pharmacological circles, although it tended to be limited to the discussion of male sexual disorders such as ejaculatory and erectile dysfunction, and inhibited sexual desire. For example, *The Pharmacology of the Newer Materia Medica* (1892) refers to patient R.J., 54 years old, who "called Aug 2, complaining of a gradual loss of health, weight, and genital power" (583). "Genital power" was not associated with women until the 1950s, when research on female sexuality became an important social and medical issue.[14] One of the first published use of the term "genital power" to refer to women is James Arnold Brussel's *The Layman's Guide to Psychiatry* (1962). Brussel writes: "Thus, premature cessation of genital power in women may be manifested not only by loss of potency, but also by reversal of feminine characteristics (marked growth of bodily hair, change of voice, flattening and flabbiness of the breasts)" (235).

[14] The shifting understandings of the sexed body explain the gradual association of "genital power" to women. See Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard UP, 1990) for a compelling study of sexuality and bodies throughout centuries.

In the twentieth century, as the term expands to include women, its medical use seems to have subsided to make place for a figurative one: the will to use the sexual body as a site of resistance. My use of the term was inspired by the 2006 essay "Women's Aggressive Use of Genital Power in Africa" by cultural anthropologist Phillips Stevens. Although Stevens offers no rationale for his choice of terminology, I found his term appropriate for my project. Richard Philcox, the translator of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), may have introduced another definition of genital power. In his 2008 translation of the seminal text, Philcox renders "puissance genitale" as "genital power" instead of "genital potency," the term used by Charles Markmann in the 1967 Grove Press translated version: "[The Black Man] embodies *genital power* out of reach of morals and taboos" (154 my emphasis).[15] Philcox may have racialized the phrase because in Fanon's theorizing of blackness, the myth of the "black man"'s unrestrained sexuality was a projection of the "white man"'s fears of his stunted sexuality (supposed small size, shorter erection, limited and tardy arousal).

I use term "genital" rather than "sexual" not because of its sensationalist connotations but rather its inclusiveness and closeness to physiology. The term allows me to name a wide range of non-procreational, male-friendly, or anti-male usages to which women may put their genitalia for self-empowerment, while bypassing the numerous debates around the more ideologically-charged term

[15] In the 1967 Grove Press edition, Charles Markmann translates the sentence as "The Negro is the incarnation of genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions" (177).

"sexual." An example of such a debate is the battle of terminology used to define the practice of the Mevoungou, a precolonial female secret society of the Beti of Cameroon, discussed in Chapter Four. The power of this female secret society is predicated upon the clitoris, an organ women caressed, invoked, and worshipped during their ritual performances. So, based on anthropological descriptions of the ritual, including women's simulation of copulation, two French feminist anthropologists, Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé and Jeanne-Françoise Vincent, consider the ritual as an expansion of female sexuality. Bochet de Thé sees it as an opportunity for women to engage in "double sexuality" (1985, 248), that is, sanctioned lesbianism. Although the ritual was forbidden to men, most male anthropologists and intellectuals, whether French or Cameroonian, contest that the ritual may have had any sexual implications.[16] Although they acknowledge that the ritual contains "sexual gestures," they still attempt to desexualize it, denying women participants the possibility of experiencing physical pleasures associated with massaging the clitoris. To completely overlook the possible pleasures associated with the ritual is to "hijack" Beti women's bodies; and as a postcolonial African feminist critic, I seek to reclaim the power of sexuality without its stigma. My use of the term "genital," then, is an attempt to sidestep these debates.

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[16] See French anthropologist Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, *Initiations et sociétés sécrètes* (1985); Cameroonian sociologist Charles Gueboguo, "Manifestations et facteurs explicatifs de l'homosexualité à Yaoundé et à Douala" (2002); film director Jean Pierre Bekolo, "Being African and Modern at the Same Time" (2005). See also Beti catholic priests: Isadore Tabi, *La théologie des rites Beti (*Nd) and Paul Mviena, *Univers culturel et religieux du peuple beti* (1970).

To return to definitions, the term "power" should be considered in the two conceptual meanings of "energy, potency" and "potential, drive, capacity." Frustrated women's capacity to stand up for themselves and to reclaim some space of agency complements the potency of the means of resistance. I suggest that the inner strength necessary to use the genital, contrary to its conventional and "prescriptive" uses, is quintessentially transgressive. The transgression is even more powerful when the agents live in challenging material and psychological conditions, where their bodies' naked lives are constantly marked for death. Whether produced out of limited options or deliberately acquired, genital power introduces ruptures and reversals in what seems like an interrupted and uncontested march of male-dominated values and practices. Rather than give up, those who resort to deploying genital powers, their last and "deadliest weapon,"[17] reveal an awareness of their conditions, their resourcefulness, and their hope for better treatment. I think that more than the means itself, women's ability to display resistance deserves cultural recognition. They "fight" back and will be defeated as warriors, like Draupadi, the defiant female protagonist of Mahasweta Devi's revisionist short story "Draupadi," famously discussed by Gayatri Spivak. Gang raped and left with mangled breasts and naked, Draupadi

[17] Questions might be raised as to the choice of words such as "deadly" and "vicious" to convey the force behind the actions taken by women. Perhaps this semantic of spite and unconventionality re-inscribes the stigma of women's bodies and sexuality. But, it must be noted that this semantic is from the perspective of the women using the "weapon." As a literary critic, I think that the attempt and/or need to sanitize the choice of words will be to disregard the ways in which women label and define their means of resistance. In addition, we could also regard these words in a less stigmatized way when used in connection with genital power.

reclaims her unsightly, defiled, and humiliated bare body to defy and unsettle, albeit momentarily, seemingly unassailable male power.[18]

Because women's bodies are often "hijacked" and put exclusively to work for a male economy, women's aggressive uses of their genitals against heteropatriarchal regimes are compelling possibilities. Most often, genital powers are gendered practices used by females against males. They include a wide range of mechanical and psychological tactics, including genital curse and charm, abortifacient herbs to limit female reproduction, female same-sex erotic acts, female secret societies predicated upon the clitoris, and "Bottom power," often defined as women's use of sexual tricks for favors. However, the use of the genital to practice resistance in a West African context is fraught with tensions, especially when one considers the porosity of the categories of man and woman, the constant danger of the material body in the "deathscape," and the pervasive images of hypersexualized black female bodies. In other words, how do West African women use the genital without reinforcing centuries-old constructions of

[18] By translating the short story in 1981, Gayatri Spivak brought on the global platform the figure of the woman warrior who uses genital power as her weapon. The narrator explains Draupadi's last act of defiance: "Draupadi stands before him [Senanayak] naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes close with her hands on her hip, laughs and says, the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? Where are her clothes? Won't put them on, *sir*. Tearing them. Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing… What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?[..] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. [..] Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (186, emphasis in original). *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988).

their bodies as supersexed or running the risk of reducing their subjectivity to the genital?

2- Colonialist Texts and the Trope of the Hypersexualized Black Female Body

To make a case for the use of the genital as a means of resistance necessitates jumping several hurdles, material and discursive, local and foreign. In fact, by looking at how African bodies have been constructed during the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism and by briefly surveying nineteenth-century European visual arts and early missionary writings, one begins to appreciate the extent to which women who use genital power are unwittingly contesting longstanding and foreign pathologizing of their bodies.

Although this dissertation refuses to position the West as the ultimate violator of the African continent, it still considers how the colonial writing enterprise has shaped the current misrecognition of certain modes of being in the postcolonial space. Indeed, for centuries, images of black African bodies have been buried under disempowering palimpsestic layers of discursive and non-discursive regimes (Mudimbé 1995, Mbembé 2001). A typical example of the practice is the framing of the native as "absence," "lack," "non-being" and "incapable of acting *intentionally*" (Mbembé 2001, 187 emphasis in original). Although Mbembé subsumes colonized women and men under the same category, disregarding how the former were doubly negated and stigmatized, as I observed

earlier, an impressive scholarship has established how specifically colonizers pathologized female bodies because of their sex/gender (Ki-Zerbo 1972, Mohanty 1991, Vaughan 1991, Arnfred 2004).

Nineteenth-century missionary writings, which scholars of African women have since problematized, significantly contributed to the trend. The level of pathologization in missionary writings was in proportion to the degree to which missionaries condemned and sought to clothe the "scantily-dressed" colonized, discipline their "unnatural" sexual desires and practices, and "improve" their lives. It is important to note that the missionaries who advocated clothing were not interested in the natives' well-being and comfort but, rather were fighting to ban indigenous practices they considered to conflict with Judeo-Christian precepts. A case in point is John H. Weeks of the Baptist Missionary Society and his representations of nineteenth-century Boloki women of the Congo. In *Among Congo Cannibals* (1913), Weeks uses formulaic terms such as "savages" and "degraded" to describe Boloki women.[19] Emphasizing the achievements of the Baptist missionaries among the natives, Weeks remarks: "Now we find that Christian teaching and monogamy have conduced to stricter morality among the people […] Polygamy is giving place to monogamy, and that means a higher

[19] For more on John H. Weeks, see my essay "African Women and Missionary Writings: Nineteenth-Century Boloki Women of the Congo in John H. Weeks' *Among Congo Cannibals* (1913)" in *Intersections 5. (*2007): 44-51. For more on the images of African women in missionary writings, see also Nakanyike Musisi's "The Politics of Perception or Perception as Politics" (2002). Musisi discusses how the (in)famous Dr. Cook from the Church Missionary Society represented nineteenth-century Baganda women of Uganda as "suffering" from "uncontrollable sexual drive" and "free, yet 'beasts of burden,' ignorant and diseased" (99-100).

morality, a purer and self-respecting womanhood" (138-9). From this quotation, it is clear that very little concern or respect was shown to the natives' ways of being or to their civilizational modes.[20]

But, the construction of the pathologized female body was not exclusive to white missionaries and colonialists. Historian Sylvia Jacobs analyzes nineteenth-century African American women missionaries in Africa to show how they participated in conventional representations of men's and women's unrestrained sexuality. Jacobs discusses ten African American women missionaries who served in six African countries from 1882 to 1951 and represented seven mission societies. As a result of their gender, women missionaries were naturally more interested in the fate of "African" girls and women, and consequently invested more time and energy in "uplifting" them. In their writings and letters, black women missionaries use the rhetoric of "heathens," "those living in sin and darkness" (92), and "poor women of Africa" (94).[21] Steadily radiating like a pebble in a pond, the trope of the "sexually licentious" woman creeps up from

[20] Although I point out the weaknesses of the colonial enterprise, I acknowledge the benefits mission societies brought to the natives. For example, most rudimentary dictionaries of indigenous languages were the result of work done by nineteenth-century missionaries such as Weeks and Dr. Cook.

[21] In the same essay, "African American Women Missionaries and the African Way of Life" (1996), Sylvia Jacobs also analyzes Nancy Jones, a missionary who served in Mozambique from 1888 to 1893. According to Jacobs, Jones sexualized the young girls in the way that recalls European missionaries' perceptions of African women. In her diaries and letters, Jones writes: "They [girls] do not desire much clothing, they want their forms to be seen by the men" (95). Instead of reading the girls' response to clothing as an intrinsic cultural and climactic aspect, the woman missionary read it as a sign of their uncontrolled sexual tendencies. Jacobs concludes her essay, saying: "The perspectives of these black female missionaries did not differ much from the views on Africa held by black males and white missionaries" (94).

colonialist and missionary writings to bleed into other spheres of the European imaginary, including the visual arts.

The visual artifacts -- postcards and photographs of Africans -- circulating in Europe during the heyday of colonialism, brought into being the imagined and hypersexed African women (Thompson 2008). This discursive hypersexualization and fascination were materialized in the figure of Saartje (Sarah) Bartmann, also known as the Hottentot Venus, the South African woman who was exhibited in Europe as a freak. The supposedly disproportionate sizes of her buttocks and genitalia came to support the early nineteenth-century narrative of black degeneracy and sexual deviance. But, recuperating the tendency to generalize African women, novelist and cultural critic Zoe Wicomb frames Bartmann's fate and her overexposed genitalia as the symbolic representation of all colonized black women (1998, 91). Through the erasure of individual identities, a trope undergirding most racist imperialist texts, black women's bodies, independently of their locations and idiosyncrasies, "suffered" from pathological sexual drives.

Ironically, a closer examination of the hypersexualizing discourse reveals an ambivalence; the black female body was simultaneously hypervisible and never really seen. This borderline contradiction between "super sexedness" and "double nothingness" resonates with what Homi Bhabha, in a slightly different context, has called "less than one and double" (1994, 169). In other words, the female body became an enigmatic figure that seemed subjugated yet challenging

to pin down to a singular meaning. This proliferation of impossible figurations tests the limits of colonialist discourses about the female natives; and it is in the interstices of these disjunctions that a colonized female subjectivity emerges.

As the empire continues to write back, contemporary African and African-descent feminists attempt to redress the discursive oppressive violence by humanizing black female bodies. For example, African American feminist writer Suzan-Lori Parks' revision of Bartmann in the 1997 production *Venus: a Play* attempts to humanize the controversial figure.[22] The innovative aspect of Parks' revision is the attribution of personal agency to Bartmann, presented as a savvy businesswoman in control of or at least a partner in, the commodification of her body.[23] But to consider racist Euro-Americans as the exclusive oppressors of the black female body would be to ignore the economy of excision and cutting that indigenous patriarchal institutions, with women's collaboration, have written on the black woman's body.

[22] A new film, *Black Venus* by Director Abdel Kechiche, premiered in France on October 27, 2010.

[23] In *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (2007), Neville Hoad observes that the "revisionist humanizing" such as Parks' "allows [Baartman's] intentions, desires, and fears to become visible in the face of racist and sexist forces that would have us continue to fixate on her genitals. This revisionist humanizing, while risking 'blaming the victim,' enhances rather than mitigates a sense of outrage of what happened to her in Europe and to her body after a premature death in 1815" (96).

3- West African Material and Discursive Violence against Female Bodies

Indeed, various indigenous political and literary institutions have subjugated West African women's bodies to physical and discursive acts of violence. These acts include female genital surgeries and the reduction of visible female sexuality to prostitution, which in turn is framed as source and metaphor of moral degeneration and the failures of postcolonial ruling classes. Whereas among the Beti of Cameroon, female genital mutilation is the ultimate form of punishment for an adulterous woman (Ombolo 1990; Vincent 2001), among the Igbo of Nigeria, it is believed to make a woman more feminine and thus more attractive to men. I intentionally use the rhetoric of violence to designate female circumcision among the Beti because in that specific instance, the practice serves as a mechanism of punishment. In fact, I rarely use the culturally-loaded term "female genital mutilation," which African and African Diaspora scholars routinely critique, because it is an umbrella term that fails to capture the shifting histories, geographies, and understandings of female genital surgeries.[24] Suffice it to say that whether the practice is part of an initiation ritual or other "indigenous"

[24] For more discussion on female genital circumcision, see Obioma Nnaemeka's *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses* (2005); Signe Arnfred's edited *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004); Oyeronke Oyewumi's anthology *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (2003); and Isabelle Gunning's "Cutting through the Obfuscation: Female Genital Surgeries in Neoimperial Culture" (1998). Jean Pierre Ombolo's *Les Mutilations Sexuelles en Afrique Noire (*1981) remains the most comprehensive ethnographical accounts of male and female genital/corporeal mutilations in Africa.

practice, or whether it is couched in a semiotic of violence, it still affects in profound ways women's relations to and appreciation of sexual acts.

Circumcised or whole, female bodies have been figuratively used by local political and literary discourses to advance decolonizing agendas and/or to critique the failures of the postcolonial state (where it exists) without any regard to the interests of women themselves. Because the strategies of using women's bodies to signify the wholesomeness and integrity of the continent were flawed at their inception, they did little to bring women's issues to the forefront (Bohemer 1991, Shohat 1991). For instance, decolonization and late post-independence era fictions by male writers use images of visible female sexuality as a metaphor for human degeneracy and sources of moral and political contamination.[25] Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah, Cyprian Ekwensi, Mongo Beti, and Sembène Ousmane have been critiqued for this epistemic violence (Little 1980, Kishtainy 1982, Stratton 1994, Cazenave 1996, Hitchkott 2000). In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton is more specific in critiquing African male writers for peopling their texts with "prostitutes;" she says: "In these texts, prostitution is not related to the female social condition in patriarchal societies. Rather it is a metaphor for men's degradation under some non-preferred socio-political system - a metaphor which encodes women as agents of moral corruption, as sources of moral contamination

[25] In "African Women's Body Images in Postcolonial Discourse and Resistance to Neo-Crusaders" (2008), Ifi Amadiume discusses the persistence of pathologizing West African women's body images in postcolonial discourses.

in society" (53).[26] These fictional narratives and their reductions of visible female sexuality to prostitution position women's images in a double bind since the prostitute character becomes the representation that is not representation. Through that trope, women's sexuality hovers somewhere between images of the hypersexed metaphorical prostitute and that of the unsexed mother.

In light of these distorted images, it becomes problematic to use female genitalia as a site of resistance; the price to pay may be too high for the return. In addition to the patriarchal and colonialist components, other discursive challenges to bodily forms of female resistance emerge with the mind and body split, the contestation of the "body" and "woman" as natural categories, and the theoretical void of "woman" in the dual-sex system scholarship.

4- Challenging Genital Power: the Body and Mind Split and the Porosity of Bodies

The privileging of the disembodied consciousness in the constitution and recognition of subjectivity has had the limiting effect of excluding those who at times resort to genital power for resistance. The overreliance on the Cartesian, self-reflexive model of subjectivity, underpinning much of the Western imaginary, continues as the *de facto* and universal mode of subjectivity. This

[26] However, Calixthe Beyala, whom a specific category of African feminists has hailed as progressive in her imaginings of female sexuality, complicates Stratton's critique. Beyala explains that "prostitution" is not a mechanism of resisting patriarchal practices but rather "a loss of identity, a loss of the self" (C'est une perte d'identité, une perte de soi) (Quoted in Emmanuel Matateyou, 1996, 609). Beyala's quotation shows that independently of the writer's gender/sex, we can still ourselves in the landscape of metaphors, degeneration, and loss of markers when discussing the issue of 'prostitution'.

focus on the mind, "I think therefore I am," at the expense of the body has led to a discursive and material association of women and non-Europeans with the body, relegating them to subordinate social positions.

Numerous Euro-American feminists have contested this divide and most of its underlying principles. They have attempted primarily to wrest knowledge production from the exclusive domain of the mind and women from the scorned and discounted body. In **"**Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason" (1993), Elizabeth Grosz exacerbates the crisis of reason in the humanities and social sciences by identifying the possibilities for feminism to challenge Western mechanisms of valuation and production of knowledge.[27] Grosz debunks the myth of the body as the site of emotions and, drawing from Friedrich Nietzsche's definition of knowledge as practice and activity, argues that "[k]nowledges are the product of a drive to live and conquer, a will to power that is also primarily, exhibited corporeally" (204). Here, note that from the singular knowledge we move to the plural, as if the very notion of knowledge is being broken open, democratized and therefore make accessible to the formerly disenfranchised. In the same vein, Judith Butler compellingly interrogated phallogocentrism (the male-centered system that generates binaries and positions the phallus and rationality as the norms)[28] and its disavowal of the body and

[27] In "Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject," Rosi Braidotti makes a similar argument. *Hypatia* 8.1 (1993):1-13.
[28] The term "phallogocentrism" comes from the 1980s poststructuralist and psychoanalytic French Feminism.

females: “The abstract masculine epistemological subject…. is abstract to the extent that it *disavows* its socially marked embodiment and, further, *projects* that disavowed and disparaged embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female” (1990, 11, emphasis in original). Feminist attacks against phallogocentrism and Cartesianism have succeeded in problematizing the privileging of the mind and women’s exclusive association with the body.

However, in some cases, the deconstruction of the binary has been pushed to the point of losing sight of material and incarnate bodies, as Hortense Spillers and Toril Moi have argued.[29] In their attempts to undo the divide, poststructuralist feminist theorists, and more specifically Judith Butler, have deconstructed the binary so effectively that categories of female and male and material bodies are now “endangered” species. From their perspective, the body is not outside of society and thus cannot be taken for granted. In other words, if I claim my identity as a woman, I may be suspected of participating in the discursive subjugation of my own body. So, in a context where all bodies, including the female body, are believed to be socially constructed and therefore porous and unstable, one

[29]Back in 1987, Spillers cautioned against the metaphoricity of the body because “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 206). In *What’s A Woman*? (1991), Toril Moi critiques poststructuralist feminists and the straitjackets of metaphysical, essentialist, or biological determinism in which they have imprisoned the word “woman.” Taking up Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of the body as a situation, Moi suggests an alternative to sex/gender thinking, which will reject biological determinism and provides the historically and socially situated understanding of the material, living, and dying body.

wonders how and to what extent West African women can claim and use the prerogative of their womanhood to construct a resisting model of subjectivity?

Not only has the category "woman" been abraded in poststructuralist feminist circles in the United States, but it has also been drained of theoretical currency in the dual-sex system scholarship.[30] Reacting against the uncritical transposition of Euro-American understandings of "woman" and "gender" onto the Oyo-Yoruba of Nigeria, Oyerunke Oyewumi claims: "I came to realize that the fundamental category 'woman' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses - did not exist in Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West. There was no such pre-existing group characterized by shared interests, desires, or social position in Yoruba society called 'woman'" (1997, ix). The absence of gender markers in the Yoruba language, according to Oyewumi, reflects the indifference accorded to physicality in determining hierarchy and social positioning. Although Oyewumi omits to see in the Yoruba privileging of seniority a marker of the body, her work of excavating indigenous forms of social organization is useful in debunking the myth of universalizing Euro-American models of social and labor divisions. Gender may not have been central in

[30] What I consider here as the dual-sex scholarship is not a monolithic field because while Oyewumi rejects "woman" as a social category among the precolonial Oyo-yoruba, Kamene Okonjo and Niara Surdakasa do not. In their analyses of the Yoruba, Igbo, and Asante, both argue that the hierarchical system did not encompass all spheres of life. For more on the dual sex-system, see Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in Hafkin and Bay's edited *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Political Change*, 1976: 45-58; Niara Surdakasa, " 'The Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies," Terborg-Penn and Rushing's anthology *Women in African and the African Diaspora: A Reader*, 1996: 73-88.

determining social positioning in precolonial times, but today, the postcolonial social and political structures are saturated with it and its attended ideological values (Bakare-Yusuf 2003). Similar to and yet different from Oyewumi in problematizing the category of "woman" is Monique Wittig, a frontrunner in destabilizing reified politically-motivated constructs.

At the Modern Language Association's convention in 1978, US-based French feminist Monique Wittig declared to a surprised audience a now classic sentence: "I am not a woman, I am a Lesbian." Although Wittig's pronouncement was enigmatic in 1978, her subsequent theoretical essays such as "The Category of Sex" (1982) and "One Is Not Born a Woman" (1992) elaborate her goal of problematizing the normalized categories of sex and gender. Using a Marxist lens and expanding Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one," Wittig seeks to unmask the ideological and political motivations behind the construction of "[m]asculine/feminine, male/female, which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, and ideological order" (1982, 64).[31] In concrete terms, lesbians are not women because they do not participate in the economic,

[31] Several social constructionist theorists have debated the naturalized categories of sex and gender. For example, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray disassociates "women" from one sex, writing: "[woman] has at least two of them" (1985, 47). In addition, one of the most famous pronouncements in social constructionist theories is Simone de Beauvoir's "on ne nait pas femme: on le devient" *Le deuxième sexe* (1949). The translation of that sentence has since been a point of controversy among feminists. In the 1972 edition translated by H.M. Parshley, the sentence is rendered as "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." But, in 2010, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier translated it as "One is not born, but rather becomes; woman" (283).

ideological, and political power of "man."[32] As she critiques ideologically-saturated categories, Wittig also argues against French feminist theorists' *l'écriture feminine* for reinforcing mechanisms of women's oppression. In her works, Wittig seems to claim that a lesbian's refusal to sleep with a man is the most effective way to fight patriarchy and sexism, but she fails to take into account that lesbians live in a world predominantly marked by the political economies of patriarchy and capitalism. However, seeking to render meaningless categories as Wittig does has the benefit of avoiding essentialism, universal humanism, or the subjection of a particular to a totalizing generality.

Although some might superficially speculate on the foreignness and irrelevancy in the African context of social constructionist theories, such as Wittig's and Butler's, a closer examination of practices of female excision as well as male circumcision indicates that several African societies seek to construct categories of gender and sex. In his seminal 1990 study of sexuality in black Africa, Cameroonian anthropologist Jean Pierre Ombolo links female circumcision to the dual-sex principle of most African cosmogonies. Examining the Dogon of Mali's and the Pahouin of Cameroon's myths of creation, Ombolo observes that in the African sexual anthropology, androgyny constitutes a fundamental and original condition of human beings and that any form of

[32] Wittig opines: "What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women." (*The Straight Mind and Other Essays*,1992, 32).

"genital mutilation" (his words) answers the social necessity of confirming and fixing the individual in his/her sex and of foreclosing any possibility of questioning it (359). More recently in 2007, in "'You Can Also Cut My Finger!': Social Construction of Male Circumcision in West Africa," anthropologists Cheikh Ibrahima Niang and Hamadou Boiro elaborate on Ombolo's argument by extensively exploring religious, spiritual, and biomedical aspects underpinning male genital circumcision among several ethnic groups of Sénégal and Guinea Bissau. They explain:

> Circumcision is also related to the ontological system of meaning of these ethnic groups. Both in Sénégal and Guinea-Bissau, what it means to be human (regardless of a person's sex) is that the person has characteristics related to masculinity and characteristics related to femininity. […] Due to the dynamic and evolving nature of the relationship between femininity and masculinity, the society acts, at critical moments in the life of the individual, to reinforce one or the other set of characteristics, according to the social circumstances, expectations and needs that are recognised, both at the individual and social level. (2007, 25)

Here, genital surgeries represent an intervention of society to modify "nature" by fixing the individual in his/her gender. The analyses that Niang, Boiro, and Ombolo provide are illuminating and point to the social construction of gender in genital surgeries-practicing African societies, and by implication, serve to

question the exclusive association of social constructionist theories to so-called progressive spaces.

As I have suggested above, the "dual-sex" system scholar Oyewumi and queer and feminist theorists like Judith Butler and Monique Wittig have interrogated the naturalization of the category of "woman," thus questioning the possibility of taking for granted women and their corporeal forms of contestation. However, despite their critiques of "woman" and the materiality of the body, it is still possible to consider the former as an agent and the latter as a potential site of resistance. So, instead of the flight into metaphoricity, it may be useful to recontextualize and bring the material body into the theorizing of resistance and most importantly to focus on embodied subjects as several native African cosmogonies have done. Unlike the Cartesian model of subjectivity, those belief systems reject the mind and body split and consider the physical body as crucial in the recognition of subjectivity. For example, African philosophers and scholars of African philosophy including Kwasi Wiredu and Ivan Karp have argued the ways in which African cosmologies have questioned the mind and body split and the privileging of the former in the constitution of subjectivity, a point I discuss in Chapter Two.

In addition to African cosmogonies, one of the main Western theoretical frameworks that challenge the privileging of the mind is phenomenology,

especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.[33] Emphasizing the role of the body and its constitutive acts as central to several forms of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty disrupts the Cartesian model and gives "I can" the primacy over "I think," writing: "Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity [= consciousness] is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world" (475). Merleau-Ponty's attempt to bring the body and materiality in the realm of subjectivity proves beneficial to those exiled from the realm of personhood because of their racialized and/or gendered physicality. However, by giving primacy to the body and its acts, phenomenology may have occluded how structures of control skew the subject's supposed total liberation and self-determination (Foucault 1972). In addition to disregarding regimes of control, Merleau-Ponty has been critiqued by several feminist theorists for giving the account of an unmarked "anonymous body," thus erasing gender from his theories (McMillan 1987; Butler 1989; Young 1990, 14-15, 141-201; Grosz 1994; Sullivan 1997, 2001). Not only does Merleau-Ponty erase gender, but he also seems to disregard how variables such as race and location impact our embodiment.

[33] Existentialism, which Jean Paul Sartre drew from Phenomenology, became the foundation of Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 *The Second Sex*, a quintessential feminist text.

So far, I have tried to identify multiple theoretical challenges to viewing the postcolonial black female body as a site of resistance. In the process, I argue that images of black female bodies as both hypersexualized and never really seen, the conception of the body as inconsequential in the recognition of subjectivity, and the porosity of womanhood and femaleness should not impede the possibility of recognizing female bodily form of resistance. In specific terms, despite these shortcomings, if we pay attention to women's lived experiences, we may consider the genital as a site of resistance as well as of oppression and regulation. The larger social and political environment in which women live still impacts the meanings and circumstances of resistance, as critics of phenomenology have argued. Since the construction of the self is accomplished amidst a web of connections and filiations,[34] how does one claim subjectivity through the body in spaces where everything comes in contact with violence and death? What does it mean to have a body, to exercise agency through the body in a context where life is essentially precarious? Mbembé asked a similar question in 2006: "In regards, thus, to the politics of life in the African archives of modernity, the questions can be formulated in the following way: in a context where everything is likely to come in contact with violence and death… what does it mean to say, 'I am a human being', 'I am alive', or still, 'I exist"? (154)

[34] Françoise Vergès pithily opines: "no practices of the self can be understood outside of the webs of connections, debts, filiations, fantasies, practices, and politics of friendship, through which the self constructs his or her sense of existence." ("The Power of Words," *Public Culture* 14.3 (2002): 607-610, 609).

5- Genital Power and Resistance in the Deathscape

Women who use genital power as a form of resistance in the postcolonial space deserve cultural recognition for navigating and exercising agency in an environment saddled with oppressive violence, death, and generalized material dispossession. Several forces, both local and foreign, contribute to these dehumanizing material and psychological conditions, but the corrupt postcolonial ruling classes spearhead them all. For, even if a complicitous conviviality exists between the *commandement* and its subjects, it still holds the right of life and death over them, as well as the right to suspend the State of Law. Ironically, the State of Exception has become the normal paradigm of governmental power, closer to a Necropower - a sovereign power built for the maximum destruction of lives - than any other regime of power. Not only is the naked life of the average citizen in constant danger of annihilation, but also her political life is either non-existent or disciplined through the manipulation of constitutions to extend the terms of presidents, cabinets, and even parliaments.[35] Manipulating constitutions also serves, among other purposes, to postpone presidential elections, to void unfavorable results, and to engineer a vicious witch-hunt of opposing voices. In these attempts to test new stylistics of power and fabricate the State of Exception, the ruling classes invoke the sacrality and well-being of the civilian body. However, the process of sacralization implies the possibility of doing away with

[35]For a discussion of manipulations on constitutions in Africa, see *Constitutionalism in Africa: Creating Opportunities, Facing Challenges*, ed. J. Oloka-Onyango, (2001).

civilians' naked lives in a civil war, what I would call a "sacralizing" civil war. I think that the current regime of power in Côte d'Ivoire (January 2011) literalizes the notion of Necropower.[36]

In that paradoxical context, the average civilian cannot be sacrificed, but she can be killed by anybody in the protracted, multidirectional, and multileveled wars and conflicts. Naturally and unbeknownst to her, she comes to embody the figure of the *homo sacer*, which Giorgio Agamben examines in conjunction with sovereignty, sacrality, life, and power.[37] The crime of the West African *homo sacer* is to be born in poverty, to be positioned on the wrong side of the social, class, ethnic, or religious divides. If based on Agamben's reflection, contemporary Europeans live in conditions of anomie with encased subjectivities, I will echo Mbembé to say that postcolonial Africans live in the deathscape *par excellence* - a space in which humans are marked for death and/or living in a state

[36] In July 2000, Côte d'Ivoire experienced such constitutional manipulation, which resulted in October 2000 in the creation of a deathscape. After months of drafting the constitution by various constituencies of the state, the leader of the 1999 coup, General Robert Guei, changed the conjunction "*ou*" (or) with "*et*" (and) in it to bar nationals from running for president unless both parents were Ivorian. This seemingly innocuous act, which was nevertheless directed against Dr. Alassane Dramane Ouattara, General Guei's main rival, plunged the country into years of civil war. General Guei invoked the sacrality of civilians' rights to justify his actions. However, he was ready to sacrifice their lives in a civil war in which he lost his own life. From 1999 to October 2010, Côte d'Ivoire lived in a State of Exception, which Agamben defines as "this no-man's land between public law and political fact and between the juridical order and life" (2).

[37] In *Homo Sacer: The Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben reflects on the ways in which past and contemporary regimes of power test drive the extent to which they can stretch the State of Exception. Using the figure of the *homo sacer*, he shows how sovereignty sacralizes in order to desacralize, creates the subject while negating her subjectivity.

of the living dead.[38] The mechanisms of conferring this state of living death include summary killings, detentions and executions, systematic sexual violence against women and girls, mushrooming of military posts, checkpoints and roadblocks, constant verification of identity, curfews, spatial compartmentalization, and countless other basic human rights violations.

In conjunction with the state, where it exists, other regimes of power such as local militias and paramilitaries, the private security forces of the multinationals, war machines with their organized violence, all contribute to what might be superficially considered to be senseless violence. In these violence-ridden and poverty-stricken spaces, bare life is constantly porous. And the general population comes to constitute the surplus for which the state (where it exists) has no use. Mbembé's poignant description of the surplus merits a lengthy quotation:

> These are the people who have in effect nothing to lose, who have been abandoned as surplus to society - a condition from which they can often escape only by migration, criminality and all kinds of illegal practices. They are a class of "superfluous beings" that the state (where it exists), and the market itself, don't know what to do with. They are people who can neither be sold into slavery as in the early days of modern capitalism, nor reduced to forced labour as in the era of colonialism and under apartheid. From the point of view of capitalism, as it functions in these

[38] For a discussion on poverty in West Africa, see Ibrahima Thioub's "Africa and Its Predatory Elite" (2010) and Badiadji Horretowdo's "Fiftieth Anniversary of Independence: A Plea for a Dignified and Progressive Africa" (2010).

> regions of the world, they are completely useless - a mass of human meat delivered up to violence, illness, North American evangelism, Islamic crusades and all kinds of phenomena involving witchcraft and visions. (2010) [39]

It is in these nightmarish circumstances that women attempt to create spaces of self-fashioning using their genital power. If the nominal state and other brutal local regimes of power do not claim their naked lives, they are offered up to the greed of devious capitalists and unscrupulous international regimes of power that deny them the right to a dignified life.

For example, in 1991, in an internal memo that was later leaked on the Internet, the then Vice President of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, suggested the dumping of toxic wastes in what he described as the "UNDER-populated" and "UNDER-Polluted" countries in Africa. Summers added that the outrage over a possible pandemic of prostate cancer that the waste might cause is unfounded because the poor populations in these countries do not live long enough to develop prostate cancer.[40] This is a depressing picture of life in the postcolonial state, and in light of Mbembé's words, it might actually reek of foolishness at worst and of naiveté at best to consider speculating on resistance

[39] In this interview, discussing the (in)significance of the fiftieth Anniversary of Independences in Africa, Mbembé maps out large outlines of the squatter settlement in the postcolonial city and the generalized state of war.

[40]See "Toxic Colonialism" on the website of MIT's newspaper, *The Tech*. http://tech.mit.edu/V121/N16/col16guest.16c.html (6 April 2001) (Accessed 12 Oct. 2010).

through the genital in spaces where humans exist as the living dead. However, we can choose to dwell on the dehumanizing picture or we can allow ourselves to recognize the creative ways in which local populations and more specifically women carve out temporary spaces of resistance, to envision them with their contradictions and ongoing struggles.

Although parallels and echoes of such moments are limited in fictional narratives, a look at social and political events, folk media, and anthropological texts offers a glimpse of women's self-determining practices that may provide a deeper understanding of the possibility of resistance through the body.

III- Aggressive Uses of Genital Powers in Folk Media and Anthropological Texts

As they appear in folk media, anthropological texts, and socio-political events, genital powers may be loosely divided into two categories: the mechanical/material and the spiritual/ psychological. However, the differences between these practices are unstable and at times blurred. For example, genital charm is a mechanical process used to achieve emotional and psychological effects in men. And so is the menstrual cloth; the material "weapon" aims at producing fear, a psychological effect. I present a taxonomy of genital power here, first to provide an overview of the diverse uses to which the body is put, and second to map out their scenes of manifestation, since no one single site provides an exhaustive account of them. Although in Chapters Three and Four, I discuss a

female secret society and female same-sex erotic acts as modalities of genital powers, in the section below, with the exception of abortifacient plants to control female reproduction, I focus on forms that directly involve a confrontation or interaction with a male. They include overt and covert sex strike, public undressing, and the use of menstrual cloths. Although genital charm sometimes aims at pleasing a male partner by tightening or lubricating the vaginal opening, most genital powers, as I define them here, seek to confront and circumvent male power.

1-Abortifacients and Controlling the Construction of the Womb as a Bearing Vessel

In most patriarchal cultures, reproduction or rather over-reproduction as the *de facto* mode of being for female bodies constitutes a site of women's subjugation. In those cultures, the male's anxiety to maintain his lineage is translated into an uninterrupted flow of demands on the female body to reproduce. As Ketu Katrak pithily puts it, in those spaces, women's bodies become "bearing bodies" (2006). Several historical reasons have been brought to account for the primacy given to motherhood in most West African societies. In "The Black Woman Cross-culturally: An Overview" (1981), African Diaspora women and gender studies scholar Filomena Steady explains that motherhood is cherished because of its capacity to maintain and perpetuate the husband's lineage. Differing from Steady, Maria Cutrufelli attributes its supreme value primarily to

the depopulation caused by the Atlantic slave trade, colonial wars, and the spread of endemic venereal diseases (1983). It is obvious that the fundamental reason behind the social capital invested in motherhood is the perpetuation of society, even if Cutrufelli goes further in referring to historical forces related to the contact with the Western world. Independent of this rationale, the privileging of motherhood at the expense of other functions is a double-edged sword. For some women, motherhood provides the greatest of joys and the fastest channel to the man's good graces, especially if she produces male children. But, for infertile women and those who find no pleasure in bearing children, the expectations of reproduction become the ultimate hell.[41]

In fact, the glorification of motherhood and its conflation with womanhood, and the crippling social attacks against non-reproductive and unwilling women are recurring themes in West African fictional texts and literary studies (Davies 1986, Amadiume 1997, Katrak 2006). Two of the most compelling articulations of the female body as a bearing body come from Mami Fanti, the protagonist of Ama Ata Aidoo's tale "A Gift from Somewhere" (1979) and Nnu Ego, the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). After suffering child mortality three times, Mami Fanti prepares herself to be pregnant again and laments: "Now all I must do is to try and prepare myself for

[41] The recurring theme of childless and psychologically tormented female characters is traceable in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968), and Aminata Sow Fall's *L'appel des Arènes (The Call of the Wrestling Arenas) (*1982).

another pregnancy, *for it seems this is the reason why I was created….to be pregnant for nine of the twelve months of every year*" (80, my emphasis). The realization that one's life and worth are based on reproduction can potentially be a harrowing experience. Not only do women suffer from the social pressures to give births, but they may also bear the expectations of reproducing male children. And very few female characters in West African literature have suffered the pressures bestowed on Enu Ego of *The Joys of Motherhood*, of whom the third-person narrator says this: "The arrival of her new twin daughters had a subduing ... effect upon Nnu Ego. She felt more inadequate than ever. Men—all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going" (186).

Similar to fictional characters, postcolonial women at times live with these endless demands on their bodies. And since in social circumstances where voicing their frustrations too loudly may worsen their social conditions, women may fall back on cunning ways of controlling their bodies and of redirecting the social valuation of their worth. To do so, they may resort to an indigenous method of child spacing using abortifacient plants. The method is efficient on several levels: it overcomes the absence of modern family planning and child spacing programs, the rampant illiteracy, and the limited purchasing power to afford modern contraception, which was for a long time available predominantly to middle-class women. Even if a woman overcomes the above-mentioned challenges, critiques from the family and the opposition of the husband would constitute the last

barrier.[42] Here, in the absence of anthropological or other social sciences data, I refer to a fictional work to illustrate preconceived ideas about modern contraception. In Philomène Bassek's *La tache de sang* (*The Drop of Blood)* (1990), Mama Ida, the protagonist, admits that she never recommends modern contraception to her daughters because "they end up causing female infertility or pushing women to sexual licentiousness."[43] Although Mama Ida's claim has some truth, especially in light of female infertility and blood clots related to the birth-control pill, it was based on unverified rumors engineered by men who feared losing control over female sexuality. The use of abortifacient plants to control reproduction was therefore effective without arousing the husband's or male partner's suspicion.

Through this astute strategy, the rebellious woman shows one thing to the male partner while doing and achieving another. She may claim that plants help cleanse her reproductive organs for an easy ovulation, conception, and a carefree pregnancy, but in reality she prevents pregnancies or provokes abortions (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). The method resonates, to some extent, with enslaved women's use of abortion as a resisting mechanism against the "peculiar

[42] Also, rumors swirled that contraceptive pills caused male impotence. For a more elaborate account of family planning in West Africa, see Jay Gribble's 2008 "Family Planning in West Africa" on the website of *Population Reference Bureau.* The average number of births per West African woman is 5.7.

[43] The original French version of the quotation goes as: "[Elle] n'a jamais conseillé les méthodes contraceptives a ses filles car, répétait-elle sans cesse, elles finissent par rendre stériles les femmes ou les poussent au vagabondage" (*La tache de sang*, 128).

institution" of slavery in the Americas.[44] In an environment where men measure their virility by the number of their descendents, women's choice of abortifacients to reclaim power over their reproductive functions and to "deny men the thing they most desire: viable descendants" is subversive (Brett-Smith 1994, 243). The practice of genital power in this instance is consonant with Obioma Nnameka's negofeminism, which avoids outright confrontation for a more calculated and shrewd negotiating practice.[45] Not only can natural plants be used to reject the predominant patriarchal mentality that assigns to women's bodies the task of reproduction, but they also serve to welcome, reject and defeat the male sexual organ during heterosexual intercourse.

2- Genital Charm: Empowering and Defeating the Male Sexual Organ

Fundamentally, genital charm is a tricky form of genital power in that it can be considered as endorsing masculinist expectations and valuations of female bodies, especially in cultures with male preferences for tighter or dryer female genitalia. For women, the desired result of enhancing the male partner's sexual pleasure or "erasing" the effects of engaging in extra-marital sexual activities is achieved through the insertion into their vaginas of various products, believed to "shrink" vaginal openings or "warm up" sexual organs. These include stones, dry

[44] For more on abortion as a weapon of resistance for the enslaved woman, see Darlene Clark Hine's *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (1994).
[45]In *Family Planning Worldwide 2008 Data Sheet* (2008), Donna Clifton, Toshiko Kaneda, and Lori Ashford determine 9 the percentage of women who use modern contraceptive methods and 4 those who use traditional methods.

cloth, antiseptics, pharmaceutical products, tissue or toilet paper, plant-based potions, powders, and decoctions sold in marketplaces and/or manufactured by medicine men and marabouts (Kun 1998, Runganga and Kasul 1995, Niang 1994, Young 1994, Brown et al. 1993, Vincke 1991). Once considered restricted to African cultures, the normalization and adaptation of the practice is now much more widespread in the so-called Western world.[46] The fundamental differences between the practices are that whereas women in Africa primarily use natural or plant-based products, in the "West," women resort to plastic and cosmetic surgeries and chemical products.

In the African context, an impressive body of literature has analyzed the phenomenon, but primarily in the context of HIV/ AIDS transmission and other Sexually Transmitted Infections. That tendency -- which is truly salutary -- has the limiting potential, however, of categorizing victimized or hopeless women along with those in control of their bodies. When reading the reports by social and medical scientists, one encounters the oft-used idea of "poor" women being victimized by a dehumanizing patriarchy. In that landscape, women who view the practice as a site of resistance are silenced. A woman who manipulates or "perfects" her body by using drying and astringent substances might be seeking to

[46] For example, in *The Whole Woman* (1999), Germaine Greer writes: "In many cultures (and increasingly our own) the most desirable vagina is as tight and narrow as a rectum" (2). In "Moulding Women's Bodies: the Surgeon as Sculptor" (1997), Alice Adams has observed that in some cultures, "the ideal 'natural' woman [is] represented in the tight vagina ('one of nature's miracles')" (69). Increasingly, these desired sizes are being re-created by plastic and cosmetic surgeons (Matlock 2009, Greer 1999).

live up to heteropatriarchal expectations, but she may also be increasing her abilities to sexually manipulate male partners or to prevent them from contracting extramarital affairs. Either way, the practice is still fraught with tension because the methods reinforce the construction of female bodies as bargaining chips at the service of a heteropatriarchal culture. The weapon might be problematic, but we have to acknowledge women's willingness to carve out temporary spaces of resistance and leverage.

In fact, when the drying agents fail to attract and retain the male partner, women have the possibility of using a more potent method: bodily secretions for the male partner's consumption. These methods are believed to emotionally subdue the man, allowing the woman to dominate him psychologically (Brett-Smith, 1994). The fear of genital charm leads many young men to be careful in consuming meals cooked by an angry female partner or wife. In such situations, men constantly seek to sidestep rebellious women's strategies.

A variation of genital charm is commonly known in Anglophone West African popular parlance as "bottom power" and in Malinké as *Taafè Fanga* (Wrapper Power), which is the title of Adama Drabo's 1997 movie. These phrases, "bottom power" and "wrapper power," play on the beliefs that refer to women as below and inferior to men. While bottom power reverses the conventional denigration of women as those in the bottom position, the ones "suffering" the penetrative act in heterosexual intercourse, wrapper power

overturns derogatory meanings assigned to wrappers. Among the Malinké, to disparagingly refer to a woman as the one who wears wrappers amounts to putting her down, to signify that she is easily undressable and therefore vulnerable. In a culture where bark and loincloths were for centuries the *de facto* clothing code, I suggest that cultural valuations of wrappers versus pants reflect the legacy of the contact with Europeans and Arabs. In the post-independence era, some women staged their rebellion against the nationalist patriarchal framework of domesticated female sexuality by wearing pants whereas others attempted to overturn the meanings with the term "wrapper power." By appropriating the bottom and the wrapper to empower themselves, women are seeking to disrupt reified social positioning and locations of power.

It must be noted that the social meanings of "bottom power" are spatially defined. In fact, most anthropologists and African women's studies scholars have defined it as women's use of sexual tricks in exchange for favors.[47] At a personal level,[48] here I am taking advantage of my experience of living in Côte d'Ivoire to explain the limitations of reducing bottom power to what might be considered

[47] For references to "bottom power" see for example Chikwenye Ogunyemi's *Juju Fission (*2007), *Africa Wo/Man Palava* (1996); J. Lorand Matory's "Government by Seduction"(1993); William Joseph Baker and J.A Mangan's edited *Sports in Africa: Essays in Social History* (1987); Andre Viola, Jacqueline Bardolph, and Denise Coussy's anthology, *New fiction in English from Africa* (1998); Dorothy Hogdson and Sheryl McCurdy's *"Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (2001); Stephanie Newell's "Introduction" in *Readings in African Popular Culture (*2002); Oladipo G B Ogunseitan's *Be Afra*, Vol. 1. (2010); and Philomina Ezeagbor Okeke-Ihejirika's *Negotiating Power and Privilege* (2004).

[48] I am aware of the critiques and dangers of native informant readings as Biodun Jehifo has warned us in "The Nature of Things" (1990).

transactional sex (exchange of gifts and money for sex).[49] While transactional sex is a male and female practice, mostly observed in urban spaces, in the popular imaginary, bottom power is women-centered and culturally-sanctioned (mostly in rural or impoverished areas), and it encompasses all forms of aggressive uses of genital powers, including genital cursing or shaming. In other words, it is the power that women reach down for, seize, and wield like a warrior who reaches down for her deadliest weapon. So, the reduction of the phrase to sexual favors or "prostitution," or transactional sex is an expression of patriarchal and colonialist paradigms. I consider it a patriarchal paradigm because socially, bottom power implies women's exercise of power, their domination, while transactional sex or "prostitution" levels the playing field and even implies women's victimization. The idea of victimhood is even more compounded by the fact that like vaginal drying, transactional sex is primarily discussed in the context of HIV/AIDS; and the subjects providing the sexual services are discursively victimized. The conflation of bottom power and prostitution reveals an interesting dynamic that I think is culturally-enhanced. While African women and scholars of African women reduce bottom power to transactional sex and prostitution, North American and European gender and sexuality studies scholars seek to

[49] For more on quantitative and qualitative studies on transactional sex, see Kristin L Dunkle & al. "Transactional Sex among Women in Soweto, South Africa: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Association with HIV Infection" (2004); Minki Chatterji & al, "The Factors Influencing Transactional Sex Among Young Men and Women in 12 Sub-Saharan African Countries" (2005); and Susan Leclerc-Madlala, "Transactional Sex and the Pursuit of Modernity" (2003).

conceptually differentiate them.[50] The exploration of reasons motivating the trend will be another project. Needless to say, the proliferation of categories reflects the shifting nature of sexual and intimate practices.

In social and cultural settings with frequent usage of genital powers, most male partners understand and fear women's capacity for cunning. Those fears are part of the collective imaginary and codified in folk media such as proverbs. In the Malinké society for example, sayings like "Woman can never be completely known," or "God created woman for treachery" (Hoffman 2002, 6) have conditioned generations to see women and their bodies as terrifying.

3- Overt Sex Strike and Vaginal "Sealing"

While the tightness of the vaginal opening works to attract the male partner, taken to the extreme, it either prevents any penetration during intercourse or hurts the male partner's genitals. At times, women are subjected to neglect and battery without any recourse to state-supported systems of protection or to family-based networks of support, all eroded with rapid urbanization and the dislocation of indigenous female networks. In those scenarios, frustrated women use their most vicious weapon to negotiate a new power arrangement: the prevention of penetrative sex. That method, which I call vaginal sealing, can be considered as a covert sex strike, itself different from the overt version. The differences between

[50] The categories of sexual and erotic practices include transactional sex, prostitution, the girlfriend experience, and the call girl industry.

them lie in the fact that in the covert sex strike, the male partner ignores the antagonistic dynamic. When a woman fears physical brutality and/or sexual assault if she declares a defiant sex ban, she may manipulatively use the covert sex strike, which is a variation of the "I have a headache, I am sick, or I am tired tonight" excuses. In order to show the longstanding and common usage of vaginal overdryness or sealing in folklore, Ifi Amadiume reports the Igbo saying: "When a man begins to ill-treat his wife, his world becomes confusing, *and when a woman begins to ill-treat her husband, her vagina becomes dry*" (1987, 187 my emphasis). Even if the woman lacks the physical strength to subdue her husband, she possesses the genital power to do so.[51] In the covert sex strike, the vagina ceases from carrying out its expected functions of reception, male pleasure, and life-giving to become unfriendly, unreceptive, antagonistic, and taming. The vagina's rejection of the penis is even more devastating in poor material living conditions when male worth is often unstable and dependent on sexual performance.

In challenging material conditions with limited employment opportunities made worse with heavy financial stress, men may feel incapable of assuming their financial obligations towards their families; in those circumstances, sexuality and

[51] Referring to the female protagonist in Calixthe Beyala's 2003 novel *Femme nue, femme noire (Naked Woman, Black Woman)*, Mbembé articulates the shrinking of the vaginal opening as a scenario in which "the female subject might seek if not to disempower the penis […] in obtaining, by every means, its flaccidity and failure, then at least to frustrate virility, and to despoil masculine pleasure in such a manner that, the vain hope of total satisfaction [is] being ceaselessly deferred" (2006, 168).

more particularly penetrative sex might represent for them the domain of control and relaxation. His subtext might be: "If I can't get a fulfilling job to take care of my family, if I can't be a provider for my family, if I can't control the way the government runs the country, if I can't even decide who should be president, at least I can control my wife." Several studies, mainly in East and South Africa, have established the correlation between men's economic and social positioning and their sexual behaviors. Poor material conditions have been reported to have exacerbated the pressure to fulfill the hegemonic male sexual performance (Silberschmidt 2001, 2004).[52] Understandably, if in this heightened atmosphere, the female organ's antagonism undermines male authority and virility, he suffers a devastating blow. However, the female genital organ may become a temporary terrain of negotiation, the practice may also provoke marital rape. Whether the male organ is welcome or whether it forces its way to satisfaction and affirmation, the male ego is still bruised by the defiance of and the sheer rejection by a female body. But, let it be said that the ill-effects of using astringent potions to shrink the vaginal opening and the possibility of marital rape indicate the psychological and health risks involved in deploying the genital as a "weapon." This instability highlights the continuous dialectic of subjection and resistant subjectivity.

[52] A host of social science studies on masculinities in East and South Africa abound while research on West Africa remains scarce. An outstanding fictional narrative on masculinity and sexual performance in East Africa is Tatamkhulu Afrika's *The Innocents* (1994).

Different from the covert version, the overt sex strike is more defiant and can be termed the Lysistrata-weapon of withholding sex.[53] Unlike isolated uses of the practice, a more collective model was brought onto the international platform by the Women's Development Organization of Kenya.[54] In April 2009, the coalition of eleven women's rights organizations declared a week-long sex strike, which is to be carried out by wives and partners. The coalition even proposes to pay prostitutes if necessary, so as to enlist their support in enforcing the ban. Women organized the strike to react against political infighting in Kenya's government, which caused the post-election civil war that killed more than one thousand people, and displaced about half a million. And women seemed to have paid the highest price.[55] The Executive Director of the Federation of Women Lawyers, Patricia Nyaundi, highlights women's fate when she says: "We were sexually assaulted, we were the highest casualties." Indeed, approximately three thousand (3000) women reported being raped during the post-election violence. The strikers argued that the weeklong ban was effective and appropriate because

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[53] *Lysistrata* is a play by Aristophanes featuring Lysistrata who devises the sex strike as an anti-war project.

[54] The most recent threat of collective sex strike in West Africa occurred in August 11, 2010 in Nigeria. Organized by the Nigerian chapter of the Africa Women in Diaspora (OAWDN), the threat was an ultimatum to the Nigerian interim President Jonathan Goodluck to declare interest to run for president in the 2011 Nigerian election. The women declared: "We unequivocally support the presidential bid of Dr. Jonathan and call on him to declare his interest to contest the election on or before Friday August 20, failure of which would force the women to embark on a-seven-day sex starvation." For unfavourable strong points of view on the strategy, see Senior Fyneface's scathing analysis, "Femi Ajayi's blog commentary, "The Appalling Approach of Nigerian Women Involvement in the 2011 Election" (3 Sept. 2010).

[55] See "Kenyan Women Fight Corruption with Sex" (Hughes 2009). For more on sex ban in Kenya, see "Kenyan Women Ban Sex over Political Reform" CNN.com (2009) and "Kenyan Women Hit Men with Sex Ban" (CBS.com 2009) (Accessed 25 July 2009).

“sex costs nothing and it excites public imagination” (Hughes 2009). As intended, the strike caught attention, even that of international news agencies. Additionally, the Kenyan women proposed that since their bodies had been used as weapons of war through rape, they might as well use them on their own terms by turning their bodies into politicized sites for different social, humanitarian, and even political agendas.

Although measuring the success of the sex ban remains outside the scope of this dissertation, it succeeded in bringing the political squabble over power in Kenya and its casualties to the international arena as major American, English, and international news agencies such as BBC, ABC NEWS, CNN, MSNBC, and *The Daily Telegraph*, all of which reported the strike. Moreover, although the calculated use of their sexual bodies potentially reinforces historical stereotypes of African women’s hypersexuality as well as set up women’s bodies as bargaining chips, it also testifies to Kenyan women’s awareness and their willingness to act, using any means necessary and available to them.

4- Genital Curse: Public Undressing and Wielding Menstrual Cloths

Out of all aggressive and calculated uses of genital powers, genital cursing -- public undressing and the use of menstrual cloths -- has received the most anthropological and historical attention. Its publicness, cultural potency, and the extreme socio-political events required to bring it out explain the interest. Anthropologists and historians including Robert Rizenthaler (1960), Raymond

Prince (1961), Judith Van Allen (1972), Shirley Ardener (1973), Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (1988), Sarah Brett-Smith (1994), David Conrad (1999), Mitzi Goheen (2000), and Misty Bastian (2002) have explored genital cursing to examine gender relations and power differentials in West African societies, particularly those marked predominantly by patriarchal regimes. Most studies establish that although men apparently enjoy power over women, women exercise the ultimate power thanks to or because of men's fear of women's bodies. For example, in the Malinké society where genital cursing has been widely observed, women's cunning and their unique ability to produce human beings, regarded as the "ultimate in human power," are said to justify men's fears of female sexuality (Brett-Smith 1994, Conrad 1999, Koné 2004).

The oldest manifestation of genital cursing in West Africa is found among the Malinké, specifically in the epic narrative of Sunjata, the most widespread piece of oral literature in Francophone West Africa. In fact, in the Malian imaginary, where genital power still holds the power of a science, the downfall in 1991 of the former dictator Moussa Traoré is attributed to a genital curse. In "Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in the Mande Epic Traditions" (1999), American anthropologist David Conrad discusses the genital curse against Moussa Traoré and reports that a grandmother of victims of the president's army cursed him by stripping herself naked in a cemetery. Conrad

traces the practice back to foundational moments in the history of the Mali Empire, recorded in *The Epic of Sunjata*.[56]

The dearth of written literature on genital cursing and its deployment in the twentieth century led Conrad to examine the epic narratives. Conrad's essay aims at tracing a long history of traditionally-codified women's aggressive uses of genital power to precolonial times. According to his readings of several versions of the epic, women's use of their genitals played a significant if not the decisive role in the formation of Manding, and more specifically in the outcome of the historic battle between Sumaworo Kante and Sunjata Keita. In Jeli Mori Kouyate's variant of the epic, Sogolon Kolonkan, Sunjata's sister, saved her brother from inevitable death. She provides him with a vision by opening her wrapper and enabling him to escape capture and death: "On the side of her open wrapper, appeared a kind of television, / On the screen [Sunjata] saw Sumaworo and his warriors inside the walls of Soso" (208). Concerning Sunjata's opponent, Sumaworo Kante's death was attributed to his mother, who cursed him with her menstrual cloth. In a violent altercation with her son, as reported, Sumaworo's mother caused his downfall by cutting up a piece of her menstrual cloth. Although the epic extensively describes the final battle between the Mande leaders, based

[56] Conrad demonstrates how with the use of occult powers, female figures have exercised influential political powers and contributed to the making and unmaking of Mande leaders. They did so as *femmes fatales*, sacrificial virgins to appease the gods, or female warriors. The *femmes fatales'* commonly used mechanisms were sorcery or sexual seduction.

on these details -- often effaced from popular renditions[57] -- it is safe to surmise that the outcome was already decided by a female action. In addition, it establishes a tradition of women's contribution to building the Mande Empire, which remains predominantly unacknowledged in current patriarchal historiographies. But, as Conrad demonstrates, the absence of images of genital cursing in fictional texts does not invalidate its power in folk belief systems nor does it annihilate its social and political manifestations.

Growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, I did not witness full-blown genital cursing because the simple threat, verbal or gestural, of exposing female genitals was sufficient. Referring to the Igbo of Nigeria, anthropologist Phillips Stevens also notices the pattern, that the threat is often sufficient to deter a disrespectful and abusive male: "the genital curse is the ultimate sanction a woman has, and even the just threat of it, making a motion of opening her wrapper in front of a man, '*is often enough to cause the most angry and aggressive of men to back down*'" (596 my emphasis).[58] Among the Yoruba, Chief Olabuju reports that the threat usually

[57] I grew up listening to countless versions of the Epic of Sunjata, however, I do not recall hearing the details that Conrad highlights in Aliou Diabate's and Jeli Mori Kouyate's versions. Perhaps my young age prevented me from catching the implications of these details. For example, Aliou Diabate's narrated version of the Sunjata epic features Nyana Jukudulaye in a scene that reads: "Three hundred bells,/ Thirty bells,/ And three bells,/ Encircled her waist at Mande Djakajalan./ When she exposed her buttocks in the direction of any battle,/ The Warriors would cease fire" (196).

[58] In "The Yoruba Image of the Witch" (1961), anthropologist Raymond Prince recounts Yoruba women's use of their menstruation cloths in 1960 during a demonstration against the payment of taxes women considered unfair. According to him, when the police was called in to disperse the women, they brandished their menstruation cloths, causing the police "to take to their heels, for it is believed that if a man is struck by a woman's menstrual cloth he will have bad fortune for the rest of his days" (799). See also Misty Bastian's "The Naked and the Nude" (2005).

goes: “Except it were not I that gave birth to you from my womb/ Except it were not I that fed you from my breasts/ That so and so would befall you” (Olajubu 1972, 156).[59] A variant of genital cursing is performed in Adama Drabo’s 1997 movie, *Taafe Fanga*, translated in English as *Skirt Power* and that I translate as *Wrapper Power.*[60] Yaménè, a housewife in the film, is distraught after learning of her husband’s plan to marry a second wife. Feeling powerless to prevent the marriage through material means and negotiations, the character resorts to her genital power; she walks into an enclosed space, lifts her wrapper, and invokes it: “Dear Amama, God of Right, If no man, other than Anbara has been allowed to open my wrapper, this marriage will not take place.” The housewife’s action is predicated on the belief that her genital body possesses the “mystical” power to ruin her husband’s place. The threats of genital cursing range from death, to madness, to imprisonment, or any such misfortune. As the above examples show,

[59] This text is a direct translation from Yoruba by Chief Olabuju. He provided the original as: “Ǎfi bí kí i ba i se obo mi yíi ni mo fi bi/ Ǎfi bi ki i ba i se omú mi meji yí ni o mu dágbà/ Oun nikan ni bayii bayii o fi ni bá o”.

[60] I find the translation “Wrapper Power” more accurate because it encodes both class and age as crucial criteria in genital cursing. In West Africa, those who oftentimes use genital cursing are older women from lower economic classes. Speaking to a *BBC news* reporter, the Ghanaian Interior Minister, Kwamena Bartels, qualifies the alleged public disrobing by Liberian refugee women as violent. He says: “When women strip themselves naked and stand by a major highway, that is not a peaceful demonstration.” Even if refugee women denied using social nakedness, the reporter commented on the class aspect of the weapon, saying: “Stripping naked is a traditional form of protest amongst poor and powerless women in parts of Africa.” (“Ghana to Expel Female Protesters,” 18 March, 2008).

genital cursing has a long tradition among various West African ethnic groups, even if its manifestation in most West African novels is almost non-existent.[61]

Indeed, very few novels of West Africa imagine genital powers, with the exception of Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* and American psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* -- a collection of reinterpreted folklore: mythical stories and fairy tales.[62] Echewa's four hundred-page narrative is a fictional re-creation of the well-known 1929 Igbo Women's War, an event in which Igbo women in Nigeria showed their naked bodies to horrified British male authorities to protest unfair taxation, whereas Estes' includes only a three-page vignette, "A trip to Rwanda." It describes how Rwandan women defiantly lifted their skirts, staging a protest against their colonial governor who forced them to stand by the dirt road to cheer and welcome General Eisenhower during his visit to American

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[61] Historical events where genital cursing was used as weapon abound. In *Anatomy of Nakedness* (1982), Paul Ableman's writes that several hundred women demonstrated outside a prison in the Central African Republic, where emperor Bokassa had arrested a large number of children and massacred some of them. The demonstration continued until surviving children were released. In a 1996 *Times Literary Supplement* article, Nurrudin Farrah reported similar uses of naked body parts in Somalia ("The Women of Kismayo: Power and Protest in Somalia"). In her essay, "The Naked and The Nude: Historically Multiple Meanings of *Oto* (Undress) in Southeastern Nigeria" (2005), Misty Bastian explores the power of female nudity against the background of women of the Niger Delta's threats to go naked in their 2002 war against the multinational oil company Chevron Texaco. More recently in *AfricaNews* (Accra, Ghana), Francis Ameyibor writes a news report about Ghanaian women's threat to demonstrate naked: "The dismissal of a District Chief Executive in Ghana, had angered over 500 women from some communities in the Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo District of the Northern Region who have issued a warning shot to march naked to the seat of Government at Osu Castle in Accra to present their petition to President John Agyekum Kufuor the African Union Chairman" (Nov. 26, 2007).

[62] Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel* (1998) briefly mentions genital cursing when a passerby caught sight of the genitalia of a market woman whose wrapper was accidentally open, exposing her genitals.

troops stationed in Rwanda.[63] Differing readings of sartorial codes lie at the core of the incident. Since the native women's quotidian dress code was no more than a necklace of beads and "sometimes a little thong belt" (372), the governor consulted with the headman of the "tribe" and provided women skirts and blouses. Contrary to what the governor thought, colonized Rwandan women's bodies were never naked, because their hairdos, scarifications, and other bodily signs were texts covering them. By literally and metaphorically stripping women of their beads and necklaces and dressing them in the "the fabric of civilization" (Masquelier 2005, 18) (skirts and blouses), the governor attempted to deny women agency, to treat them as mere bodies in the service of the colonial regime. But, as General Eisenhower's jeep approached, women lifted their skirts to cover their faces, seeking to shame their tribesmen, the governor, and his honored guest. Lifting their skirts became a moment of resistant subjectivity for the women. With this gesture, they signaled that they can be clothed and forced to stand by the roadside, but they cannot be disciplined as docile objects. Their uncovered bodies express resistance.

This incident raises many questions. How do colonized women stage a protest using the body without reinforcing historical readings of primitivism? Wouldn't the meaning of public undressing be lost to men outside the given

[63] I could not find any historical document to confirm the visit. The nature of Estes' story (partly fictional, historical, and analytical) shows that the distinction between reality, fiction, and history remains problematic when it comes to African historical events, especially with the late introduction of writing as a medium of recording history.

culture? These questions and others constitute issues that the overarching project contends with. Indeed, the bodily performance of agency necessitates that the subject and the regime of control share in the same episteme. Estes' story and its uncritical celebration of women's use of public undressing as a moment of resistance is empowering; however, by considering it closely we realize that it overlooks the crucial factor of the identity of the observer in making the political intervention. Perhaps, the Rwandan women's point was lost on the Governor and General Eisenhower, who regarded their acts as an expression of sheer backwardness. But, whether understood or misunderstood, the incident succeeded in disrupting the decorum and protocols of the parade.

Unlike fictional narratives, anthropological texts and folk media document manifestations of women's resistance across different temporal and geographical spaces: from Francophone to Anglophone West Africa, from the Igbo of Nigeria to the Malinké of Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. However, the contentious nature of the weapon and the endless tension between subjection and resistance demands that we refrain from uncritically celebrating it. As I mentioned before, I have been frustrated with the pervasive picture of negative sexualities, what Chimamanda Adichie would call the "single story," the single story that seems to stage *ad eternam* women's bodies and genitals as overworked, cut, raped, and diseased. But, in my attempt to move beyond that single story, I ran into another single story that consisted in uncritically celebrating women's aggressive uses of their

bodies. I was then caught up between two single stories, straddling polar opposites, both negating a crucial aspect of resistance, its temporariness. Just like I was, this project of exploring female resistance through the body situates itself between these two views. Even if the in-between space is one of discomfort and instability, it still offers a space closer to women's lived experiences than does either story alone.

5- Reactionary Scholarship and an Unexamined Celebration of Genital Powers

In their reactions against the disempowering ways in which women's bodies have been framed, African women scholars and novelists such as Buchi Emecheta, Teresa Washington, and Ifi Amadiume, just to name a few, engaged in an empowering, yet a problematic scholarly venture. For example, using the Igbo cosmogony and the figure of Aje to read Echewa's novel, Washington celebrates women's use of the divine powers of their genitals in their resistance against the indigenous version of patriarchy and British colonialists. Washington's approach, which sheds much-needed light on Igbo women's divine powers and sacred solidarity, seeks to critique Euro-American feminist interventions and patronizing attitudes towards "victimized" and silenced African women. Most importantly, by rejecting Western epistemologies, it aims at showcasing a supposed African authenticity: "Although condemned to eternal victimhood by some feminists and international organizations, Africana women possess abundant revolutionary skills and abilities, and they have used them against slavers, colonizers, and their

oppressors. The tools they brandish to obtain their goals, however, may vary depending on circumstance and locale" (Washington 134). In the process of retrieving and "brandishing" authentic and nativist African women's powers, Washington seems to ignore the limitations of the weapons. Mbembé describes and classifies such intellectual practices as Afro radicalism and nativism or the metaphysics of difference ("African Modes of Self-Writing" 2002). The use of public undressing and its celebration has the potential to be empowering and yet, it can also misrepresent the experiences of the embodied subjects.[64] Washington's version of nativism, which constructs women as powerful in order to produce an indigenous mode of being, is more a response to Western scholarship than an inward and candid look at African women's lived experiences and circumstances. Citing work by V.Y. Mudimbé and Robert Carr, Mbembé elaborates on the limitations of a scholarship that frames the contact between Africa and the West "as a rape" and built around proving the West wrong (149). Indeed, an obsessive writing back to and answering the wrong done by the West often result in sweeping generalizations rather than in a rich description of women and their diversity.[65]

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[64] In "Yorubas Don't Do Gender: A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women*: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses" (2003), Bibi Bakare-Yusuf critiques similar authenticity-construction scholarship in Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women* (1997).

[65] Also, as Ulu Oguibe succinctly suggests in *The Culture Game*: "To perpetually counter the center is to recognize it" (2004, 4).

So far, I have conceptually and concretely defined genital powers, explained the different challenges that might challenge their conceptualization, and surveyed several anthropological and folk media to show their historical and social manifestations. Now, I turn to the novel form to discuss the reasons that have prevented that genre from becoming a viable medium for imagining aggressive uses of genital powers. I think that the taboo around questions of sexuality, the limited structure of recognition, intellectual imperialism, the exceptional circumstances required to bring out genital power, and sexist practices in the modern state (where it exists) among others explain why it has been so difficult to bring genital shaming and other genital powers into novelistic representations. Naturally the dearth of empowering or complex images of women's genitality in fictions from West Africa has resulted in the pervasive picture of negative sexualities.

IV- Performatives of Victimization and the Unrepresentability of Empowering Images of Female Sexuality

The relative absence of genital powers in fictional narratives is not entirely attributable to women's invisibility. It also results from the limited structure of recognition and the need, either conscious or unconscious, to "sanitize" the hypersexualized and pathologized image that came to be associated with West African women, which I discussed above. In addition, the late development of women's education and fiction writing, the longstanding masculinist tradition of

the publishing industry, and the class and social divides between the majority of women and the Western-educated, middle-class novelists push into the background empowering images of women's sexuality.

Drawing from Kimberly Segall's reflection on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how "legal language and narratives, as cultural constructs, influence national history and constructions of identity" (2002, 617), I suggest that a certain class of imaginary narratives and their "restaging" of the paradigm of victimization perpetuated what Mbembé has called the "cult" or "neurosis of victimization" ("An interview with Christian Holler" 2002). Through the construction of female characters as "victims" of dehumanizing pluralizing powers and patriarchal practices, many texts metaphorically deny them the possibility of transcending, albeit temporarily, the position of the oppressed. In more concrete terms, how was I supposed to feel as a young Malinké girl reading the sobering story of Salimata, the childless, tormented, circumcised wife of Fama, the protagonist of Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968)? The answer is "depressed." I am not arguing against the transformative powers of novels or that such representations contain no hint of reality. My point is that the constant discursive restaging of oppressive violence against female characters potentially affects how female readers view themselves. Amidst these victims, it was refreshing to find new narratives that give female characters, the "victims," the possibility of "performing the roles" of

"'survivor,' 'fighter,' and 'community member'" (Segall, 619). With these images, subversions of canonical narratives, women readers may be equipped to consider their bodies differently, and to view them as more than just the eternal ball and chain, endlessly marked for cutting, beating, and over-reproduction. But, before I move on to discuss these new texts, I shall explore the scarcity of empowering images of female sexuality. In fact, the narratives of oppressive violence against women's bodies have been compounded by a regime of silence and cultural misrecognition.

1-Taboo, Policing Sexuality and the Regime of Misrecognition

That sexuality is said to be taboo and enshrouded in secrecy in most African societies is self-evident and will thus not be rehearsed here, except to refer to a few artists and literary critics who conflate fictional representations of sexuality with sexual violation. Among these artists is Togolese film director Anne-Laure Folly who opines: "African culture is more secretive, less expressive, more prudish and chaste. Any action of unveiling the phenomenon amounts to violating it. In that sense, cinema is transgression" (Quoted in Tcheuyap 2003, 39. My translation). The conflation of representation with violation, central to Folly's claim, seems like a compelling argument against representing sexual images. If the prescriptive environment muzzles discussions about sexuality in general, the thickening of the veil over empowering images of women's sexuality is not surprising.

Postcolonial modern states have used these questions of taboo in exclusionary and oppressive ways, especially against non-normative sexual practices. In "Out of the Closet: Unveiling Sexuality Discourses in Uganda" (2003), Ugandan feminist Sylvia Tamale argues that by enshrouding sexuality in secrecy and using cultural "traditions" as nativist cultural nationalism, the modern patriarchal state maintains gender hierarchy and outlaws "sexual deviants."[66] For instance, until the 1990s and even after, West African women's attempts at problematizing boundaries erected around their bodies and sexuality have been unduly labeled feminist, read "unAfrican." Most importantly, these acts were considered as undermining the countries' crucial march towards economic development (Tripp 2006).

The enforcement of cultural traditions in the name of economic and social development has had the effect of stomping out sexually non-normative, and overtly feminist undertakings. But, the rejection of feminism as a foreign import literalizes the notion of double standards because the sexist ruling classes remain blind to their adoption of non-immanent religious doctrines such as Christianity and Islam as well as social and political theories such as Marxism and Socialism. So when charges of unAfricanness prove insufficient to drive underground

[66] The need to use an East African theorist to elaborate this point resonates with the paucity of critical studies on homosexualities in Francophone West Africa, an issue that literary critic Chantal Zabus raises in her 2008 essay "Matière africaine et théorie queer: une interpenetration nécessaire."

feminist and/or subversive views of sexuality, questions of ethics occupy the front seat.

In the modern patriarchal state, women's uses of their sexuality outside the regime of procreation and in the forms of culturally-sanctioned and/or "modern" female prerogatives are more often than not dismissed on the grounds of immorality and/or backwardness. For example in 2008, Nigerian young women who used public undressing as a means of protest against summary detentions of members of their organization were arrested for public indecency.[67] Surprisingly the law brought to be bear on these women's action is derivative of the colonial era "repugnancy clause." During colonization in Nigeria, two legal systems, the customary law and the metropolitan law, were operating simultaneously to regulate social issues. Different from the metropolitan law, the customary law that was to settle legal matters among the natives was still regulated by the colonial authority and its modes of judgment. The repugnancy clause and its prohibitions of customs and practices such as polygamy, witchcraft, and rituals saturated and overruled the native, customary law. In other words, practices that the colonial administration deemed immoral, backward, and insulting to good conscience, were to become so in the eyes of the natives. Not surprisingly, colonial ideology seems to have been so effective in colonizing the natives that even two centuries

[67] Chapter Two elaborates on the incident.

after the end of direct colonization, Nigeria still carries the residual value judgments of the former colonial empire.[68]

This dynamic echoes what Elizabeth Povinelli unmasks in the liberal institutions of Australia and its dealings with the Aboriginal people. In *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002), Povinelli reports that the multicultural nation is willing to extend rights to aborigines, legally granting them land titles for example, if they can demonstrate sustained and continuous adherence to aboriginal traditional beliefs and practices. However, the conditions of bringing aboriginal persons into the multicultural nation include a caveat. They are predicated on the aboriginal persons' disengagement from and rejection of aspects of their customs considered "repugnant" by state law and prevailing social norms:

> … although state courts and publics demand evidence of the continuity of traditional beliefs, practices, and dispositions as the condition of cultural recognition and, through this, land title, some features and practices of 'customary law' are prohibited by common and statutory law and by a public sense of moral decency --what constitutes the socially and culturally repugnant and the limits of recognition. (3)

[68] In *Citizen and Subject*: *Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996), Mahmood Mamdani explains the transference of the colonial legacy on to the scenes of the postcolonial governance. See also Achille Mbembé's *On the Postcolony* (2001).

The dynamic of conditioning cultural recognition that Povinelli critiques here is transferable to the West African context and women who use genital powers. But, unlike the Aboriginal people, women in these cases neither expect nor seek financial compensation, legal redress or cultural recognition and validation. As a cultural critic, I am the one who suggests that the means of resistance be acknowledged and respected. As things stand now, as soon as women aggressively use their bodies to destabilize the logic of subjugation, they are automatically classified by the regime under the category of victim and/or immoral, thereby obfuscating their attempt at exercising agency through resistance. Clearly, the modern state's cultural misrecognition, partially tainted by the colonial "repugnancy clause" and a patriarchal bias, has been carried over to theoretical discussions and literary imaginings. These limited imaginings constitute a mechanism of domination and exclusion; the exclusion of the means that do not fit the mold of the acceptable. In that regard, there seems little difference between late multicultural liberal humanists and most West African intellectuals and writers of fiction who, due to their intellectual imperialism, refuse to consider the genital as a site of resistance.

2- Intellectual Imperialism and Political and Social Exclusion

West African ruling elites, novelists and intellectuals, then, misrecognize women's bodies as a temporary space of resistance. The class and social divides between Western-educated, middle-class intellectuals and working-class and rural

women partly explain the blindness to genital powers. The pervasive presence of the signs of modernity (read Western ideologies) in the lives of most intellectuals finds no such embeddedness in the daily reality of the majority of continental West African women, those with limited or no access to literacy, to the technologies of information, and to basic material comfort. In 1988, V. Y. Mudimbé discussed the increasing gap between social classes and between "culturally Westernized Africans and the others," claiming: "Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. What is more, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their (our) thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism" (185).[69] Their position of liminality is often more problematic because it potentially alienates them from non-literates. Gayatri Spivak qualifies such dynamic as "intranational cultural differences," which often play out between local bourgeoisies and the non-literate segments of the population (Sharpe 2003). Saturated with both Euro-American intellectual and cultural traditions, the Western-educated intellectuals develop an intellectual imperialism that shapes how they recognize diverse modes of subjecthood and elide certain subjects from spaces of representation.

[69] For a discussion on the gap between most western-educated African writers and their forefathers and foremothers, see also Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1993). He writes: "[M]ost African writers have received a Western-style education; their ambiguous relations to the world of their foremothers and forefathers and to the world of the industrialized countries are part of their distinctive cultural (dis)location" (54).

In the midst of a deathscape, when my body is simply at the mercy of the sovereign and other regimes of control, to what extent do questions of morality impact my ways of using it to empower myself? Variables of location, class, and educational level will naturally inform my uses and experiences of my body. The ways in which rural or working-class women experience their bodies differ from the ways, say, a middle-class, Western-educated novelist would experience hers. If the novelist uses novels, conferences, and interviews to make her statements, the working-class woman may use her body as a writing board, for example, by wearing tailored outfits or wrappers with specific prints, whose meanings are shared within the community. A woman may wear "*Ton pied mon pied*," (literally your foot my foot) (see image 1) which shows the drawing of two unequal sized foot soles heading in the same direction to mean "you're not leaving without me." That resolution is directed at a husband or partner who is planning to divorce or leave her. Through the wrapper, not only is the message understood by the husband, but it is also shared with the entire community that becomes aware of the dynamic in the couple. Another print known as "*Jalousie*" (jealousy, see below), meaning "I am jealous," conveys a woman's feeling of jealousy at her husband's or partner's indiscretions.[70] These modes of contestation are silent, yet

[70] For more on the meanings and designs of prints in West African cultures, see Tanella Boni's *Que vivent les femmes d'Afrique* (2008), Sylviane Janin's *Burkina Faso* (2010), and the website www.afriquartquilt.be, dedicated to African quilts and cloths http://www.afriquartquilt.be/index.htm_textilesafricains_pagnesactuels_laparoledespagnes.htm (Accessed 20 Aug. 2010).

loud without the need of language. In other words, the women use the tools available to them to exercise agency. With these audibly silent messages, it becomes clear that the environment and the modes of subjugation determine the means of resistance. In fact, it may be paternalistic to expect and require of these women that they use modes of resistance - for example, writing - to which they have no access.

Ton pied mon pied (Your foot my foot/ I will follow you)
Courtesy of AfriquArtquilt.be

Jalousie (Jealousy)
Courtesy of AfriquArtquilt.be

Si tu sors, je sors (If you go out, I will)
Courtesy of brikebrok.over-blog.com

Femme capable (Strong woman)
Courtesy of AfriquArtquilt.be

On questions about sexuality, West African literary critics refuse to act in nonhegemonic and non-exclusionary manners. Specifically, in the 1980s, before the explosion of gender and sexuality studies, the very few literary critiques of Flora Nwapa's novel *One Is Enough* (1981) and Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982) -- two trailblazing fictional imaginings of emancipating female sexuality -- were disparaged based on ethical considerations. In her discussion of the critical silence on *One is Enough*, Carole Boyce Davies opines: "Flora Nwapa was clearly a victim of literary politics" (1986,14). And subsequent critics, mainly in the mid-late 1990s, have studied male bias, compounding Davies' observation.[71]

While in the 1990s, literary critics have acknowledged the progressive nature of the texts and their departure from the victimization of female characters, critics in the 80s were not that celebratory and remain bound up in questions of ethics. Brief descriptions of the characters will put my analysis into perspective. As she suffers familial and social pressures for failing to give birth, Amaka, the protagonist of *One is Enough*, revolts against social structures and decides that one husband is enough. She packs her belongings and flees to Lagos, where she lives as a single woman, accumulating capital by unapologetically getting involved with several men, notably a Catholic priest, by whom she births twins. In her sustained refusal to uphold patriarchal values of domesticated female

[71] Brenda Berrian reaches the same conclusion as Davies; she opines: "Male bias is raised because of the obvious non-existent and poor reception that the novel received from 1981 to 1991" ("The Reinvention of Woman through Conversations and Humor in Flora Nwapa's 'One Is Enough,'" 1995, 60).

sexuality, Amaka refuses to marry the former priest and continues to live as a single, independent, and wealthy woman, generous even to those who have called her a harlot for her unconventional choices. As for Nko, the protagonist of Emecheta's *Double Yoke*, she is a university student trying to navigate through the sexual harassment of the Reverend Professor Ikot. In many ways, Nko personifies the double yoke of the novel's title because she is caught between a sexist college boyfriend and an exploitative, unscrupulous, and morally-bankrupt postcolonial intellectual. In her attempt to exercise agency, especially with regard to the constraints placed on her body, Nko decides that "if her degree was going to cost her that much she was going to take the gamble" (110). In other words, she reluctantly but intentionally attempts to use her erotic power for educational purposes.

Several unfavorable critiques of the characters and their choices exist, but I will highlight a few of the most controversial. Oladele Taiwo's is one of the harshest.[72] In *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984), Oladele sees in Amaka the metaphor of corruption and a "little better than a common prostitute" (64). More than a decade after Oladele's analysis, in 1995, Chimalum Nwankwo concurs with him and stamps Amaka's sexual behaviors as profligate and unscrupulous, and critiques the novelist's failure to live up to the expectations set

[72] For more on the novel, see Australia Tarver's "Coming Home to Herself: Autonomy and Self-Conversion in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough.*" (*Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Janice Liddell and Yakini Belinda Kemp. 1999. 58-70)

by her first novels.[73] Similar to Amaka, Nko did not escape harsh criticism for daring to consider using the system on her own terms. In her analysis of Emecheta's campaign against female subjugation in *Double Yoke*, Marie Umeh uses a sociological approach and questions Nko's strategies of agency on moral and ethical grounds. Umeh qualifies Nko's decision as moral laxity, writing: "Moral laxity need not be equated with the new African woman. Ironically, Emecheta in her plot does not promote female liberation in Africa. Instead, she strengthens the belief of conservative Nigerians who fear that female education leads to all sorts of corruption" (1986, 177). In contrast, I would instead consider it as an attempt at exercising agency amidst structures of victimization.

Less harshly, Katherine Frank finds Amaka's and Nko's "sexual bargaining somewhat questionable" because " 'Bottom power,' to call a spade a spade is just really a shrewd kind of prostitution" (21). In conflating bottom power with prostitution, Frank flattens out social realities and emerging sexual behaviors while overshadowing the possibility of using the body as a site of resistance. Prostitution is a culturally-charged term and one that is markedly

[73] In "The Igbo Word in Flora Nwapa's Craft" (1995), Chimalum Nwankwo complains: "There is something rankling about the profligacy of women like Amaka and the unscrupulous Madam Ojei and the Cash Madam Club women" (*Research in African Literatures* 32**,** 50**).** But, an increasing number of literary works are critiquing Taiwo's and Nwankwo's readings. In 1995, Berrian acknowledged Amaka's pragmatism and courage to choose an alternative lifestyle. For Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Amaka is a disturbance of patriarchal and cultural oppressive values: "Amaka represents the new mother. Ex-wife (or part-time wife. as is increasingly becoming the case), single, wealthy, and independent, the new mother prominently occupies the contemporary national space which delegitimizes the notion of illegitimacy" ("Introduction: The Invalid, Dea(r)th, and the Author: The Case of Flora N wapa, *aka* Professor (Mrs.) Flora Nwanzuruahu Nwakuche" *Research in African Literatures* 26. (1995): 1-16. 9).

different from bottom power. Frank considers the ending of the novel ambivalent because when experiencing grief over the death of her father, Nko goes to the village with her boyfriend Ete Kamba, who has previously called her a whore after taking her virginity.[74] Again, rather than read the ending as ambivalent, I consider it as a more complex imagining. That Nko decides to take matters into her own hands somewhere in the narrative shows her ability to exercise agency. Unlike Taiwo, Umeh, and Frank, I seek to avoid moralistic pronouncements on the ways in which characters use their bodies. What I am interested in instead is how female characters use their genitality for moments of resistance in the postcolonial space and suggest that the conceptualization of West African women takes into account women in their differing social and cultural positionings.

3- Brief History of the Novel and the Male-Dominated Publishing Industry in West Africa

My focus on the novel as a site for analyzing women's forms of self-empowerment calls particular attention to how it has engaged with women's non-procreational sexuality. At the intersection of folk media and anthropological

[74] Jane Bryce-Okunlola and Obiema Nnaemeka have critiqued Frank for her supposed misunderstanding of gender relations in the Nigerian postcolonial space. For Nnaemeka: "A black woman does not get oppressed in the morning because of her race and summoned back in the evening to be oppressed because of her sex; she is not that lucky. The real danger in Frank's categorization of identities is that it foregrounds sex/gender issues to the detriment of serious engagements with other issues in the literary texts, some of which may even help to increase our understanding of the sex/gender issues" (1995, 95). Although the analyses that Bryce-Okunlola and Nnaemeka bring forth are compelling, I find the insider/ outsider debate predominantly unproductive.

texts, the novel form and cinema fell behind in representing empowering images of women's calculated uses of genital powers.

Before the 1980s, novels in West Africa were predominantly written by male writers and tended to center on social, political, and historical issues. In those decolonization and post-independence novels, personal and domestic issues were relegated to the back burner, and consequently female characters -- those saddled with domesticity -- were predominantly appendages to male ones.[75] In these narratives, while male characters struggle to make sense of the "the clash of civilizations" and the disillusionments of nationalism, female characters are just wives, or daughters, "shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, [and] plaiting their hair" (Frank 1987, 14-15). Similarly, women writers were conspicuously absent from or marginalized in "respectable" and established literary circles.

Novels by Anglophone and Francophone West African women writers emerged in the late 1960s, whereas men had started publishing thirty years earlier.[76] The relative absence of women writers has to do with the late

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[75] Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *Kaydara* (1940); Camara Laye, *L'enfant Noir* (*The Dark Child*) (1953); Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956); Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Amadou Kourouma, *The Suns of Independence* (1968); Ahi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). However, a few novels, Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* (1961), differ from the above-mentioned because they feature a women's strike and a powerful female figure respectively.

[76] In the introduction to the edited short-story collection, *African Women's Writing* (1993), Charlotte H. Bruner reflects on the changing face of women writing and publishing in West Africa, writing: "Nigeria, in particular, with its population of over 115 million and its occasional prosperity from oil, has been able to produce a more favourable climate for women writers than many other West African countries. There are several regional universities and some publishing

introduction of female formal education. Compelling work has been done on those issues, which need not be rehearsed here (Lebeuf 1963, Boserup 1970, D'Almeida 1994, Stratton 1994, Cazenave 1996, Gallimore 1997, Kesteloot 2001, Boni 2008). Although Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's 1965 *Our Sister Killjoy* is the first copyrighted novel by an African woman, Nigerian Nwapa's *Efuru*, published in 1966 by Heinemann African Writers Series, is known as the first internationally-published novel by an English-speaking female writer from West Africa. Published in 1969, Cameroonian Thérèse Kuoh-Moukouri's *Rencontres essentielles* (*Essential Encounters*) is the first novel by a Francophone West African woman.

With these novels, women's voices and issues started to emerge, but women writers struggled to be respected as writers. Like the characters to whom they lent voices, these women writers were disparagingly labeled "public women" and therefore denied social and cultural respect and institutional protection (where it exists). In 1982, Aidoo shared her pains and challenges as a woman writer: "[M]y trials as a woman writer are heavier and much more painful than any I have to go through as university teacher. It is a condition so delicate, it almost cannot be handled. Like an internal wound and therefore immeasurably dangerous, it also causes a ceaseless emotional hemorrhage" (37). The fear of the emotional

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houses. Flora Nwapa, the first black African woman novelist to publish in England, starting in the fifties, is still writing, and she has been a role model for many others. Alert to the need for local outlets for women writers, she established a publishing house for women" (4).

hemorrhage may have kept many women away from professional fiction writing.[77]

But, even when more female writers entered the publishing arena in the 1980s, their representations of images of women's sexuality did not take risks, with the exception of few novels such as *One Is Enough* (1981). Unlike male authors for whom women's subversive sexuality was source of degeneration and a metaphor for corruption, women writers presented sobering images in efforts to expose the violence enacted on women's bodies. Through images of wife battery, over-reproduction, female genital surgeries, and prostitution, female writers' "double exposures," to use Mieke Bal's phrase, unwittingly perpetuated views of West African women as "beasts of burden" and victims. Nwapa's *One is Enough* is one of the first novels to imagine a sexually independent female character without falling into the cliché of the metaphorical prostitute, so pervasive in pre-1990 male-authored texts. Nwapa's departure from existing tropes is attributable to her unabashed feminist political agenda; she says: "When I do write about women in Nigeria, in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about [sic] women because there are many women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who

[77] Back in 1989, Tanella powerfully articulated the defiance that was necessary for a woman to become a fiction writer: "[J'écris] lorsque j'ai rompu d'une certaine manière avec le monde qui m'entoure. Lorsque j'ai osé prendre la parole, moi une femme vouée d'ordinaire a d'autres besognes….Non. Je n'écris pas parce que je suis au monde. J'écris tout compte fait parce que je suis en rupture. Avec le monde. Avec les autres. Avec moi-même." ([I write] when, in a way, I have broken with the world that surrounds me. When I have dared to speak; me, a woman ordinarily doomed to other kinds of work…. No. I do not write because I am part of the world. When all is said and done, I write because I am at odds. With the world. With others. With myself] (Quoted and translated in Nicki Hitchcott's *Women Writers in Francophone Africa*, 2000. 26).

are very, very independent, and very, very industrious" (Interview with Umeh 1995). Indeed, Nwapa is known for her consistent representations of independent female characters such as Efuru and Amaka. And she has had a tremendous impact on images of Nigerian women in fiction (Stratton 1994).[78]

After women started publishing as writers, it still took them decades to break into the role of publisher because of their inability to access capital (Viney and Zeleza 2001). To change the pervasive sobering images of female sexuality, women had to play a role in controlling the circulation of images in locally-produced cultural works. And the male-dominated and masculinist publishing industry, endorsing and reinforcing state-sanctioned male chauvinistic practices, made this difficult. Women eventually entered the publishing industry and exercised some control over the publication of their writings and the issues they deem worthy of attention.[79] In my interview with novelist Frieda Ekotto in 2008, she reported that Aminata Sow Fall was interested in publishing texts that other continental publishers had rejected because of what they considered immoral sexual characters (Diabate 2010). In fact, the publishing histories of two of the primary texts discussed in this dissertation, Jean Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* and Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop*, literalize the notion of unofficial

[78] In 1994, Florence Stratton established that *One is Enough* was "among the few Nigerian novels which subvert the otherwise male-dominated view of the Nigerian society" (155).

[79]By founding in 1976 a publishing house in Nigeria, Tana Press, Ltd, Nwapa became one of the first female publishers in West Africa. Senegalese novelist Aminata Sow Fall followed on her footsteps with the creation in 1987 of editions Khoudia in Sénégal ("We need to know how to honours [sic] books: Interview with Aminata Sow and Moussa Konate," 1998).

censorship. Because of their daring imaginings of non-normative sexualities, it took the filmmaker and the novelist five and ten years, respectively, to find a distributor and publisher and then they were not in West Africa but in France. Male chauvinistic practices, limited educational opportunities for women, intellectual imperialism, and the need to discursively desexualize the image of the hypersexualized African female body -- all these boundaries and taboos -- contribute to explain the scarcity of empowering images of female sexuality.

4- Desexualization: Attempts to Sanitize the Image of Hypersexualized Black Female Bodies

The attempt at what I call "desexualizing" the image of black female bodies reflects a conscious distancing from the trope of the hypersexed as disseminated in Euro-American imperialist texts and decolonization and post-independence West African novels. Amina Mama uncovers the connection between the two phenomena, arguing that "the historical legacy of racist fascination with Africans' allegedly profligate sexuality has deterred researchers" from further exploring female sexuality (1996, 39). Perhaps critics and novelists too attempted to undo the representational violence enacted on women's bodies by avoiding imagining sexuality that female characters can potentially enjoy.

Desexualization operates by placing an emphasis on other aspects of women's lives: motherhood, spirituality, economic freedom, and nation-building and overshadowing any reference to eroticism or aggressive uses of genital

powers. The privileging of motherhood in patriarchal cultures, which I discussed above, finds its parallel in fiction. Carole Boyce Davies explains: "This preoccupation with motherhood is evident in almost all modern African fiction….A survey of literature written by men often reveals the mother as the most truthfully realized character. All other women pale, in comparison, are pitied or are even treated contemptuously" (243-244). Differing from male writers, Ama Ata Aidoo and several other women writers offer some contrast to the romanticized picture of motherhood.[80] I think that the construction and dissemination of what I call the unsexed mother is a veiled attempt to desexualize the female body and to maintain a patriarchal gender hierarchy. I therefore suggest that we go further than interrogating the fiction of romanticized motherhood to examine how it also desexualizes the female body by inscribing on it the exclusive cultural meanings of procreation. Indeed, the mother character is more often than not seen as giving birth, feeding, bathing, or mourning the baby, but not as enjoying erotic pleasures. Paradoxically, she procreates but she is unsexed. She is "elevated" to a privileged social and cultural position thanks to her abilities to place her needs after everybody else's. As Mariama Bâ's character Ramatoulaye repeatedly complains in *Une si longue lettre* (1975), "The mother of a family has no time to travel. But, she has time to die" ("La mère de famille n'a pas du temps pour voyager. Mais elle a du temps pour mourir" (110)). The image

[80] Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979); Amma Darko's *The Housemaid (*1998); Aidoo's short story "A Gift from Somewhere" (1970); and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1980) have imagined a less glorified and romanticized picture of motherhood.

of women as the self-sacrificing and unsexed mothers distorts the embodied experiences of women who have sex and probably enjoy it too.

In literary criticism, desexualization became a strategy for celebrating African women's supposed authenticity against Euro-American feminism's perceived focus on sexual liberation. In "Feminism with the Small f" (1988), speaking of what she believes to be the insignificance of sexuality in African women's emancipatory ventures, Buchi Emecheta claims: "Sex is part of life. It is not THE life. Listen to the Western feminists' claim about enjoying sex. They make me laugh. African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic. We believe we are here for many, many things, not just to cultivate ourselves, to make ourselves pretty for men" (177). First of all, Emecheta's generalization of Western feminists as a monolithic entity replicates the trend she sets out to critique. Second, the "many, many things" she mentions include the well being of the family, economic development, and financial independence, a list from which eroticism is absent. Three years after Emecheta's claim, and from the other side of the Atlantic, African American scholar Angela Gilliam echoes her in "Women's Equality and National Liberation" (1991). Gilliam codes the focus on sexual politics as "sexualism" and positions it as a marker of privilege: "Sexualism becomes the new elitism, the new expression of class struggle within the movement, since most of the world's working women -- including many women in the United States -- identify survival

issues to be food, housing, health care, and employment, not sexuality" (218). Here, sexualism, the supposed focus on sex, is viewed as a mark of privilege and used to emphasize alterity.

When one juxtaposes Emecheta's and Giliam's pronouncements on homogenized Western feminists as "supersexed" with the hypersexualized images of West African women in Euro-American colonialist texts, we find an irony. Descendents of African and African American women, those supersexed and set in opposition to the pure and prudish Victorian womanhood, charge "Western" feminists with "sexualism." Past centuries' hypersexualized are today's unsexed and vice versa. Just like Emecheta's homogenization of Western feminists, Giliam's is a sweeping generalization that flattens out differences between working women, occluding the impact of variables of class and location.

The historical imperative to "sanitize" women's sexuality as an attempt to undo the representational violence enacted by structures of domination remains a problematic venture for three reasons. First, it is a web of contradictions, for female bodies are simultaneously desexualized and sexualized. They are desexualized in the sense that they are rarely seen as means of self-empowerment and sites of erotic pleasures, but, they are sexualized in the deployment of the rhetoric of pain, cutting, and pathology. Second, such sanitizing failed to reflect women's diversity and lived experiences. Based on anthropological examples I described above, it is obvious that women are all but unsexed; they strategically

use their marked and scarred bodies for self-empowerment and resistance. Finally, by eliding the category of sexuality from women's emancipatory projects and stripping them of genital or sexual inclinations, literary critics and novelists deny them a crucial aspect of their liberation: the "power of the erotic." It must be said that Audre Lorde did not confine the erotic to the sexual; she considers it as an encompassing term that designates a profound and meticulous commerce between the female and her body (1978). Understandably, hypersexualization and desexualization are part of the same vice "since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put" (Spillers 1984, 164).[81] Starting in the 1990s, writers and literary critics have not only resisted silencing on questions of empowering sexuality, they have also abraded the regimes of hypersexualization and desexualization of female characters.

Conclusion: Recuperating and Recentering the Genital with its Limitations

The rise of novels imagining empowering and complex images of West African female sexuality can be explained through an examination of several developments of the 1990s: the expansion of gender studies and queer theories, the rise of third-wave feminism, the institutional extension of women's studies,

[81] The limited scholarship in African studies on questions of desexualization, my training as a comparatist, and the non-negligible similarities between African and African American women lead me to turn to African American feminist theories as an explicative framework. I acknowledge that several African female scholars will disagree with the similarities and, rather dwell on the differences between African and African American women.

and finally the UN Gender in Development programme. [82] Although most of these developments occurred in the United States or more generally in the northern hemisphere, they have had ripple effects on African studies and cultural productions due to an increased traffic of African intellectuals living and teaching in North American academia, a point to which I shall return. In addition to these major cultural shifts, more scholars of African studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s - as I suggested above - urged researchers to inquire into questions of sex and sexuality and how they affect issues of subjectivity and power. Given this amplified visibility of questions regarding bodies and sexuality on the global platform, several West African writers of fiction joined the movement, and more progressive imaginings of sexuality have since been trickling in. It is a selection of these cultural products that this dissertation has set out to read and showcase.

Because of the specific historical and social positionings of women in West Africa, the stakes for an engaged intellectual exercise are high. Since images of West African women's bodies have been distorted as unsexed and supersexed, a supple and intelligent recuperation of the genital should figure in feminist scholarship on African women. As this dissertation seeks to perform that role, it argues for the necessity of a cultural recognition of genital power and how it factors in female subject formation in postcolonial spaces. In the process, this

[82] See for example, Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards' *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000); *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism,* ed Rebecca Walker, 1995); Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake's edited *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997); and Barbara Findlen's anthology *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995).

discussion also invites a more comprehensive conceptualization of female subjectivity and suggests that we not lose sight of existential and effective life conditions. Until we recognize those body-centered forms of resistance, we will continually theorize ghosts, fantasies, anxieties, and projections.

As suggested above, subjectivity through the body should be embraced with its limitations and temporariness. The limitations of theories that exclude or over-rate the powers of female bodies stem partly from internalized patriarchal and colonialist paradigms and a belief in the permanent nature of positions of power. The recognition and constitution of subjectivity need not be reified as stable but should be understood as temporary because "there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality -- [and]… in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality" (Mbembé 2001, 15). Not only are subjectivity and resistance temporary, but they are also constituted through ambivalence (Butler 1997, Agamben 2007).[83] Embodying the Foucauldian model of subjectivity, in which discursive practices and disciplinary regimes constitute and subjugate the subject,[84] female characters are quintessentially constituted by

[83] In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (1997), Judith Butler elaborates the ambivalence saying: "[T]he subject is itself the site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges as both the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned forms of agency"(14). For Agamben, "There is no dispositive without a process of subjectivation. Subject means two things: what leads an individual to assume and become attached to an individuality and singularity, but also subjugation to an external power" ("Metropolis" 2007).

[84] For example, in *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction* (1976, 1978), Foucault problematizes the conventional understanding of the impact of the nineteenth-century culture upon questions of sexuality, arguing that through the discursive practices of psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature, the nineteenth-century "bourgeois" society "did not set boundaries for sexuality; it

ambivalence. They are even more so when they engage the genital, always already a problematic and contentious site of self-empowerment. For example, as we have seen in anthropological texts, as women manipulate and mobilize their bodies by tightening and drying vaginal tissues, they simultaneously subject themselves to the patriarchal economy and make themselves vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV/AIDS.[85]

French anthropologist Edouard Vincke reports that women suffer "damages to the vaginal tissues" as a result of the overuse of astringent substances. Frequently, women are placed in a vulnerable position, to the point of resorting to this ultimate weapon. In their attempt to ascertain their agency, they run the risk of endangering their health and subsequently their lives. Since the formation of subjectivity is imbricated in its contingency, literary critics have one more reason to expand their analytical fields to avoid exiling and victimizing vulnerable but brave subjects from their modes of recognition. By failing to recognize subjects that speak and resist through their bodies, we are denying them the right to speak, and one can be led to wonder if the "subaltern" female in postcolonial West African spaces can speak at all.

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extended the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration. It did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals" (47). In other words, the "bourgeois" culture formed the self-disciplining subject while using her as an object of study for the production of knowledge/power.

[85] On Vaginal Dryness and high risks of HIV/AIDS transmission, see also Karen E. Kuhn "Vaginal Drying Agents and HIV Transmission" (*International Family Planning Perspectives* 24:2 (1998): 93-94).

It is with this question, among others, that this dissertation grapples. By asking that question, this project heeds Gayatri Spivak's invitation to postcolonial intellectuals to suspend their privileges. More than two decades ago in the now famous "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), revised in 1999, Spivak recounts how two women, Rani of Sirmur and Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, use corporeal forms of communications but fail to be heard. Not only have these figures been misread in the archives of colonial administrators, they are also silent in discourses of Indian nationalism and contemporary liberalism. In a 1991 interview with Leon De Kock, Spivak expressed her disappointment that multiple, interrelated, and often opposed regimes of discourse (familial, collective, and institutional) failed to hear Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri and her great-grandniece, Spivak herself.[86] As she excavates these female figures, Spivak asks "What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?" (281). To answer her question, she warns the postcolonial critic against projecting their own biases, the result of their privilege, onto the misunderstood subjects.

Although Spivak's caution and invitation were made more than twenty years ago in the context of the Indian colonial and postcolonial archives, they still hold theoretical currency for the globalized postcolonial African space. Her

[86] In a candid interview with Leon De Kock (1992), Spivak reports: "My mother said to me that my grandmother's sister had done this and left a message and waited until menstruation and all that stuff, and in my generation the women have forgotten it. It's the *least* phallocentric way of networking and it has failed, so not only has she not been able to speak, her grandniece trying to make her speak has also failed because not one critic has related it to the example which proves for me that the subaltern cannot speak. I'm supposed to take that seriously? I cannot take that seriously, to tell you the truth. Now let's move that one out" (44-45).

examples, when transposed in the West African context, take the shape of a repetition with a minor difference. The repetition consists in excavating images of women who use corporeal forms of resistance, and the difference resides in the ways in which females use the body. Like Badhuri, Rani of Sirmur, and Draupadi, female characters in the texts discussed in this dissertation use a wide range of bodily forms of "speech" and resistance: same-sex erotic acts, a female secret society predicated upon the clitoris, genital cursing, and suicide. Their social and historical positionings differ, but the common thread linking them is the danger of not being heard when they use their means of resistance. Spivak's was a call to reconfigure the structures of recognition. Such a practice will allow scholars of West African women to retrieve elusive female figures from colonial and postcolonial archives. Indeed, in order to listen to women who use their bodies as writing boards, the intellectual should suspend her projections and anxieties.

The following three chapters are organized chronologically, based on the dates of publication and the temporal settings of the three primary sources. The first narrative, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, takes us back to the heyday of colonialism, 1929 in Igboland, when angry village women resorted to genital curse in the form of public undressing and sitting on men, to protest unfair taxation and wife battery. Entitled "T. Obinkaram Echewa's 1992 *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*: Aggressive Uses of Genital Powers and the Dialectic of Resistance," the chapter closely reads the fictionalized account of the Women's War in

conjunction with present-day deployments of public undressing in Nigeria, which are condemned and punished as public indecency. As I examine the novel to recognize moments of women's agency, I also analyze the use and effectiveness of culturally specific modes of female resistance in a globalized and postcolonial state and against foreign bodies. I argue that the novel imagines complex uses to which women put their bodies, thereby problematizing the uncritical celebration of Igbo women's *Oto.* The complex representational politics that the novel seeks to bring to the forefront is literalized in the array of female characters that resort to various and frequently contradictory means of self-empowerment. In this chapter, I also suggest that there is more to Echewa's double narrative fiction than just showing empowered female characters and humanizing women who participated in the 1929 Women's War. In fact, the novel disturbs the colonial power's rendering of the war and the patriarchal historiographies that refused to acknowledge female contribution to localized and/or diffuse anti-colonial struggles.

The second text, *Chuchote pas trop*, invites us to an imaginary postcolonial Fulani society in Cameroon, where mutilated and sexually violated female characters engage in same-sex erotic acts, create abjection, and carry out murder-suicide as mechanisms of agency. In "Positioning Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop* (2001) within the Archives of West African Same-Sex Sexuality," I argue that the novel problematizes our modes of recognition and the

invisibility surrounding queer working-class and rural women while rearranging the archives of West African same-sex sexuality. As Ekotto said in the interview I conducted with her in 2008, through this novel, she seeks to initiate a conversation around female queer sexuality. I believe that in the process, she also advances the conversation about empowering female heterosexuality. Ekotto's mission of unearthing buried and stigmatized stories of rebellious women substantiates her protagonist's mission of creating an archive of how women marshal the power of their bodies in the service of resistance. The novelist seems to have gone to lengths to voice her frustration about the shackles placed on female same-sex sexuality. The diversity of same-sex erotic practices that she imagines is wide ranging and speaks to her political agenda of transcending dangerous boundaries: interracial, intergenerational, and familial or "incestuous." In the novel, the sheer variety of non-conventional sexual behaviors seems proportionate to the degree of violence to which female bodies are subjugated under the Fulani heteropatriarchal regime. In fact, the regime has devised a number of mechanisms of disciplining female bodies, including marital rape, female circumcision and infibulation, child marriage, and corporeal dismemberment. In that landscape of mangled bodies, one may expect the novel to restage the paradigm of victimization, however, the characters escape from that position and respond with queer spatialization, suicide as weapon, and the transformation of dismembered bodies into subversive projects.

Produced four years after Ekotto's novel, Jean Pierre Bekolo's postmodern film projects us into the future via science fiction, allowing us to witness female characters who use the Mevoungou ritual to purify themselves as well as the corrupt postcolonial State. Chapter Four, "Jean Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005) and the Performance of Horror and the Mevoungou in the Postcolonial State," argues that the unconventional film depicts complex images of women's genitality through the retrieval and degenitalization of what has been habitually a female ritual. Far from a straightforward and documentary-style film, *Les Saignantes* is allegorical, as it is structured like a night-long Mevoungou ritual. It is a challenging film in terms of genre but also with regard to its content. Images of rampant death, dystopia, plastic sexuality, emasculation, and decapitation, couched in cold lights and thriller-genre cinematography, make *Les Saignantes* an uncomfortable movie to watch. However, it is a roughly disguised political and social critique of power and gender in the postcolonial State. In light of the meanings of backwardness brought to bear on rituals, positioned in comfortable opposition to modernity, and the pervasive constructions of female bodies as sources of the postcolonial ruling classes' failures, the film's adaptation of a precolonial missionary-banned female ritual, aims at reclaiming women and a scorned past without its stigma. In doing so, I think it reminds contemporary continental and diasporic African women of the positive influence of West African women's bodies in the construction of communities.

Since these texts predominantly subvert social and gender expectations by representing empowering images of female sexuality, can they be considered feminist texts? Or how do we imagine their authors' social and political agendas? These are hard questions, almost impossible to answer with certainty. But, one thing remains clear: the artists' genders and sexualities defy the dichotomy of associating women with feminism and men with sexism and patriarchy.[87] Although male, Echewa tests the limits of gender expectations by becoming the thread through which Igbo women's historical struggles against colonialists and chauvinist Igbo men are fictionalized to benefit a wide international audience. Similar to Echewa but more ambivalent, Bekolo adapts the all-female ritual to the demands of the screen and of a globalized audience. Both authors excavate precolonial and colonial female modes of resistance, allowing us to make contact with Igbo and Beti women. With regard to Ekotto, her queer sexuality (lesbian and bisexual) seems to inform her goals of imagining marginalized members of the society in their negotiation with brutal regimes of control.

I think that the authors' educational journeys and the locations -- the United States and France -- from which they live, write, and direct partly explain

[87] *In Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990), Iris Young invites a distinction between sexual differentiation, "a phenomenon of individual psychology and experience, as well as of cultural categorization," and male domination, "structural relations of genders and institutional forms that determine those structures" (46).

their choice of subject matters and their refusal of single and simplified stories.[88] Based on their biographies, the authors represent those that Simon Gikandi has called the "émigré native informants."(21)[89] As they excavate "native" forms of female self-empowerment, these authors also in an indirect fashion imagine and narrate how and what it means to live through the experience of globalization. In their revisionist approach to women's subjugated sexuality, the artists avoid the triumphalist prism. Their textual and cinematic narratives do not show female characters that use corporeal forms of resistance as endlessly powerful warriors or quintessential victims. Instead, these characters perform the roles of survivors, fighters, and members of communities.

The artists' transnational experiences have facilitated the emergence of and/or an interest in issues that commonly remain marginalized among continental intellectuals; my experience is a case in point.[90] Since questions of sexuality constitute some of those differentially experienced subjects and because of the unofficial censorship of the local publishing industry, I was unable to find

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[88] As Edouard Glissant opines in *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (1996), "On n'émet pas de parole en l'air, en diffusion dans l'air. Le lieu d'où l'on émet la parole, d'ou l'on émet le texte, d'où on emet la voix, d'où l'on émet le cri, ce lieu là est immense" (29).

[89] In "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality" (2001), Gikandi notes the location shift of intellectuals that mediate knowledge about postcolonial Africa. He argues that while in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the mediating intellectuals were located in the "Third World," in the 1980s Europe and the US have become their primary site of knowledge production. And naturally, the easy access to their cultural productions explains how the postcolonial émigré elite have unwittingly become the voice of postcolonial subjects on the global landscape. In the same essay, Gikandi complains about the emphasis on literary texts in postcolonial theories at the expense of harsh material realities in the postcolonial nation-states.

[90] Originally, I planned to write my dissertation on fiction and women's political involvement. The project was to explore how women writers imagine political power in West Africa and how those imaginings differ from male writers'.

locally-produced novels on *oto* or the Mevoungou by the time I started writing this dissertation. All the texts discussed here have thus been published or released in the northern hemisphere. Needless to say, locally-published texts would have enriched our view of the differences between how each location influences imaginings of female sexuality.

Finally, by paying closer attention to the lived experiences and circumstances of historically marginalized segments of postcolonial modern nations, especially rural and working-class women, those removed from the technologies of information and the channels of knowledge production, these texts give us the opportunity to move away from the single stories and to imagine West African women in their diversity as well as add sexually powerful women's voices to the conversation about what it means to be a resisting subject in the postcolonial space.

Chapter Two

T. Obinkaram Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (1992): Aggressive Uses of Genital Powers and the Dialectic of Resistance

> "[T]hey knew about [The Women's War] from the lullabies their older sisters sang in order to quiet them […] Little sister, little sister, please stop crying/ Lest I throw some sand in your eyes!/ Remember the time Grandmother went to prison in the sky/ And set the sky on fire […] Ndom set the sky on fire! Drew down lightning from the sky and set the earth on fire!"
>
> Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (39).

This chapter closely reads the fictional recreation of the 1929 Women's War, in which Igbo women organized a massive and destructive attack against the British colonial administration and even resorted to their deadliest weapon, genital cursing and shaming. I start by reflecting on the contemporary frequency and/or hypervisibility of and the backlash against genital cursing in several parts of West Africa. In order to close-read Echewa's novel, I provide an overview of the historical war, allowing us to understand the novelist's goal of problematizing the archives of the colonial administration and how they downplay the gravity of women's grievances and their organizational skills. Through an analysis of female characters and their methods of self-empowerment, I show how the quotidian and diffuse mechanisms of female resistance defy the assumption of monolithic Igbo women. To explore genital cursing in the novel, I refer to three examples - a woman who aggressively shows her naked buttocks as a contemptuous gesture against

her husband's relatives, women who literally "sit on" an abusive Igbo man as a collective form of punishment, and the historical social nakedness against a horrified British colonial officer and Nigerian soldiers during the war. Rather than consider genital cursing from an indigenist perspective and uncritically celebrate it as several scholars have done, I use the Foucauldian notion of reverse discourse and the Freudian uncanny to examine the unstable dynamic of power relations it involves. In the same vein, I explore the racist colonial ideology, the British colonial administration's strategic failure to consider the war as a breach in their rule, and the violent deaths of defiant female characters as the possible limitations of the weapon. The chapter concludes with an examination of the possible conflation of protest with spectacle and how the multiplication of protest disrobings around the world might impact its meanings among the Igbo.

I-Re-Emergence and/or Hypervisibility of Women's Aggressive Uses of Genital Curse

Recently in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa including in Nigeria and Ghana, news articles about "sexual insult," "genital cursing" and "bottom power" have been turning up with remarkable frequency. The trend is observable in online newspapers and magazines, discussion groups, listservs, and personal blogs. The reasons behind this hypervisibility and/or re-emergence remain elusive and diverse. Possibly women are increasingly using or threatening to use genital powers, or perhaps, the extreme circumstances requiring genital cursing are multiplying. Perhaps, the escalating archiving and sharing frenzy that the Internet and the technologies of information allow or our

contemporary culture's fascination with bodies, nudity, and spectacle account for the hypervisibility of genital cursing.

On June 1, 2008, in Ekiti State, *The Nigerian Tribune*, a local newspaper, reported sanctions against two young women, members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), who bared their breasts as signs of protest. The protestors hoped to shame men by pushing them to cover their faces for fear of being cursed. The message of shame they intended to convey is: "You should be ashamed that 'your' women (sisters, mothers, and aunts) are reduced to the point of baring their most guarded body parts because of your irresponsible decisions." Since genital cursing is an age-and gender-related weapon, formerly the prerogatives of mothers and post menopausal women, it clearly has been called into new forms by the young women. They co-opted and revised the parameters of the weapon by ignoring variables of motherhood and seniority.

It is important to take note of these variables because according to Misty Bastian, genital cursing is based on the "potency of women's fertility, fear of senior women's sexuality, and prohibitions against incest, particularly among members of uterine households" (46). However, the protest against the arrest of several NYSC members fell short of expectations. Not only the young protestors were barred from entering the Governor's Office, and thus from making a compelling statement, but they also suffered public humiliation. The journalists reported that denying women access to the office was an attempt from authorities to discourage the use of genital cursing, a form of protest on the rise in Ekiti State:

> To arrest the increasing wave of indecent dressing among ladies in the society, three ladies currently on the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme in Ekiti State received the greatest shocks of their lives during the week as two of them were barred from entering the Governor's Office in Ado-Ekiti over indecent dressing. ("Indecent Dressing" 2008)

The reporters' framing of the means of protest as "indecent dressing"[1] (a label from authorities) delegitimizes this weapon and reflects their rejection of a long-sanctioned cultural practice. That female protestors who use genital cursing suffer public humiliation is a classic example of a backfire. Ironically, in an attempt to shame decision-makers and, by implication, the general public, protesters ended up humiliated. We therefore find ourselves in a vicious circle of denigration, recuperation, and denigration again.

Because patriarchal cultures typically stigmatize women's bodies as soiling and use this stigma as the basis for gender inequality, women then reclaimed their threatening bodies to inscribe resistance by attempting to humiliate men and society. But, in the

[1] "Indecent dressing" is increasingly being used in Nigeria to label scantily-clad women and men. Although no law in Nigeria bans "indecent dressing," Lagos police still round up those they consider as dressed in an immoral fashion. In 2007, Lagos police chief Muhammad Abubakar argued that indecent dressing potentially cause public disorder. Few days after his pronouncement, *BBC news* reported that a night-time police patrol arrested and brought before a magistrate's court about ninety women and three young men. (Johnkennedy Uzoma, "Nigerian Skimpy Dressers Arrested" 27 July 2007). In March 2010, three years after the above news, the controversial label was resurrected, this time on a college campus. The Acting Vice Chancellor of the Evans Enwerem University Owerri Prof. Osita Nwebo announced that scantily-clad students would not be allowed into the campus. This measure, taken in the name of moral rectitude, risks curtailing the social rights that women's activism has fought so hard to secure. Nigeria is not the only country where such measures are taking momentum. *The Ghanaian Times* reported in 2008 that a Catholic college banned what was considered as "Indecent dressing" on their campus. According to the administrations, these measures were intended to protect young female students who reportedly complained about sexual harassment from their male colleagues or professors. However, it is almost tautological to assert that these measures were problematic. Not only the parameters of "indecent dressing" are spatially and temporally defined, but women rather than men are positioned as the ones to control their attitudes.

quintessentially postcolonial and globalized space *par excellence*, the office, women's recuperation, albeit self-empowering, meets with social resistance and critical women are patently humiliated, as in the case cited above. One can argue that the response to women's strategy was predictable because in most postcolonial cities, the office is the international and/or multinational space where different gender norms are recognized and where cultural (traditional) are increasingly being covered up. If genital cursing may elicit fear and shame in men in a rural space, it may fail in the space where different gender norms are operative. In other words, the backfire against women's strategy clearly demonstrates that the conditions of resistance are conditioned by power and social norms. The incessant traffic of humiliation and self-empowerment also bespeaks the ongoing and shifting nature of relations and positions of power.

Also, independently of the targeted males' response, there is something in the nature of shame that is contagious. The deployment of shame is an always potentially rebounding act; one in which the space between the performer and the target collides.[2] In that sense, the shame felt by the protestors becomes an predictable negative affect.

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[2] For more on the contagious nature of shame, see for example Michael Lewis' *Shame: The Exposed Self* (Simon and Schuster, 1995), Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), and Anna Gibbs's 2001 "Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect" in which she writes: "Bodies can catch feelings as easily as can catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear -- in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion" (1) and later in 2006, she expands her argument in "Writing and Danger: The Intercorporeality of Affect," adding: "Shame is an affect of social interaction (or an attachment emotion -- one that indexes the strength of our bond with the other and our dependence on her or him) produced when our interest in or enjoyment of the other is met with rebuff. Sudden disjunction replaces expected attunement. The experience of shame brings about a sudden dissolution of the distinction between subject and object as the shamed subject experiences herself (as if) through the eyes of the object." (159). Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) offers a useful analysis of shame and other negative affects.

However, to consider the dismissive and humiliating response as the male sole reaction to the NYSC members' public undressing is to disregard the deep-seated influence of traditional cultural practices in Ekiti State. Colonialism and neocolonialism cannot have completely erased century-old traditions and beliefs. I speculate that the dismissive public reaction is possibly different from the private one, in which most men may acknowledge the possibility of being cursed and would consequently seek protection. In addition, the possibility of disrupting the decorum of the Governor's office and of calling attention to their cause and weapon constitutes a victory in itself.

Whereas the young women protestors modified the specifications of genital cursing, older women in the same Ekiti State dramatically refashioned it on April 29, 2009, a year after the arrest of the NYSC protestors. During the electoral controversy in Ekiti State, hundreds of women (mostly elderly) staged a protest, baring their breasts, to demand that Dr. Kayode Fayemi be declared winner of the gubernatorial rerun ("Naked Women Staged" 2009).[3] Again, the weapon was transformed under the pressures of globalization and postcoloniality in that rather than bare their buttocks and genitals, women bared just their breasts. How successful was these women's method of protest is a matter of speculation; what transpired clearly is their determination to assert some

[3] Mrs. Ronke Okusanya, an activist in Nigeria, organized the demonstrations primarily to demand that the Resident Electoral Commissioner, septuagenarian Mrs. Ayoka Adebayo, be allowed to conclude her duties and declare Dr. Kayode Fayemi winner of the governatorial rerun in Ekiti. During the contested elections, opponents to Dr. Kayode pressured Mrs. Adebayo to resign on charges of bribery. The Inspector General of Police, IGP Mike Okiro even declared her wanted. According to the article, Mrs. Adebayo's gender and status as a mother strongly motivated Mrs. Okusanya to support a fellow woman and mother. In other words, a female mode of resistance was deployed to support a mother. For more on the controversy around Mrs. Adebayo, see "Ekiti Rerun Update 12." http://www.osundefender.org/?p=4364 (Accessed 12 Dec. 2010).

measure of control over the definitions of their bodies and their living and social conditions.

Certainly, the use of genital curse to punish a male offender is not exclusive to women of Ekiti State. Contemporary examples abound from West and East Africa. In 1996 in "The Women of Kismayo: Power and Protest in Somalia," Somali novelist Nurrudin Farrah reported a similar incident in Somalia. But, the most famous contemporary use concerns the women of the Niger Delta's threats to go naked in their war against the multinational oil company Chevron Texaco in 2002 (Stevens 2006). Five years later, in 2007, approximately five hundred angry women of the Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo District of the Northern Region in Ghana threatened to march naked to the seat of government at Osu Castle in Accra to present their petition to President John Agyekum Kufuor. They were protesting against the dismissal of a District Chief Executive in Ghana (Ameyibor 2007).

This seeming re-emergence and/or hypervisibility of aggressive uses of bodies and the backlash against protesting women convince me of the necessity to explore the meaning of traditional cultural female practices in the postcolonial and more globalized space. I do so taking as a point of departure T. Obinkaram Echewa's historical novel, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, in which Igbo women show their naked buttocks to horrified British colonial officials to protest taxation and imperial exploitation. Published in 1992 and part of the emerging tradition that features, albeit problematically, empowering images of women's sexuality, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is considered a powerful

revisionist narrative of the 1929 Igbo Women's War. In her 2007 monograph, *Can These Bones Live?*, Bella Brodsky opines that the "rendition of the events fills in the blanks of the elided version, challenging decades of British scholarship that neglects to mention that the Igbo give a different name of this revolt" (131). I echo Brodski's argument and add that the novel lends voice to those discursively and historically absent from the postcolonial Igbo patriarchal and British colonialist historiographies.

There is more to Echewa's novel than just revising the official British colonial archives. It engages with several incommensurate social, epistemological, and political traditions, including the British colonial historiography and its racialized view of Igbo women as primitive, the colonial-era Igbo patriarchal practices that consider women's bodies as soiling, and contemporary African intellectuals and their cultural misrecognition of the diverse ways of mounting resistance in the colonial space. In the process, it humanizes women, giving them flesh and bones as opposed to the impersonal, faceless, and cold names of biased historical archives.

In discussing the subversive uses of social nakedness and other bodily forms of resistance in the novel, I seize the opportunity to ask about the effectiveness of deploying public undressing as a weapon in a postcolonial era against the postcolonial modern state and during colonization against a body foreign to the indigenous culture, the British colonial administration. In other words, would the meaning and gravity of Igbo women's undressing be lost to male offenders who did not understand the cultural meaning of genital curse or who have rejected most precolonial cultural values? What would it take

to transfer the meaning of the weapon to a new spatial and temporal setting? Finally, I also examine how the widespread deployment of public exposure of naked bodies, at the international level, blurs the lines between protest and spectacle and further delegitimizes the weapon in spaces such as Nigeria or Ghana.

The Women's War of 1929, translated in Igbo as *Ogu Umunwaanyi*, became the first recorded female revolt against imperial forces in Igboland; and it problematized the long-standing image of African women as eternal victims of local and foreign versions of patriarchy. Several historians, anthropologists, and literary critics have speculated on the signification of the War and its importance in localized resistance to colonial powers.[4]

II- The Women's War of 1929 and Echewa's Revisionist Project

1-*Ogu Umunwaanyi* or the 1929 Women's War

In line with the imperial philosophy that the colonized should bear the costs of colonization, the British colonial administration's 1906 Native Revenue Proclamation laid out the foundation of taxation in the protectorate of Northern Nigeria. Taxes would help raise the revenue necessary to pay for all expenses, including the colonial army, the police force, and the native warrant chiefs, those whom Mamdani called "mediating links of the bifurcated state" (1996). It also would force the natives to work, thereby stimulating industry and production and the development of urban areas. Eleven years after the Native Revenue Proclamation, the colonial administration's efforts to

[4] Nwando Achebe's *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (2005), Simon Gikandi in *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (2003), Misty Bastian's "Vultures of the Marketplace" (2002), and Rose Uchem's *Overcoming Women's Subordination* (2001).

amalgamate the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria with the colony of Southern Nigeria resulted in the 1917 Native Revenue Ordinance, which replaced the 1906 Proclamation. Extended to Southern Nigeria in 1926, the ordinance was again extended to the Eastern Nigerian provinces of Calabar, Owerri, and Onitsha (Afigbo 1982). But, the resultant taxation was applied only to men. Since women were considered to be under the protection of males, they were, paradoxically, not full subjects to be subdued by the colonial administration. So, in 1926, in the region discussed in Echewa's novel, adult males were counted and taxed and their failure to pay resulted in imprisonment.[5] Predictably, the colonial taxation put a strain on the lives of the local populations; men who could not grow crops to pay taxes were obliged to migrate to the cities and large plantations to become laborers. Taxation was oppressive, and the counting of human beings - necessary to assess it - was always dreaded by the natives who, considered counting as "provoking evil spirits, and causing destruction and death" (Afigbo 94).

As the locals suffered the vicious drubbing of the British colonial conquest, in 1929, a zealous Assistant District Officer in Bende division of Owerri province decided to recount the households and property. Even when the Assistant gave reassurances that no taxation of women was in order, the counting of women and their property caused a wave of fear among the populace. With the rumors of taxation, women mobilized and held meetings during which they reached the following recommendations: If census agents asked only men for information, women were not to react, but if they approached

[5] See "Vultures of the Marketplace" (2002) by Bastian, Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subjec*t (1996), Judith Van Allen's "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?" (1976), and A. E. Afigbo's "The Native Revenue Ordinance in the Eastern Provinces: The Adventure of a Colonial Legislative Measure" (1982).

women for information, women were to raise the alarm. The bottom-line of women's mobilization was that they wanted the reassurance that they were not to be taxed.[6]

In the heightened atmosphere of mistrust, on November 23, 1929, Marc Emeruwa, an agent of the Oloko Warrant Chief, entered a compound and asked one of the married women to count her goats and sheep. According to a historian of the colonial administration, Margery Perham, the woman replied with the insult, "Was your mother counted?" A physical altercation followed the reply and "they closed, seizing each other by the throat" (Perham, 207). Nwanyeruwa, the woman involved in the altercation, alerted the Oloko women and convinced them of their upcoming taxation. In turn, Oloko women alerted women of the Owerri province, who flocked into Oloko to lend support and demonstrate against the British colonial administration and their warrant chiefs.[7] They demonstrated at the District Office, the seat of the colonial administration, and succeeded in obtaining the assurances that they were not going to be taxed. However, still the women were unsatisfied and they decided to protest against the British colonial invasion and the colonial enterprise. They literally "sat on" Marc Emeruwa, the census agent, and demanded that he be stripped of his official duties. Then, they mounted mass protests and organized various gatherings for several days, leading to Marc Emeruwa's

[6] For more on the confusion about the taxation of women, see Harry A. Gailey's *The Road to Aba: A Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria* (1970) and A.E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (1972).

[7] It must be noted that to use Margery Perham's writings as supporting historical materials here is fraught with tension because as a historian of the colonial administration, she was implicated in the colonial enterprise. However, we need to engage her writings and those of the other historians and anthropologists closely connected with the colonialists because these remain the very few sources available to us on the Igbo Women's War.

arrest, trial, conviction, and imprisonment. One of the colonial administration anthropologists sent in to investigate the War, Harry Gailey, reports that Marc Emeruwa was sentenced to two years of imprisonment on the charges of "spreading news likely to cause alarm" and of physical assault on women (108-113). Despite the measures and the sentence, women continued to protest, and news of their victory over the warrant chiefs spread quickly and galvanized women in many areas who also wanted to get rid of their warrant chiefs and the British colonial administration. Their massive protests resulted in what has become known as the 1929 Women's War. During the protest, thousands of women took possession of and damaged several Native administrative centers, courthouses, European factories, and any site that signified the European intrusion in Igboland.

Demonstrations at the offending sites consisted of singing, dancing, and verbal abuse. In addition to the destruction of buildings, women also used genital cursing (also known as social nudity) by sitting on men with naked buttocks. The meaning of the practice is that since mothers and women are framed as the seat of society, their public nudity is implicitly the society's nudity, degradation, and humiliation. As discussed above, in the colonial Igbo worldview, literally "sitting on" a man with naked buttocks, or striking a man with a menstrual cloth, or threateningly showing a man one's nakedness are considered the ultimate punishments available to women and the equivalent of a literal death sentence of the man so targeted. Colonial officials recognized these practices as native practices; however, it remains unclear whether cases that involved deaths

resulting from genital cursing were brought under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan law. During the war, while most women wore palm fronds around their waists and heads (the traditional female war attire that I will discuss later), the most militant ones wore almost nothing and taunted men to look at their mothers' genitals. According to anthropologist Misty Bastian, contrary to their everyday attire, elder women undressed against both the colonial regime and its warrant chiefs: "Disrobing as a group was a potent example of social nudity, especially when the *oto* display was combined with a well-understood women's sanction, genital cursing" (45).

The 1929 Women's War was unprecedented because women of the Owerri and Calabar provinces used every available mode of resistance, from grassroots leadership, indigenous organizing to invocation of female ancestors, and even the use of their naked body parts. Igbo men understood the gravity of the act, whereas British colonialists mocked its seriousness as a threat. The colonial administration silenced the anti-colonial demonstrations by using large numbers of police, soldiers, and even Boy Scouts. They opposed Igbo women's sticks and social nudity with guns and bayonets, killing about fifty women, and one man. These figures, reported by the colonial investigative study (*Notes of Evidence taken at the Commission of Inquiry appointed to inquire into the disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December 1929,* published in 1930) have since been contested. The narrator of Echewa's novel gives more than one hundred as the number of women killed. Following the war, the colonial empire put together the

Aba Commission of Inquiry to shed light on the disturbances, and the commission produced the above-mentioned report.

Not only were the deadliest forces mobilized to crush women's violent protests, but also the British colonial administration, in its official history, downplayed the significance of the struggle and characterized it as riots. According to historian Judith Van Allen, an ideological agenda was behind the naming of the event as the "Aba Riots," after Aba, the region affected by the war (1976). She argues that, whereas "women's war" stressed the prominent role of women and the idea of a grave assault on an enemy, the British localized, diminished, and diffused the impact of the revolt. Nigerian scholar Chikwenye Ogunyemi further complicates the naming of the Women's War with her coding of the event as the "Women's Struggle" (53). She thinks that "war" refers to a neat, closed, and time-situated category, whereas "Women's Struggle," an ongoing effort, more accurately reflects women's resistance.

With its economic, military, and ideological powers, the colonial administration considered itself victorious as colonization continued in Nigeria until 1960. But, in Echewa's novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, Igbo women refuse to consider the violent encounter a defeat as they celebrate their victory and abilities to climb "the sky and set the sky on fire" (39). Celebrating in lullabies sung to "little sisters" and re-counting the War reflect Igbo women's engagement in empowering future female generations. Their determination to stand up and express their resistance using their legs, arms, and ultimately their naked body parts was a victory in itself, as the epigraph suggests. Of

course, the novel seeks to acknowledge women's courage, proposing an enabling narrative in opposition to the disabling narratives of British colonialists. But further, it disturbs the colonial Igbo patriarchal historiography that downplayed women as passive subjects during anti-colonial struggles and their bodies as soiling and terrifying.

2- Of the Novel and the Author

T. Obinkaram Echewa was born in Nigeria and holds a Ph.D. from Syracuse University. Currently, he is Professor of English and a Novelist in Residence at West Chester University, Pennsylvania. He has published several works for adults and children.[8] His most acclaimed novel, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (hereinafter referred to as *ISSCF*), was published in 1992 in the United States and received unusual attention in the American print media as an African novel.[9] Enthusiastic reviews of the novel appeared in about thirty newspapers and journals within a year of its publication. However, it has met with a relatively cold academic and scholarly response, especially compared to the publicity it received in the American print media. Also, it is difficult to explain the eight-year gap between the publication of the novel in 1992 and the first academic essay in

[8] His literary productions include: *The Land's Lord* (1976); *The Crippled Dancer* (1986); and several children's books: *The Magic Tree: A Folktale from Nigeria* (1999); *How Tables Came to Umu Madu: The Fabulous History of an Unknown Continent* (1992); and *The Ancestor Tree* (1994).

[9] *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Houston Chronicle, The Philadelphia Inquirer, San Francisco Chronicle, Boston Herald, Boston Globe, Booklist, New York Newsday, South Bend Tribune, St. Petersburg Times, National Black Review, Palm Beach Post, Milwaukee Journal, Virginian Pilot/Ledger Star, Publishers Weekly, L.A. Reader*, and *The New York Times. etc*

2000.[10] By publishing the novel in the United States, whether out of convenience or lack of options, Echewa makes Igbo women's acts of resistance accessible to a global audience.

That the novel reaches a global audience is a far cry from the fragmented, multi-sourced stories of women's resistance in the novel. According to Ajuzia the scribal narrator, colonial and local patriarchal configurations of powers contributed to relegate women's resistance and the 1929 Women's War to "the general lore of the villages" (23). Not only were stories of women's struggle marginalized and absent from textbooks, but there also was no official effort to preserve them. For that reason, women's determination in the war remains either underappreciated or scarcely known. Consequently, Ajuzia praises his grandmother's decision to pass on to him the precious historical events through storytelling. In the absence of official archiving structures, the collective memory with its ruptures, gaps, and breaks come to stand in opposition to the linear British official history. In that context, there is the temptation to bestow on the novel the role of THE archive read history. However, we ought to refrain from dismissing the fragmented stories on charges of inaccuracies and from upholding the novel as a higher and complete

[10] Derek Wright "Whither Nigerian Fiction? Into the Nineties" (1995); Abioseh Michael Porter, "A New 'New' Jerusalem? West African Writers and the Dawn of the New Millennium" (2000); Teresa Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Aje in Africana Literature* (2005); Bella Brodzki, *Can These Bones Live?: Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory* (2007); and Jane Bryce "'Half and Half Children': Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel" (2008).

history.[11] Rather, the novel should stand side by side with the fragmented oral stories (memories) because these register the contribution of all members of the community. In the same vein, oral stories, lullabies, historical, anthropological, and fictional renderings of the event reach different audiences and do different types of cultural work. They complement one another to present deeper and diverse understandings of the 1929 Women's War. As a double narrative fiction, *ISSCF* has certainly been able to disseminate this narrative of resistance to postcolonial African and international readerships.

The novel masterfully blends facts and fiction, history, tales, anecdotes, and blurs the conventional assumption of preserving and transmitting women's stories. Two overlapping narrative voices recount the stories from two different social and gendered perspectives: the female voice, an illiterate grandmother named Nne-nne, and the educated, intellectual grandson, the scribal narrator who is named Ajuziogu, also known as Ajuzia. On the eve of Ajuzia's departure to the United States to pursue his doctorate, Nne-nne decides to tell him stories of women's determination and solidarity before and during the famous Igbo Women's War of 1929. Two reasons, political and social, motivate Nne-nne's decision. One, Nne-nne seeks to show her grandson her power and

[11] For more on the difference between memory and history, read Pierre Nora's famous essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire" (*Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24). Nora distinguishes memory from history, writing: "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (8). Later, he axiomatically claims: "History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it" (9).

abilities to lead the family compound in his absence, and second, with Ajuzia's imminent departure, which she can neither prevent nor delay and in the absence of another descendant that can serve as a vehicle of transmission, Nne-nne fears that women's stories will be lost to future generations. According to Ajuzia, the urgency of transmitting the stories, of sidestepping colonial and patriarchal historiographies to pass on empowering stories of women's courage, shaped the eerie atmosphere and turned the storytelling into an event similar to "a deathbed confession" (5), and Nne-nne into a metaphorical possessed or "a drinking hen" (3). The eerie atmosphere leads Africana women scholar Teresa Washington to read Nne-nne's storytelling as chanting and recitation, suggesting the intervention of mystical powers (2008).

That a female selects and transmits women's stories to a male disturbs the traditional line of passing down of history: female to female, mother to daughter. In the absence of daughters and granddaughters, Ajuzia is called on to fill the role. Echewa's choice of the grandson, the novelist's alter ego, as the channel of transmission of women's stories, also reflects the author's transcendence of the gender polarity operative in Nne-nne's world. His stance as a postcolonial writer negotiating multiple discourses bridges the gap between Western and "indigenous" approaches to narrative, gender, and their shifting historical relations.

The novel is divided into two major parts; the first one concerns women's stories, the second half recounts Ajuzia's life narrative and his struggles as a postcolonial intellectual torn between his dreams of defining himself and his duties to his family

compound. He leaves to pursue his education in the United States and returns to Nigeria after a five-year stay to find his wife, Stella, pregnant by another man. Before dying, Nne-nne uses her charisma, and the prerogatives of an elderly woman, to save her grandson's marriage. The novel ends with the protagonist's decision to stay in Nigeria rather than immediately return to the US to complete his Ph.D. Part one is set in the village of Ikputu Ala (Southeastern Nigeria) at the peak of colonialism in the 1920s. In it, Nne-nne weaves her life story with the resistance stories of several other women and those of *Oha Ndom*, the Igbo name for women's solidarity. She allows the reader to understand the powerful and sacred bond that united women and the leverage they enjoyed in their fight against patriarchal institutions: "[T]together as *Oha Ndom*, we are fiecer than the first windstorm of the rainy season" (10). Whereas women are associated with nature, here Nne-nne defines women's solidarity as more powerful than natural forces.

As a fictional narrative, *ISSCF* provides a new landscape through which to come into contact with and fully appreciate women who dared bare their nether parts against white colonialists and their native allies to protest unfair taxation and the colonial incursion.

III- The Dual-Sex System and Multiple Modes of Female Resistance

One of the defining characteristics of the cultural and social landscape that the novel imagines and in which female characters recuperate their bodies against disempowering meanings is the dual-sex political system.

1-How Non-Hierarchical is the Dual-Sex Political System?

To rebut arguments of the social hierarchy based on sex and to put forward the complementarity of sexes, several scholars, historians, and literary critics have published on the dual-sex political system in the precolonial Igbo, Yoruba, and Akan societies of Nigeria and Ghana, as I suggested above. Originally, before the effects of colonialism, the dual-sex political system operated with women having their own political wing and having access to political positions. In the economic sector, complementarity was translated in daily lives into women growing different crops from men, managing their own affairs, and leading their own market associations and trade guilds. However, with the systematic appointments of men as warrant chiefs, the colonial administration increasingly abraded the dual-sex political system, gradually instituting the "single-sex" system in which women lost most of their political prerogatives (Boserup 1970, Okonjo 1976, Ogunyemi 1996, Surdakasa 1996). Although these studies are compelling in showing some sort of complementarity, it seems more accurate to say that the model did not apply to all social and political spheres. In some situations women were equal to men, but not in all. And as Amina Mama claims, it appears that in general women occupied lower social positions (1996). Similar to some historical and anthropological works, Nne-

nne -- who is not an anthropologist -- reiterates the workings of the dual-sex political system in and the impact of colonialism on the Igbo society. But, she goes further to paint a more complex reality, the one in which sex and gender are sites of hierarchically categorizing men and women. She tells her grandson:

> Ajuziogu…men and women are like their organs. A woman's is mostly private, tucked away like a secret purse between her legs, with little to give away how big or deep it really is. A man's on the other hand, hangs loosely and swings freely about for all to see….A few years into old age, and men have to offer sacrifices and pour libations for their erection (10).

Much is implied in this quote, from complementarity to hierarchy between women and men, to biological determinism and the impact or colonial on gender relations. It rather looks like a snapshot of the cultural world of the first part of the novel.

In direct contradiction of the preconceived notion of the downtrodden and helpless African woman that the colonial intervention liberated, the narrative suggests a confident and outspoken woman in her interaction with her grandson. Nne-nne's ability to unabashedly refer to male and female genitalia reflects her level of confidence and assertiveness. In her views, shaped by her environment, women and men are reducible to their genitals, forever constituted in parallel mode to one another; this is the classical case of biological determinism, one in which the ovum and the testicles saturate the whole being and determine their behaviors. The parallel structure "on the other hand" compounds the marked difference and a parallelism between the sexes. This parallelism

rejects any possibility of gender modification or fluidity, which somewhere contradicts the meaning behind female circumcision and its goal of fixing women in their category. But, against the parallel structure in which one expects a complementarity, here the intrinsic qualities of genital organs, hardness and limpness, openness and closure and their social interpretations reveal the hierarchy between the sexes. Historical forces such as colonialism have reinforced the hierarchy and further reified the gap between men and women because men's openness rendered them porous to, and their limpness showed their inability to fight against colonial intruders. Opposed to men's genitals, women's genitals are framed as "secret purse[s]" a metaphor for women's contribution to the community's protection and survival. Unlike the exposed male genitals, women's sexual organs operate like a protective shield around the community and against malicious foreign attacks. During colonization when women demonstrated the will to resist, men showed impotence and resignation. Nne-nne continues: "When the White man came and took over our land, what did the men do? They fought here and there, heaved high and ho with threats of what they were getting ready to do, held long talks under the big trees and in the end handed over the land and all of us to him" (10). The narrative indicates that men's incapacity to fight against colonialism and its exploitative practices led Igbo women to wage war against British colonialists.

Nne-nne's reduction of women and men to their anatomy and her reification of sexes contradict the view of bodies among poststructuralist feminists and queer theorists. Also, her introduction of a category of analysis, placing women's organs in the higher

position above men's, reverses the Western, conventional hierarchical dualism, which I mentioned above. Based on her social experiences, Nne-nne's view is that women's bodies no longer occupy the lower rank because of anatomical attributes. Although this reversal favors women, a progressive feminist political agenda would move out of the dualism.

As female characters resist colonial conquest, they also have to resist the injustices of the Igbo patriarchal culture. In other words, resistance becomes their *de facto* mode of being. The novel substantiates that notion in the titles of six of the twelve chapters: "Women's Wars," "Why Women Go to War," "At War!" "Stella's Wars," "Civil and Domestic Wars," and "Modern Women and Modern Wars." Indeed, the theme of war permeates the narrative, and women are framed as endlessly waging wars. In the novel, because of their sex, women suffer male abuse and childlessness; they are denied the right to remain single, to stage a title-taking ceremony, and to engage in genital work among other cultural prohibitions. For Brosdki, Nne-nne's "oral history is framed by the war women seem eternally to wage against male treachery, truancy, inadequacy, and injustice" (128). One can concede that colonialism may have disrupted the dual-sex political system; however, the social injustice that women suffer seems so profound that it cannot be attributed entirely to colonialism. Based on Nne-nne's recounting, I think that *ISSCF* also problematizes not just the colonial archives on the war, but also postcolonial anthropological and historical texts with specific ideological and political agendas. Here, with its uncensored Nne-nne's oral stories, the novel restores social

agency to several women by representing a more complex narrative that includes various Igbo women's bodily forms of resistance.

In that context, *ISSCF* retroactively anticipates and expands on Mbembé's call to African intellectuals to take up the challenge of "African Modes of Self-Writing," which would restore agency to Africans (36). In the much-discussed essay, Mbembé estimates that contemporary African scholarship has been predominantly engaged in constructing a narrative of loss grounded in three historical phenomena: slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. For him, all these symbols of dispossession and subordination explain how suffering and victimization have become the mainstay of African intellectuals' "narrative of loss." Not only does *ISSCF* transcend the simplistic binaries of the narrative of loss and the narrative of agency, it also includes a narrative of mourning, shame, and vengeance. In addition, it also recognizes the very variables of gender and means of resistance that are absent from Mbembé's essay.

With its double narrative fiction, Echewa's novel is far from the passive recording of the 1929 Women's War. Rather, it is a devastating deconstruction of traditional patriarchal views of women as objects available for exploitation. To do so, it traces a long history of women's resistance, thereby achieving some of the goals shared by this dissertation: to excavate and illuminate buried or misrecognized female practices in order to provide a richer view of African women. Women's genital powers are not the only and most important avenue of female resistance. As a richly textured canvas, the novel imagines women from several age-groups and in various social positions: as healers and

leaders, wives of their husbands' brothers, abandoned wives and mothers, widows, childless and unmarried businesswomen, mothers and genital workers. The diversity of women and how they variously respect or resist patriarchal institutions shows the difficulty of speaking of a homogenous Igbo woman and, by implication, of the African woman. If in the small community of Ikputu Ala, one encounters such an array of women, the task of speaking of African woman becomes almost impossible. Speaking of the fictionality of a category such as "the African woman," Nigerian feminist scholar Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie opines: "[T]here is no such thing as 'the African woman.' She cannot be essentialised in that way; rather she has to be considered, analyzed and studied in the complexity of her existential reality; her classes, cultures, races, and ethnicities among other variables" (9). Based on her argument, African women cannot be packaged, approached, or studied as an undifferentiated mass. So, for a more accurate discussion of African women, the cultural critic must attend to their various resistance models of subjectivity: from patriarchally-supported institutions such as motherhood and healing to patriarchally-scorned practices such as economic, social independence, and sex work. The following sections will examine different women and the ways in which their powers uphold or abrade the patriarchal framework of domesticated female sexuality.

2-Nwanyi-Uguru, the "Harmattan Woman": Motherhood as Power

Of all the notable female characters of the novel, Nwanyi-Uguru comes closest to gaining her socio-cultural power from the privileged institution of motherhood. She is described as a woman whose husband abandoned her because of her physical

unattractiveness, hence her nickname the "Harmattan woman." Nwanyi-Uguru's nickname, metaphor of her "repulsive" physicality, refers to the harshest, windiest, coldest, and dustiest season in West Africa. Although humiliated as a wife, Nwanyi-Uguru's reproductive body, her abilities to bear children and most importantly to bear sons, invest her with social capital so much so that the whole village respects her. One day, falsely accused of theft and publicly ashamed, Nwanyi-Uguru's six male children, "all out of one woman's kitchen drove the whole village of Amapu!" (22). In their abilities to create terror by wielding machetes and threatening the villagers, Nwanyi-Uguru's sons restore her dignity. The narrator shows her admiration for the mother's nurturing abilities through the figurative language of "all out of one woman's kitchen." The combination of "all" and "one" emphasizes Nwanyi-Uguru's achievements, entertaining the conventional origin of women's powers in the Igbo social context, their children, more generally their reproductive bodies and nurturing powers.

The trope of the powerful mother permeates most West African novels, as I discussed in Chapter One. Motherhood is privileged to the extent that women's powers are often consigned to procreation, which comes to be conflated with womanhood. Literary critic Ketu Katrak cogently argues, "Postcolonial women writers do recognize motherhood as a significant part of cultural tradition, a role that is personally sustaining, and that carries enormous social status and prestige" (212). Although the patriarchal culture anoints motherhood, it still manages to erect it as a hierarchically-organizing institution depending of the sex of the baby. Sons-bearing mothers occupy the highest

position, followed by girls-bearing mothers, and at the bottom of the ladder are childless and economically-challenged women who cannot afford to become female husbands and metaphorically "father or mother" their children.[12] In the novel, Nwanyi-Uguru is the quintessential powerful mother, and next to her position is that of the acclaimed traditional healer. In the novel, that figure is Ugbala, also known as the "woman of all seasons."

3-Woman as Healer: Ugbala or the "Woman of all Seasons"

Nne-nne's description of Ugbala reminded Ajuzia that she was a rare combination of power, strength, and leadership abilities. As the village's most honored nurse, healer, and a two-headed doctor, Ugbala's appellation captures her versatility. She navigates with ease the material as well as the spiritual realm. She is called upon to deliver all the babies in the village as well as to attend the ill and terminally ill women and men. Ugbala is "an example of a woman of great sociopolitical and spiritual import: She is a true daughter of the Mother of the Earth and the most respected and feared entity in the text" (Washington 134-135). In her social position, Ugbala is a revered member of the patriarchal culture, for she helps it survive. In other words, Ugbala is the quintessential

[12] For a discussion on female husbands in African societies and fiction, see Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in An African Society* (1987); Stephen Murray and Bill Roscoe's *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (2001); Niara Surdakasa's "The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies" (1996); Chantal Zabus's "Of Female Husbands and Boarding School Girls: Gender Bending in Unoma Azuah's Fiction" (2008); and Sylvia Leith-Ross' *African Women: A Study of the 100 of Nigeria* (1939).

earth-mother prototype, prevalent in Africana women's literature.[13] Frequently, figures like her attract anthropologists and are called upon by "nativist" feminists in their attempt to argue for the existence of the powerful African woman. Like queen mothers and princesses, female healers such as Ugbala are the foundation on which stands patriarchy, and the trees that often hide the forest.[14] They are problematically and politically co-opted to represent the free and powerful African women.

Whereas Ugbala achieves her unparalleled social standing through healing, Afu-Ako, another female character deserves women's respect for her defiance of patriarchal practices, which she compounds with gendered solidarity.

4-Ufo-Aku, the "Headstrong Widow": Female Sacred Solidarity as Weapon

Revealingly nicknamed "a headstrong widow," Ufo-Aku fights against her deceased husband's relatives to gain the right to stage her *ihie-ede* ceremony that the Glossary section of the novel translates as "a ceremony celebrating a woman's farming success, admitting her to a title society" (322). The husband opposes the ceremony because of Ufo-Aku's supposed stubbornness. In his attempt to prevent the title-taking event with heavy rains, Ufo-Aku's former brother-in-law and now husband hires male rainmakers to summon the natural force. But, in defiance of the unnamed husband's

[13] For a sampling of materials that reflect on different aspects of women healers, see Teresa Washington's *Our Mothers, Our Texts, Our Powers* (2005); Trudier Harris' *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001); Valerie Lee's *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (1996); Kathleen M. Puhr's "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction" (1994); and Eva Lennox Burch's *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colors* (1994).

[14] For example, in the novel, Ugbala's outstanding social status attracted the attention of colonial anthropologists, including Mrs. Elizabeth Ashby-Jones. Bella Brodski offers an insightful analysis of the intersection of translation, gender, and ethnography and argues that Elizabeth Ashby-Jones may have been the historical counterpart of Sylvia Leith-Ross.

threats, Ufo-Aku hires a woman rainmaker, W'Obiara, another strong woman, who destroys the rain stones of the male rainmakers in the district.

The day of Ufo-Aku's ceremony, W'Obiara wears the traditional female war attire, two layers of loincloth "that she tied *isi-ngidingi*, to show that this was war" and leaves her upper body naked (8). By baring her upper body, W'Obiara reminds the village of the social and cultural significance of female nakedness. She then defies all the rainmakers, stalking and threatening "like a warrior daring anyone to challenge her to a joust, brandishing her fan and palm frond like a war machete and shield" (9). However, in her defiance of the male authority, W'Obiara never loses sight of the subordinated social position inherent to womanhood as she cries out: "I am a woman! Only and merely a woman, with a slit between her legs" (9). Again here, women and men are defined by their genitals. W'Obiara echoes Nne-nne's definition of female genitalia as secretive, deep and therefore powerful and rejects the conventional meaning of the hole, the "slit between [female] legs" as a sign of weakness. She reiterates the conventional belief in order to strongly rebut it with her action. In other words, men's views are beliefs and inaction while women's are action and determination. In W'Obiara, we find a variation of the powerful spiritual earth-mother prototype, but unlike Ugbala, she defies patriarchal power, chasing the rain away. This allows Ufo-Aku to organize a successful ceremony.

Ufo-Aku's ceremony testifies to the powerful nature of women's solidarity since no male rainmaker would have supported a woman in her defiance of the male order. Nne-nne always reminds her grandson: "[T]ogether as *Oha Ndom* [women's sacred

solidarity] we are fiecer than the first windstorm of the rainy season" (10). This idea is compellingly articulated in *Oha Ndom*'s many songs: "Where one is shot all of us will be shot./ When one dies, all of Ndom dies. Where one is buried, All of Ndom is buried!/ Ndom is one! Undivided/ United!" (21). Women's solidarity is crucial to their empowerment because of the gendered nature of their subjugation. However, when taken to the extreme, this gendered and inclusive form of sociality can turn into an oppressive apparatus.

Although the headstrong widow emerges victorious in the battle with her husband to stage her ceremony, she is overpowered, accused of witchcraft, and killed in a conspiracy that her husband, with the support of other males, masterminds.[15] How do we read Ufo-Aku's death, the triumph of injustice over justice, the defeat of defiant women? We shall return to this question, because the death or murder or mutilation of defiant female characters is a motif that runs through the two novels discussed in this dissertation.

5- Ahunze, the "Impossible Wife": Trade and the Making of a Powerful Woman

Ahunze is one of the defiant female characters who encounters a violent and chilling death. Indeed, like Ufo-Ako, her story entertains the dialectic of resistance and death. Ahunze is a combination of Afu-Ako and Ugbala because her mode of resistance is grounded in her psychological power, spiritual strength, and business acumen. As a

[15] A discussion on the origin of women's associations to witchcraft is available in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's pamphlet *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (1973).

childless widow, Ahunze defies social expectations of remarrying after the death of her husband. In the village lore, her rebellion is the source of many accusations against her: she poisons her husband, she fails to give birth, and she is a witch. Although Ahunze's in-laws disinherit her, she succeeds in becoming a successful trader. Of her, the men in the village say: "Something unheard of, that a woman, no less a widow without a son, could rebuff the entire manhood of a village" (124). According to patriarchal configurations, Ahunze should crash at the bottom of the social ladder because she is a widow who fails to give birth. However, Ahunze uses her trading skills to secure social capital in an increasingly monetarily oriented cash economy. Her ability to assist financially and empower other women against abusive men earns her popularity among women and among the men who need and benefit from her financial generosity. While men call Ahunze "Nwanyi Enwegh Nluma (Impossible Wife)," women admire her "gentle manner and tough spirit, an example of what best in women" (123). Her popularity with women is in stark opposition to her unpopularity among men who feel insulted that a childless widow refuses to remarry one of them. Despite the differing and opposing readings of her personality, Ahunze unsettles the stereotype of conventional male and female attributes. She gracefully blends what is considered an essentially female characteristic (gentleness) and male characteristic (strength of spirit). Male hatred towards Ahunze leads an abusive, frustrated, and obsessed man, Ozurumba, to hack her to death and set her house on fire.

Ahunze is one of the myriad of female characters who demonstrate the diversity of Igbo women and the differing ways in which they secure social capital and resist patriarchal constraints. However, no other resisting female character suffers more from social misrecognition than the one that the village nicknames the "harlot woman."

IV- Oyoyo Love, the "Public Woman": Culturally-Banned Genital Power

As a female "prostitute" in the colonial city, Oyoyo Love is a compelling character who gives us the opportunity to reflect on several questions related to the creation and development of the colonial African city, colonial governance and the containerization of the native as a tribesman, and individual freedom and social constraints. For the remainder of this chapter, I will use the less culturally- and morally-loaded term "sex work" or "genital work" to replace "prostitution." I consider "genital work" more apt to represent Oyoyo Love's trade because it implies the unmediated and biological use of genitals. I consider it unmediated because readers are led to believe that Oyoyo Love's love for her trade is not predicated upon the search for pleasure or sexual reproduction but, rather the rational economic accumulation of capital.

1- Colonialism, Migration, and Genital Work

Nwanyi-Nma, whom the village also calls the "public woman," births two babies and flees the village, leaving her children and husband in order to become a genital worker in the city of Agalaba Uzo. She takes the revealing trade name Oyoyo Love and uses her body as a commodity to free herself from her husband's yoke and patriarchal ideology. However, her tactic clashes with culturally-sanctioned bodily modes of social agency such as sex strike, vaginal drying, or sexual insult (public undressing). In the novel, unlike other genital powers, genital work is tied exclusively to colonialism because "At about the time the War started, women were doing things [genital work] that were once unheard of for women to do" (43). As a character, Oyoyo Love highlights one of the paradoxes of colonization; although it was brutal and exploitative, it opened structures between which existed zones of relative freedom and self-determination for the colonized. The introduction of cash economy and taxation, the increasing disintegration of the native modes of being, and the need of migrant labor in the emerging colonial city indirectly contribute to the establishment of sex work in the urban area (White 1990). In fact, the colonial administration encourages the migration of men without their families. According to Mahmood Mamdani, because of its racial segregation policy and the perpetual neurosis about the "detribalized African," colonial officials seek to prevent the migration of the native family, more specifically of women and children, to the urban areas or the farms (*Citizen and Subject*, 1996). Controlling urban areas and migration was justified by the need to maintain indigenous social structures intact; and the success of

those actions was predicated upon women's immobility. So, conveniently, through the provision of genital services for laboring men, city-based female genital workers like Oyoyo Love participate in the colonial economy, the smooth running of the migrant labor system in particular, and of the colonial ideology in general.[16]

As a savvy businesswoman aware of her physical assets and the lust they provoke in men, Oyoyo Love takes advantage of opportunities, and decides to cash into them by relocating in the city. Of all of the female characters in the novel, Oyoyo Love's physicality receives the most considerable attention. Just like the village, the narrator focuses on her "endowments," describing her in voluptuous and concupiscent terms. She is "[t]he type of lusty woman who would have made a good third and fourth wife for a man of voracious sexual appetite -- big legs, big breasts, big eyes undimmed by shyness, a quick laugh, and a loud, raucous voice that was too ready to bandy flirtatious words with men" (48). As the narrator suggests, social configurations expect Oyoyo Love to act as a sexual object to her husband. Against this construction of her self, she engages in a self-actualizing practice, using her genital body as a commodity. To do so, she justifies both her trade and choice by comparing conventional marriage to a debased form of prostitution, reminding her mother and mother-in-law of situations of quarrels in which

[16] For more on female sex work and the colonial political economy, see Luise White's *The Comforts of Home* (1990). Using the life histories and memories of women informants, former sex workers in Nairobi, White argues that sex work was reproductive labor in colonial Nairobi. She removes the question of prostitution from the unsatisfying rhetoric of victimization, degeneration, and studies "the workings of a colonial society from its most intimate moments - the interaction of the work of daughters, makeshift arrangements of male migrants, and long-term strategies of rural lineages and urban employers" (ix). Although White focuses on colonial Nairobi, her study sheds light on the development of the colonial city of the novel.

women bragged about their bride prices.[17] For Oyoyo Love, genital work is preferable, with adequate pay and without the beating and "humbug."[18] Not only does she receive compensation for her body, but men also gladly and eagerly pay for her services as she explains:

> You can say your daughter is a big businesswoman in the township, that her name is on the signboard of a bar on Asa Road, the biggest street in all of Agalaba Uzo, and that she now has enough money to come home in a few weeks to repay her husband every broken manila he had paid on her account. That after I have paid back to Onwu-Ghara the bride price that made me his wife, I will be a free woman. (60)

Oyoyo Love's self-consciousness is evident in the clear articulation of her goals and practices: accumulate capital to pay back her bride price, gain freedom from a husband she despises, shape her life, and escape from traditional women's roles. By managing her social and individual identity as a businesswoman and operating outside traditional household structures and in the interstices of colonial rule, Oyoyo Love refuses to be isolated in categories of deviancy and pathology. For her, genital work becomes a means of resisting both colonialism and the local patriarchy.

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[17] This definition is eerily reminiscent of Friedrich Engels' observation that "Monogamy and prostitution are indeed contradictions, but inseparable contradictions, poles of the same state of society" (*The Origin of the Family*, 1972, 139).

[18] White quotes a former "mayala prostitute," Kayaya Thababu, saying that her patrons treated her with deference and respect: "men came to my room with respect" (55).

2-The Autological Subject and the Genealogical Society

However, *Oha Ndom*, the women's solidarity, combats Oyoyo Love and her means of resistance. True to the sacred solidarity of women and to sanitize womanhood, *Ndom* mobilizes and travels to the city in hundreds to retrieve Oyoyo Love from what they consider her shameful trade. They seek to return her to a state of respectable womanhood, achievable only through marriage. Through their actions, *Oha Ndom* denies Oyoyo Love any social agency and consider her a victim to untrammeled sexual impulses, and therefore pathological, in need of a cure. After the forced return home, Oyoyo Love is circumcised, but the circumcision fails "to cure" her. She later flees to the city and has the police arrest her mother, husband, mother-in-law, and the woman who circumcised her on charges of attempted murder. About Oyoyo Love's choices, Nne-nne complains: "Can you imagine a child using the White man's law to sue her own mother and mother-in-law, and the police sent to arrest them…?" (45). Clearly, Oyoyo Love and the village women differ on their readings of what counts as freedom and genital form of resistance.

Using the disruption of its assumed universal solidarity of women, the novel introduces a breach in the well-oiled gendered female machine that is *Oha Ndom*. The society's uneasiness towards and handling of Oyoyo Love's choice shows it as an oppressive entity, shaping and directing bodies and voices, and most clearly subjecting a particular to the totalizing general. By denying Oyoyo Love the possibility of writing her own history with her body, *Oha Ndom's* discourse colludes with the patriarchal familial

institution to exclude certain stories. Operating as an imagined community, women's solidarity empowers women, but it also smothers individual enterprise and crushes those who refuse to espouse its principles and practices. The dynamic between Oyoyo Love and *Oha Ndom* in the colonial era is reminiscent of the dynamic that Achille Mbembé identifies in the postcolony between the individual and what he calls "social tax," which works to bind the individual to the community: "The philosophy that underpinned this social tax began with the principle that every individual was indebted to a collective heritage that was not only financial but embraced knowledge, in short, the material and the identitary infrastructure without which the individual could undertake nothing" (47). Mbembé continues to argue that the failure to pay or to conform to the social constraints amounts to the transgressor's social death. Indeed, by refusing to participate in and strengthen the identitary infrastructure of *Oha Ndom*, Oyoyo Love is denied the socio-cultural consideration of a woman and is therefore socially put to death. *Oha Ndom* is an institution mired in coherence and incoherence, thus resisting comforting and simplistic definitions of either/or.

The clash between *Oha Ndom* and Oyoyo Love with regard to genital powers moves beyond the immediate disagreement to reflect larger structural configurations. While *Oha Ndom*'s worldview is grounded in cultural determination and the sacred solidarity of women, Oyoyo Love's is resolutely turned towards individualism, an approach reminiscent of liberal humanism's fetishized celebration of the sovereignty of the subject. Although incommensurate and seemingly opposed, both forms of sociality, of

which *Oha Ndom* and Oyoyo Love are the exemplars, constitute what Elizabeth Povinelli has termed the autological subject and the genealogical society.[19] On the superficial level, they appear to negate each other, but in reality, they are intimately connected and feed each other. The reality is that both are encouraged under colonial liberal governance. In fact, to morally justify the "colonizing" mission, the colonial ideology labeled the colonized mode of sociality negative and implicated it in the production of alterity. The colonized was therefore infantilized because she was believed to be culturally over-determined and incapable of moving towards individual self-determination. From that perspective, a figure such as Oyoyo Love and her pursuit of self-autonomy comfort the colonial administration in its "civilizing mission." However, during colonization, in order to enforce the cultural segregation policy, colonial officials are at pains to maintain intact the native social structures and their customary law. Based on that policy, Oyoyo Love comes to represent a threat to the colonial ideology because she is underdetermined. By using the quintessential structures of the colonial rule, the police, to arrest her family members, Oyoyo Love breaks free from the bind of various kinds of inheritances and becomes underdetermined and therefore almost impossible to discipline. In that sense, her figure parallels the contemporary radical faeries of the US, those "continuously characterized as being unencumbered by real families or real traditions or real dependencies" (101). Speaking of them, Povinelli remarks: "At times, they appear as the nightmare version of the modern unattached self" (101). Indeed, Oyoyo Love represents

[19] *In The Empire of Love* (2006), Povinelli defines the genealogical society as discursive practices that stress social constraints in the constitution of the subject.

that nightmare in the colonial world of the novel. After all, normalizing governance practices of the European Enlightenment and modernity position the heteronormative couple and family, and not the unmarried woman sex worker, as the model of sociality to produce and regulate.

Oyoyo Love's character is a figure of multiple transgressions. Not only does her narrative of modernity (relocation in the city and genital work) clash with the indigenous, community-oriented grand narrative of *Oha Ndom* but, it also and at times disrupts the colonial ideology. Through her genital work and in the pursuit of autonomous self-fashioning, she resists colonialism by transgressing the spatial boundaries between the private and public spaces, and those that the colonial administration set for colonized women. Not surprisingly, colonial officials' response to sex work is mired in paradox. While it seeks to uphold the patriarchal rule of families by enforcing policies that rounded up unmarried women to control women's mobility (Allman 1996), it also tolerates sex work as a necessary corollary of a functioning labor system. It is in that space between tolerance and rejection that Oyoyo Love exercises social and financial agency. Simultaneously a metaphor of modernity and as a social agent, she departs from the recurrent single story of the victimized "prostitute."

3- The Female "Prostitute" Figure in West African Literature

By juxtaposing Oyoyo Love with previous characterizations of the "prostitute" figure" in West African novels, *ISSCF* emerges as a novel that moves beyond the single stories of the eternal victim and of the self-determined subject.[20] The novel's positioning between these two extremes makes Oyoyo Love a believable character, one that is not co-opted in the author's overt political and social agenda. While her clear articulation of her goal destabilizes the conventional trope of the sex worker as a victimized object, she is still perceived at times as the metaphor of the vices of colonization and of the so-called clash of civilizations. Here, echoing Odile Cazenave and her analysis of canonical works, we can say that Oyoyo Love "is no longer a traditional prostitute in the sense that she serves to represent only the vices of colonization" (42). She represents those vices and more. At times, when the narrator allows her to articulate her goal -- to shape her life -- Oyoyo Love emerges as a full subject capable of self-consciousness and self-representation. In those moments, the reader witnesses the narrative attempt to revise masculinist and moralist representations of the female genital worker.[21]

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[20] At this point, it is necessary to "defeminize" sex work in the African context. Just like homosexuality, which has been overwhelmingly depicted in masculinist terms, commercial sex work is predominantly considered a female occupation. In recent years, male sex work is on the rise in some African countries and statesmen are stepping in, attempting to curb what they regard as an undesirable trade with pedophilic undertones. In 2006, *The Statesman*, a major Ghanaian newspaper, ran an editorial on the issue, writing: "A particular kind of sex tourism that is growing in Accra is male prostitution. Labadi, Osu, Adabraka and Kokomlemle are becoming notorious with rent boys. These are where foreign men come to find the young male sex workers known commonly as rent boys" ("Ghana Must Open her Eyes to the Growing Sex Tourism," 9 July 2006). See also Anne Look's "Senegal Draws Tourists with Sun, Sea and Sex." (29 April 2010) and Charles Becker's "Law, Ethics and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa Senegal as a Case Study" (2006).

[21] Through this in-between characterization of Oyoyo Love, *ISSCF* can be classified as a progressive novel, especially with regard to Khalid Kishtainy's analysis in *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature* (1982).

Through the depiction of a sex worker who refuses to talk about her trade in the moralizing idiom of vice and victim, Echewa announces the tradition that was later taken up and expanded by Francophone West African women novelists. For example, in their imaginings, Angele Rawiri from Gabon and Calixthe Beyala from Cameroon and later a French resident, retrieve the figure of the prostitute from the novelistic background to give it "comparable intensity and dimension." Not only did these "rebellious women" writers, as they were called, stage their rebellion, displacing the focus on sex work as a metaphor of moral degeneration (Cazenave 1996, Hitchcott 2000), but they also entered into a conceptual oppositional terrain, reclaiming and re-creating that which have always been in danger of being disciplined and smothered by patriarchal practices.[22] Although literary critics such as Gallimore, Stratton, Cazenave, and Hitchcock conceptualize the new face of women's sexuality in West African texts, there was little attempt made to examine the choice of terminology in the light of new theoretical developments in gender and sexuality studies. They continue to use the more culturally specific, morally laden term "prostitute" rather than the politically correct terms "sex worker" and "commercial sex worker."

Tracking the trope of the "prostitute" in literature, Kishtainy argues that the prostitute figure typically serves as a tool for political critique of the comprador bourgeoisies and their moral corruption. But, he analyzes Nigerian Cyprien Ekwensi's 1961 novel *Jagua Nana* and Ghanaian Ata Ama Aidoo's 1970 play *Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral*, to argue that though the figures belong to the archetypes, their authors allow the reader to understand the protagonists from their own perspectives.

[22] For more on Francophone African women writers and the "prostitute" figure, see Nicki Hitchcott's *Women Writers in Francophone Africa* (2000). In it, Hitchcott argues that Calixthe Beyala remains at the forefront of the battle for gender equality by featuring prostitute figures and debasing heterosexual relationships in the eyes of female characters: Beyala's works give each prostitute character "its own life and development, creating it from the inside according to a feminine point of view"(61). But, both similar and unlike the male writers that Stratton critiques, Beyala encodes "prostitution" as a metaphor for the loss of identity and markers. See footnote 27 on page 27.

Through the imaginings of W'Obiara, Ufo-Aku, Ahunze, Ugbala, and Oyoyo Love, *ISSCF* comes out as a richly textured canvas with images of resisting women. The female rainmaker with her war attire has set the stage for how women may use culturally-sanctioned modes of resistance and codes of anger and determination. Although she announces the colors, she is not pushed to the point of genital cursing. But, the anger culminates as extreme circumstances, forcing women to resort to more severe and aggressive uses of genital powers such as "sitting on" a man and social nudity.

V-Public Undressing and Sitting On: The Vengeance of the Soiling Body

> "Deviancy returns from abjection by deploying just those terms which relegated it to that state in the first place-including 'nature' and 'essence'…A complex and revealing dialectic between the dominant and the deviant emerges from histories of homosexual representation, especially from the homosexual (later gay) appropriations of nature and essence"
>
> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (1991, 125).

In the novel, women of Ipkutu Ala recuperate what their society considers to be the terrifying aspects of their bodies to resist and punish Igbo male offenders as well as the British colonial administration and their warrant chiefs. For example, Nne-nne uses her naked buttocks against her husband's enemies and estranged relatives, and women "sit on" Ozurumba for battering his pregnant wife, Ekpa-Ego. But, the most extreme use of genital cursing in the novel occurs during the war, when countless women denude their buttocks against the White Officer, Malcolm Davis and the "Heartless Munchi" soldiers.

1-Nne-nne's Naked Buttocks in the Rescue of her Husband

Early on in the narrative, the reader is introduced to the use of naked genitalia as a weapon. The illiterate grandmother and oral narrator Nne-nne uses genital cursing against her husband's enemies and relatives during a witch trial, in which her husband is accused. Described as "a nerve-grating complainer," Nna-nna's inability to fight his fellow men forces Nne-nne to step in and fight for him (10). Ajuzia recalls the incident: "Nne-nne had pulled up her loincloth and turned her naked buttocks up into the faces of the men's assembly and dared them to do their worst with her!" (10). Nne-nne considers her act successful since no man dares to confront her; but she complains about being pushed to resort to her ultimate and deadliest weapon. By metaphorically writing the law of revenge with her body, with its nakedness as pen and signifier, Nne-nne effectively expresses the outrage that her voice failed to convey. Her weapon is compelling because it rejects one of the fundamental features of patriarchy, which consists in privatizing the female body. So against the laws of concealment that are brought to bear on her body, Nne-nne writes opposing laws, those of resistance and freedom. Without her intentional nakedness, Nne-nne's body is just another productive and reproductive body in the market and patriarchal economies. However, her uncovered buttocks make a compelling yet problematic social and political intervention, for as we learn later, the men are baffled by her dangerous act and avenge themselves on the grandfather. Their fear of female bodies leads them to direct their attacks against the husband. Here, it appears that genital cursing does not

solely benefit women, since it is sometimes used to wash off the affront suffered by a male partner.

2- Sitting On an Abusive Igbo Man and the Reverse Discourse

Similar to Nne-nne, outraged market women in the novel organize a "sitting on" Ozurumba to punish him for battering his pregnant and helpless wife, Ekpa-Ego. In the village, it is a common knowledge that Ozurumba is infertile; and after years of marriage and childlessness, his wife takes a lover who impregnates her. Upon learning of her infidelity and pregnancy, Ozurumba batters her, giving her a black eye. Following the lead of Ahunze, the "Impossible wife" whom Ekpa-Ego has befriended, the market women condemn Ozurumba's act and decide to teach him a collective lesson by using genital cursing. Organized with a plan of action, they take siege of his compound, strip him naked, push him "to the ground and spread him out, face up, and holding his hands and legs so he could not struggle free. They take turns at sitting on him, pulling up their cloths and kirtles to bare their buttocks and planting their nakedness on every exposed element of his body" (146). Detailing the steps leading up to sitting on Ozurumba gives the description a dramatic touch. It is the novel's way of sidestepping the limitation of the novelistic form. The details almost work like a linguistic video of the punishment, making sure that the significance of women's act is not lost on the reader. The angry women plant their naked buttocks on Ozurumba's naked body. The figurative term "planting" is particularly revealing; one, it expresses women's determination and potential for violence, and second, their goal of putting on Ozurumba's body the seeds of

curse from the “soiling” genitals. Since genital cursing is a culturally-sanctioned practice in the novel, other Igbo male characters refrain from physically disrupting the collective punishment. In fact, they feel helpless and seek to prevent the punishment through verbal negotiations, but they fail.

Eja-Egbu, one of the village’s eldest men, frames the incident as an abomination and notes its near-extinction: “Women used to sit on people a long time ago, but I have not heard of it in recent times” (149). Although Eja-Egbu offers no explanation for the infrequency of the practice, I would argue that colonialism with its introduction of Christian values and mission schools contributed to drive it underground. The significance of the potent effect of sitting on a man is not lost on Ozurumba as the narrator explains: “Ozurumba felt severely aggrieved […] A disgrace beyond repetition has been visited upon him, the ignominy and shame of a lifetime. [Women’s] smelly and sweaty bottoms on his face, their rank wetness and the prickly hair of their things in his mouth and eyes! Unspeakable abomination. He would have rather fallen into a latrine” (151-2). The collective punishment leaves Ozurumba in a dazed state and unable to linguistically articulate the effects of the most terrifying event that may befall him.

Indeed, in the cultural world of the novel, it is the disgrace of the highest order to experience the “sitting on.” For a man to be stripped naked and sat on by a female, or several females for that matter, is the equivalent of being in the bottom position, a place conventionally reserved for the female body in a male/female pair. It is the equivalent of being “ridden” as a woman or a donkey, of being symbolically castrated. The sheer

number of women who sit on the victim leads him to repeatedly relive the haunting experience of symbolic castration.

The loss of his metaphorical manhood is all the more shameful in Ozurumba's case because he is publicly known as lacking in manhood, more specifically as suffering from infertility. In fact, Ozurumba, whom Ahunze names an "impotent waif of a man" (134), fails several of his cultural manly obligations. Not only does he fail in the primary test of manhood, which is intimately attached to his ability to maintain and perpetuate his lineage, he also fails to prevent his wife from cheating on him, and lastly he fails to financially and materially provide for her. In the patriarchal configurations of gender roles, Ozurumba is the epitome of failure. In this way, he literalizes the notion that patriarchy is not oppressive just to women but, also to men that fail to live up to its expectations. However, as a man and believing in the value attached to violence, he uses it against Ahunze, hacking her to death and setting her house on fire. His act of "annihilating" violence represents in his eyes the mechanism to replenish the manhood of which the women rob him. In that case, male violence against the female body becomes instrumental in the constitution of male subjectivity. But, Ozurumba's recovery of his manhood through violence patently fails because he commits suicide. By publicly sitting on Ozurumba, stripping him of his manhood, women utilize their bodies to reverse the conventional dichotomy of masculinity/ femininity. Their act bears out the Foucauldian theory of the "reverse discourse."

Although Michel Foucault has been critiqued for his blindness to gender and coloniality, his study of the reverse discourse as deployed by homosexuality is useful here to explore colonized Igbo women's tactics. Foucault says that homosexuality "began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (102). In fact, the disparaging language of filth and defilement that Ozurumba uses to describe female genitalia reflects his fear of and disdain toward women and his goal of producing difference. What's more, in the Igbo world, to refer to a woman's genitalia as smelly constitutes the masculinist and sexist insult of the highest order (Ardener 1973, 54). In *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988), speaking in a slightly different context, Elizabeth Spelman terms such reaction as "somatophobia." By using their "soiling" and threatening genitalia to punish men, women appropriate in their favor the same vocabulary that is used to subjugate them. In Jonathan Dollimore's reading of Foucault, they become the return of the deviant. Through the appropriation of the terms of their abjection, we see a similar process here, women enter into the cycle of resistance, subjugation, and resistance. That cycle takes on a more visible form in the light of new backlashes against contemporary uses of bared body parts as means of protest. Although the backlash against genital power demands that the weapon be reassessed, its use in the novel demonstrates women's resourcefulness and their refusal to be confined to a victimized social position.

3-The Vagina Head: Collapsing the Mind and Body Split

Almost fifteen years after the 1929's War in Igboland, in November 29-30, 1947, similar struggles broke out between Yoruba women and the colonial administration. During their demonstrations against female taxation, female protesters renamed genital cursing as the "vengeance of the vagina head" (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997). According to Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba, women sang lyrics such as: "Idowu [Alake], for a long time you have used your penis as your mark of authority that you are our husband. Today we shall reverse the order and use our vagina to play the role of husband on [sic] you. . . . O you men, vagina's head will seek vengeance" (87). Here, the lyrics revise the traditional reading of the "head" as a manly feature and a metaphor of responsibility and leadership. By investing the vagina with a phallic symbol, by weaving it with the head, women attribute to the vagina thinking and planning qualities, thereby displacing the conventional meaning of the vagina as a receptive, hollow, or passive organ marked for subjugation. In the process, they collapse the false antinomy between women and head, mind and body, thinking and feeling, pleasure and thought. Unlike the conventional European dualism that dismembers the individual into body and mind, the women suggest their inseparability and constitute them as necessary for the wholesomeness of the individual (Washington 2007). Women's reading bears out the inseparability of the mind and body split, native to several African cosmogonies, as I suggested in Chapter One.

African philosophy has produced compelling scholarship rejecting the Cartesian dualism that divides the world in two substances: matter and mind. Of course, it would be misleading to assume a monolithic African philosophy because as D.A. Masolo argues, the predominance of the Christian-driven dualist view of personhood in contemporary African thought was the result of the "precarious" marriage African ethnotheologists attempted to celebrate between Christianity and Africanity.[23] So, I will not embark on a lengthy rehearsal of personhood in African philosophical enquiries here, other than to sketch out the basic outlines as set in Kwasi Wiredu's study of personhood and Michael Jackson and Ivan Karp's exploration of the concept among the Oromo of Ethiopia.

Moving away from the "hybrid" view of personhood, Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu examines the Akan view of personhood to argue against the mind and body split. Wiredu rejects the Cartesian divide and its definition of the mind as "non-physical" because every substance is made of physical particles. Since in the Akan language the word for "thought" is the same for "mind," Wiredu infers that the "mind is the function of thought" (1996, 16) and that "communication makes the mind" (21). In other words, humans capable of thought are persons and not just human beings. Other scholars of African philosophy, Michael Jackson (no, not the late pop star) and Ivan Karp provide the Oromo take on the mind and body split. In the introduction to their 1990 *Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures*, they report: "By locating thought within the body, the Oromo model avoids the Cartesian split

[23] For more on personhood in African philosophy, see D. A. Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010).

which beggars so much ethnographical description and leads to false antinomies between the rational mind and the disorderly life of the body and the emotions" (17). Through the conception of the vagina as a head, a thinking entity, female demonstrators at the 1947 protest reject the separateness of body and mind just like women of Ipkutu Ala.

4- The 1929 Women's War: Genital Cursing and the Freudian Uncanny

According to Nne-nne, the war began when Sam-El, the British colonial administration's counter, approached Ekpa-Ego, a pregnant widow, with his notebook, pencil, and a list of questions. She was busy processing palm mash when he asked her name and how many children, goats, sheep, and chickens she had in her chicken coop. Ekpa-Ego, whose husband committed suicide after being sat on, turned on the census taker and insulted him: "Has your mother been counted?" (40). Outraged, Sam-El beat Ekpa-Ego, causing her to miscarry, and sending thousands of women on a destructive rampage. The incident with Ekpa-Ego was the straw that broke the camel's back, as colonialism had already wreaked havoc on the Igbo ways of life with the introduction of a market economy, enforced monetization, missionization, and colonial taxation of male adults. Rumors of counting women were the last straw because even if the colonial administration reassured them that there were no plans to tax them, women collectively punished Sam-El, attacked the warrant chiefs, and attempted to redress their grievances against the colonial intrusion and exploitation. Whether women would be taxed or not mattered less because they were already indirectly paying taxes by lending money to

husbands, and by having parts of their families' resources given to the colonial administration.

Assessing the impact of taxation on the local populations, Nne-nne recalled: "Nowadays no one seems to mind the tax much, but in those days it was like trying to put a leash around the neck of a young goat for the first time… after the tax came, it became the most important event of the year" (30). Although it was imposed only on adult males, the whole family and the village suffered the ill-effects of taxation as several men were imprisoned and humiliated for failing to pay their taxes. Some men would borrow from their wives and/or the treasury of the village women's association, others would abandon unproductive farms and families to relocate in an urban area. Fed up with the compliance of their men and hoping they would resist the taxation, women refused to lend their association's fund to impoverished village men, which caused a strain between men and women, between husbands and wives. The oral narrator attributes the war to three main causes: the pressure of taxation, the Igbo male's inability to contest it, and the economically exploitative measures of the colonial administration in general:

> The Women's War started because the men did not start a war when they were counted and tax was imposed on their heads […] The war started because that was the third of fourth bad year in a row for everyone, a year of hardship during which palm trees bore little fruit and the fruit they bore produced little oil, and at the market the oil fetched next to nothing.(36)

Until the rumors began, women were exempt from taxation because they were positioned under men and not recognized as full subjects. Ironically, the colonial administration's imposition of a poll tax on women was a double-edged sword because the primary decision to remove them from taxation was an expression of sexism.[24] By reading the Igbo society through the lenses of the British culture, the administration misread women's economic independence and ignored that either individually or collectively women provided men with resources to pay the taxes in order to avoid the incarceration of men and husbands. In the novel, it was known in the village that Ahunze lent financial resources to many men to pay their taxes. Although the pressure to pay the taxes was to be extended to women, it would have enabled some women freedom and a certain kind of agency. Of course, the taxation of women did not mean that the colonial officials were feminist or necessarily in favor of female freedom. Rather, it was an indication of the imperial project's dire need of resources.

In the novel, using their indigenous networks of organizing and grassroots leadership -- the women's assembly, the *inyemedi* (wives of a lineage), and the *umuada* (daughters of the lineage)[25] -- and their sophisticated networks of communication, angry

[24] The colonial administration's gendered double standards were also applied to legal questions brought under the metropolitan law, which was more lenient, for lack of a better word, on women. For example, after Oyoyo Love's mother, husband, and mother-in law were arrested for murder, Major Odgen released the women but sentenced Onwu-Gbara, Oyoyo Love's husband to three years and six months in prison.

[25] Part and parcel of the social fabric in Igboland, these women's associations were politically and socially relevant. They were meant to discuss women's concerns and interests, and to communicate them to the villages. For a discussion on indigenous women's organizations and networks, see Nwando Achebe's *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (2005) and Judith Van Allen's " 'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women" (*Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 6.2 (1972): 165-181).

women of Ikputu Ala held meetings, raised funds, planned their attacks, and sent delegates throughout Igboland to mobilize women. More than just an economic space, marketplaces, which were invested with the symbolic meaning of female power, served as meeting places as well as campgrounds. Women set up elaborate, effective, and discreet means of communication. For example, a given association would send two women to the adjacent village to communicate the plan, but the delegates were to pack as if going to the farms so as not to raise men's suspicions. The associations connected all the villages through a system of relay of delegates. In addition, to avoid attracting men's attention, no more than four women could travel together. And for those in charge of executing more dangerous tasks like kidnapping the white female anthropologist, they were to cover their faces with *uri* (dye) to achieve anonymity and carry baskets full of ritual objects to appear as if on their way to make sacrifices. And if "they carr[ied] a little twig across their lips they [could] keep from having to answer any questions" (168). The idea of the twig in the mouth indicates the manner in which women were meticulous in preparing for the war.

Similar to the historical war of 1929, details about the war in *ISSCF* describe women as wearing their outfits that signify war in the traditional Igbo imaginary, dressed in loincloths, carrying sticks wreathed with palm fronds, smearing their faces with indigo, charcoal, or ashes, and binding their heads with young ferns. The smearing of faces with indigo is an attempt to renounce their personal identities, their social and naturalized roles of mothers, daughters, or wives. By stripping themselves of individual and specific social

identities in order to espouse a depersonalized and undifferentiated identity, women sought to let the feminine principle stand out; at that particular moment, it is the only identity worth fighting for. In war attire, not only were women unwifely and militaristic but they were also legendarily anti-reproductive. The short loincloths indicate their readiness to undress, "that they were prepared to do bad things" (*Aba Commission of Inquiry*, quoted in Bastian 46). By baring themselves almost naked, they flout their prescribed social meanings. The sticks they carry to complete their war attire were saturated with symbolic meaning and power. On the Igbo cultural landscape, these served to invoke the power of female ancestors and were therefore considered more powerful than the guns of their oppressors (Harry 1970, Perham 1937, Meek 1937).[26] In their war attire, women stormed the chief's compound and attacked him, his officers, and Sam-El, the census counter. They then besieged and destroyed colonial and mercantile institutional sites: mission houses, post offices, native courts, and so one. They broke into prisons to release prisoners and sat on agents: "[L]ike an unstoppable locomotive, or rather like a river in flood surging in from everywhere, the women rolled over the court messengers, beat them, tore their uniforms, and sat upon them" (174). Like a force of nature and invigorated by their sacred solidarity, women became unstoppable.

Since women were ingenious and discreet in their planning, Igbo men as well as the colonial administration were unaware of and unprepared for their destructive powers.

[26] Using Charles Kingsley Meek's reports is a challenging task because like Perham, he was a British government anthropologist sent to investigate the origins of the Aba women's war. He subsequently published among others *Report on Social and Political Organization in the Owerri Division* (1934) and *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (1937). See footnote 8 on page 110.

At pains to contain colonized women's violent acts, colonial officials had to resort to soldiers, foreign to the region and known as the Heartless Munchi. The locals referred to them as "heartless" because of their cruelty**.** As the war escalated, the "White Officer," Malcolm Davis, flanked by two soldiers and an interpreter, stepped forward toward women to read the riot act. However, rather than diffuse the situation, his action prompted the historic collective genital cursing:

> As if on cue, all the women turned around, facing away from Mr. Davis and his soldiers, doubled over, turned up their buttocks and aimed them at the approaching White man. Then they pulled up their loincloths, so as to expose their naked bottoms. Mr. Davis did a double take, then froze in place. The soldiers with him turned away their faces, as did the formations behind them. It was a sight none of them had ever seen before and hoped never to see again. They felt insulted, assaulted, defiled, and cursed. (209)

The women opposed the message of the riot act with the message of their naked buttocks; part of the contemptuous gesture was to mean that they could not care less about the riot act. According to Nne-nne, following the genital cursing, women charged the soldiers, who fired thus causing the death of one hundred women. Like the scene of sitting on Ozurumba, the detailed description of the scene dramatizes it, giving it a visual quality. It also shows the choreographed and concerted nature of the genital cursing, and by implication, women's organizational abilities.

Teresa Washington's analysis of the scene of women's public undressing, through the Igbo indigenous system of signification, highlights the powerful nature of women's genitals in the Igbo imaginary (2005). Washington refers to Igbo female deities, especially *Aje*, and investigates the psychological power women's genitalia exercise on the Igbo male psyche: "For any mother -- not necessarily one's biological mother -- to threaten a man with her nakedness or menses is equivalent to showing him his entry into the world and promising him exit for whatever trespass he has committed. To be sat on is equivalent to a death sentence" (134). Nne-nne's comment aptly underwrites Washington's reading when she says: "A woman is everything!... A woman is like a god! A woman's crotch is a juju shrine before which men always kneel and worship. It is their door into this world" (14) as well as their exit door in the case of a genital curse.

In addition to the indigenous Igbo cosmogony, the Freudian uncanny offers additional insights into the practice. I acknowledge the debate around the so-called inadequacy of the so-called Western theories to explicate African texts.[27] Kenneth Harrow overtly discusses the question in *Less than One and Double: a Feminist Reading of African Women's Writing* (2002). As I see it, the use of "eurocentric" theories as

[27] The perceived "irrelevancy" has led several scholars of African studies to engineer alternative theories and terminologies like womanism, stiwanism, and motherism among others as explicative frames for African texts. For more discussion on alternative theories, see Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism in *Re-creating Ourselves* (1994*);* Catherine Acholonu's Motherism in *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995); Mary Kolawole's Womanism in *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997); Obioma Nnaemeka's Negofeminism in "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way" (*Signs* 29.2 (2003)); Filomena Steady's African Feminism in "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective." *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Terborg-Penn and Ha S. Harley; and Oyeronke Oyewumi's "Ties that (Un)bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations" (*Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 1 (2001)); and "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenges of African Epistemologies" (*Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women's Studies* 2. 1 (2002)).

reading lenses counters notions of nativism and indigenism while favoring a more integrative human community. To argue for the authentic nature of African cultures is to entertain the erroneous idea of an Africa outside of history and to endorse the colonial ideology that froze them in time. For, as Homi Bhabha has observed, the domination of a culture or an entity is predicated upon the belief in its unchanging nature, conditioned through stereotyping.[28] Similarly, to look for an authentic nature of *oto* during and after colonization is to ignore the impact of the West on Igbo beliefs and rituals.

In the novel, the Heartless Munchi's violent reaction to defiant naked female genitals resembles the experience of the uncanny, a profoundly disturbing sense of terror created by the feeling that an object is familiar yet strange. In the "Uncanny" (1919), Freud identifies two classes of events that generate feelings of the uncanny: the recurrence of an emotional event that was transformed into a morbid anxiety through repression and the re-activation and expression of the vestiges of animistic beliefs. In fact, as Freud shows, men experience an uncanny feeling about female genitals. That is so because women's genitals constitute the conventional originary home, with which men in the pre-symbolic stage, felt a lustful pleasure for and fantasized about living in indefinitely. However, the child's entrance into culture, the symbolic order is conditioned upon the symbolic repudiation and funeral of both parents, and especially of the maternal order. From the moment the child enters the Lacanian "Law of the Father," he is defamiliarized from the mother's body. To show him that which he repudiated in order to

[28] In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha speaks of the practice as "an arrested, fixated form of representation" (75).

enter culture creates the uncanny feeling because he is reminded of a home that is no longer home. He experiences an "externalized intimacy," and recognizes the vagina but is unfamiliar with it. In the novel, the impact of women's subversive act was visible to male offenders. The colonial officer, Mr. Davis, was described as stricken with immobility and "dumbfounded," a less dramatic reaction compared to the Munchi soldiers, framed as "insulted, assaulted, defiled, and cursed" (209). In their abilities to create uncanny feelings in targeted males, Igbo women unsettle male power and redefine their bodies in their own terms. Like Mahasweta Devi's defiant Draupadi, they successfully carve out for themselves temporary spaces of social agency. The fact that *ISSCF* revisits the war shows that Igbo women can no longer be confined to the footnotes in the history of anti-colonial struggles. Their means of resistance problematize the reading of their bodies as the locus of their subjugation. However, these empowering gestures should not occlude the limitations inherent to using the genital as a site of resistance and social agency.

VI-Race, Gender, and the Misrecognition of Genital Cursing

Because the intersection of race, gender, and coloniality complicates the use of naked body parts as a weapon of resistance, I think that the celebration of Igbo women's mode of resistance should be considered not as a conclusion about female resistance in the colonial space. Instead, I use it as a starting point for a more complex reading of the most guarded part of women's bodies. The loud silence around the limitations of the weapon and the recent backlash it received in Ekiti State convince me of the necessity of problematizing readings that foreclose the social and psychological implications for those

who deploy the weapon. To accurately reflect Igbo women's fate in the narrative, I qualify their resistance in terms of temporariness, as situational resistance and self-empowerment. Historical and ideological factors such as the hypersexualization of the black female body, the identity of the male offender, the blurring of lines between protest and spectacle, physical violence against resisting women, and even death, are some of the factors to consider in a scenario of a woman's deployment of genital cursing. For example, we can ask, what does it mean for Igbo women to use their nakedness to resist Mr. Davis, an agent foreign to Igbo culture? Or how do Igbo women use their naked bodies without reinforcing century-long imperialist views of African women as sexually loose?

1-Female Resistance, Corporeal Dismemberment, and Death

As I suggested before, many female protagonists in the novel, especially the defiant ones, encounter violent deaths: Ufo-Aku, Ahunze, Oyoyo Love, and approximately one hundred other women die during the Women's War. Unlike the defiant females, Ugbala and Nwanyi-Uguru, those who derive their powers from patriarchally-sanctioned regimes such as healing and motherhood, survive the duration of the narrative. Theirs are not lives cut short.

For a female body, the result of using such a potent weapon as genital cursing may be fateful. In the novel, according to Nne-nne, more than one hundred women lost

their lives to the colonial administration's guns.[29] The brutality of the soldiers' reaction is in proportion to their feelings of being cursed by women's genitals. That so many women are killed with impunity bespeaks the inconsequence of their bodies and lives in the eyes of the colonial administration. In fact, three main reasons explain the calculating and exploitative British colonial administration's reaction to the war: strategic failure to see women's outrage and the sophistication of their organization, racialized and gendered bias, and the use of a monologic frame of reference. Colonial officials' dismissal of the war as "Insane! Irrational, Mass hysteria, like the spirit-induced madness that possesses some of them during some of the juju festivals! A sudden overflow of premenstrual or postpartum hormones! Spontaneous Combustion" (39) substantiates the strategic failure to see. Judith Van Allen has suggested that to name the event riots serves to downplay women's organizational abilities, and by implication, their abilities to rationalize and plan resistance (Allen 1937, Ogunyemi 1996, Brodzki 2007). The strategizing necessary to organize in secret a protest of this scale was dismissed and classified as "spontaneous combustion." The administration's rhetoric of the "spirit-induced madness" axiomatically consigns the natives to their "primitive" and "animistic" modes of being. It also suggests the women's lack of the political rationality that characterizes the colonial administration. In other words, when the primitive meets and "merges" with "the sudden overflow of premenstrual or postpartum hormones," we find ourselves in the terrain where the

[29] But, the official history of the colonial empire, written by the Commission of Investigation of the Aba Riots reports the death of sixty women.

irrational works at its best. The colonialists' racialized and gendered readings confirm how the colonized female was doubly negated.

In addition to the strategic failure to accurately read the war, the historical constructions in racist colonialist texts of trivialized West African women's naked bodies contribute to explain the gendered and racialized reaction.[30] Mr. Davis' surprise stems not just from the exposure to Igbo women's genitalia but from the circumstances of the act. Unlike the objects in nineteenth-century missionary ethnographies, here resisting women become the agents of their bodies and actions. As I suggested in Chapter One, in their attempt to document the unrestrained nature of colonized West African women's sexuality, the voyeuristic eyes of colonial "photographers" metaphorically undressed and trivialized women's bodies, setting them in opposition to the untouchable body of the British middle and upper class woman's body, the "damsel in distress." Encumbered by their ideological baggage, the colonial administration refused to recognize the colonized Igbo female body as a speaking and rescuable body. In fact, in their mind's eyes, these bodies need no rescue because they escape the script of what has come to be framed as "The Cult of True Womanhood" with features of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 1515-74). So, although women disrupt the colonialist paradigm by

[30] For a discussion on the hypersexualization of the black female body in the mainstream western imaginary, see Darlene Clark Hine's "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" (1989); bell hooks' "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace" (1992); Evelyn Hammonds' "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence"(1997); Hortense Spillers' "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" (2003); and Patricia Hill Collins' "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood" (2000).

inscribing agency with their bodies, they could not be read because they were buried under palimpsestic layers of subjugating discourses.

Through their daily drudgeries of laboring under the unfailing sun and the unbearable heat, Nne-nne and other female characters exemplify the "officially unprized and unguarded" bodies, to use Bennett and Dickerson's phrase. Just as female slaves were masculinized in the slave economy, so too resisting Igbo women in the narrative; they go through a discursive masculinization in the eyes of the British colonial administration. They are just exploitable and disposable bodies. While the British colonial administration disposes of hundreds of women, sexist and violent Igbo men dispose of the lives of rebellious women.

The "Headstrong Widow" Ufo-Ako, the "Public Woman" Oyoyo Love, and the "Impossible Wife" Ahunze all meet with brutal deaths. After Ufo-Ako defies her husband and in-laws, one night as she enters the village from a trip, several men organize a conspiracy to ambush her on charges of witchcraft. To substantiate their false allegations that she is a witch, a man sitting on a branch that overhangs the road empties a calabash of indigo dye on Ufo-Ako to blacken her in the manner of witches. Then, the hiding men come out, tear off her clothes, and drag her to a witching judgment. In recounting the story, Nne-nne's becomes outraged about Ufo-Aku's tragedy and cuts off with the metaphorical and fateful sentence: "She left town" to mean "They killed her" (13). Sadly, Ufo-Aku's murder, which remains trivial and unpunished because "there was no man of substance among her relatives, no brother with a strong enough eye to stare evil down,"

bespeaks of the social currency that manhood carries. In other words, as repeatedly stated in the novel, women are "still women" (155) in the social imaginary, independently of their social, economic achievements or personalities.

Paradoxically, Oyoyo Love's corpse and blood are instrumental in changing the course of the Women's War. According to the oral narrator, she is the first casualty to galvanize women protesters in unimaginable ways. But Oyoyo Love's contribution to the war is riven with a double paradox. On one hand, she has been socially ostracized and does not count as a "woman" since the arrest of her mother, mother-in law, husband, and other village women. Yet she takes part in the women's mobilization and even "die [s] in battle, run over by a car driven by Doctor Bradshaw" (207). Although alienated and socially dead, Oyoyo Love rejects social constraints and participates in the Women's War, thereby carrying on her longstanding pursuit of self-autonomy. The second paradox is that she benefits tangentially from the colonial rule but, ironically she is killed by an unmistakable figure of colonialism (the colonial doctor). The doctor himself seems to have failed in his vocation; rather than save life, he takes it away. With her death, Oyoyo Love rises to become the paradox that is colonialism, an institution that makes and unmakes. Perhaps, just like Ufo-Aku, the figure of rebellion that the local patriarchy could not discipline except in death, Oyoyo Love becomes this excess, this "underdetermined" figure that resists both the Igbo patriarchal culture as well as the model womanhood of the colonial ideology. Both ideologies seem to lack the mechanisms of digesting this figure of excess. However, unlike the death of a

conventional and masculinist “prostitute” figure in West African literature, Oyoyo Love’s death does not appear as futile and gratuitous since her blood serves as one of the major catalysts of the 1929 Women’s War.

Oyoyo Love and Ahunze differ in the ways in which they resist the colonial Igbo patriarchy, but they converge in the violence of their death. And Oyoyo Love is run over by a car, Ahunze is dismembered. As will be evident in Chapter Three of this dissertation, severed body parts and deaths of defiant female characters turn up with remarkable frequency. Indeed, Ahunze ‘The Impossible Wife” is hacked to death after Ozurumba accuses her of organizing the “sitting on.” Only in death could Ahunze be tamed because the village men who lust after her and yearn to bed her fail miserably. On the day of her murder, one of the village elders, Eja-Egbu, sexually assaults Ahunze but patently fails to “insert his body between her legs and his tool into her” (157). Just after Eja-Egbu leaves Ahunze’s house, Ozurumba, who is reported to have been sexually fantasizing about Ahunze, sublimates his sexual fantasy into hatred, uses his outrage about being sat on, and kills and dismembers Ahunze’s body. The way Ozurumba disassembles Ahunze is interesting as he is himself assaulted with women’s body parts. The gruesomeness of the corporeal fragmentation seems to match the “unspeakable” level of Ozurumba’s rage and sexual fantasy. Because he was given a lesson and symbolically castrated during the genital cursing, Ozurumba cuts to pieces and makes an example of Ahunze, trapping the village in a state of fear. Indeed, he objectifies her as the excision of body parts positions the extracted body in a category of object. Through the

mutilation of the body, the assault on the ultimate desire for wholeness, Ozurumba exercises the long sought control over the defiant and sexually unavailable female, thereby reclaiming the social control he has lost. Violence on the female body therefore becomes instrumental in creating the conventional form of male subjectivity; the "superiority [which] has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth life but to that which kills" (Beauvoir 1949, 1988, 95). In other words, Ozurumba is claiming his manly prerogatives by deploying a paradigm of domination and an economy of terror over Ahunze.

Although I am wary of the generalizing tendency of appealing to the redemptive dynamic of death and martyrdom -- given the pervasive nature of death in the postcolonial state as I suggested above -- I would argue that the suppression of defiant characters should not be considered as the end of their empowering resistance. Despite their physical deaths, these women's stories haunt the social imaginary of the novel. By changing the course of the Women's War, Oyoyo Love's death exemplifies that very notion. As for Ahunze, "even though [she] did not see the War, the women of Ama-Kwo […] fought in her name and with songs dedicated to her. Some even say that the premature infant that Ekpa-Ego delivered on the day of the War started in Ikputu Ala was a reincarnation of Ahunze" (159). Rather than embodying the triumph of male violence over female bodies, Ahunze becomes the excess that resists patriarchal subjugation. The male act of "destruction" and silencing paradoxically generates resistance and female empowerment. Although it is possible to read the death of transgressive female

protagonists as failed attempts to imagine major societal changes, we can also see them as embodying the instability of power relations. Their deaths indicate the difficulty of abrading the patriarchal order. However, the legacy of their lives persists through their disembodied voices and the haunting presences of their absences. But, even when genital cursing is not problematized by death, it potentially places the female in a highly vulnerable position.

2-Genital Cursing and Female Vulnerability: Between Protest and Spectacle

Undoubtedly, women's aggressive exposure of the most covered part of their bodies makes them vulnerable. Their vulnerability is multiplied when the offender is unable to understand the gravity of the situation. Nne-nne's framing of women's genitalia as "a juju shrine" (14) identifies its sacred nature. So, the motivation to resort to it reflects the lack of options in extreme circumstances. In the novel, Igbo women's understanding of public nakedness as a signifier of disgrace becomes clear through an incident during the retrieval of Oyoyo Love. At the local market in full session, a madman named Okpo-Kwee yanks the "loincloth off a young woman, leaving her completely naked and clutching at her crotch with both hands" (46). In reaction to the disgraceful incident, women use their solidarity to cover her, for to be naked in public brings disgrace to oneself. The incident reveals that nakedness in public is not a desirable state in the colonial Igbo society, and it also resonates with the seriousness of using it as a weapon. Sadly, the weapon may backfire if it is mistaken for spectacle rather than as protest.

The lines between protest and spectacle blur as incidents involving genital cursing become frequent in West Africa and elsewhere in the world. In his 2006 essay, anthropologist Phillip Stevens identifies several instances of public undressing as a weapon in the United States and Europe; and he then attributes their frequency to the July 2002 incident opposing Southeastern Nigerian women and Chevron Texaco.[31] He explains that major international news channels including ABC News, BBC, The Associated Press, and Inter Press Service helped bring the incident to the attention of the international community, thus contributing to the rising international appropriation of nakedness. For example, on February 7, 2003, in "Naked Protests Held in Central Park: Anti-War Demonstrators Strip in the Snow," Reuters reported that some thirty women laid naked in the snow in Central Park in order to protest the US's possible military intervention in Iraq. Although Stevens does not mention Benita Parry, it appears that his argument is in alignment with her observation about the possibility that "the identity struggle of one community can serve as a model for other resistance discourses, since the self-definition articulated by, say, the black or the Jew […] can be communicated to different situations of contest against the authority of the dominant by marginals, exiles and subjugated populations" (1996, 176). In other words, the weapon of Southeastern

[31] On July 6, 2005, *The Daily Mail* reported similar incident in Pamplona Spain where "Hundreds of protesters, some wearing just thongs and plastic bull horns, have marched through Pamplona to protest against the centuries-old running of the bulls, Spain's best known fiesta" ("Naked Protesters March against Pamplona Bull Run"). According to an Agence France-Presse article of October 23, 2007, 50 Bolivian sex-workers threatened to march naked to protest against the closing of strip joints and bars. This list is not exhaustive as many more organizations and individuals use public nakedness as a weapon.

Nigerian women might have served as a model for the naked female protestors in Central Park.

I hasten to state that I do not consider intentional nakedness as an exclusively traditional Igbo cultural practice. Indeed, historical examples on public nakedness as a weapon abound in ancient Roman and Greek literatures.[32] Although not exclusive to the Igbo, the meanings and significations of such intentional female nakedness may be culturally determined. I am interested in the possible shifting meanings assigned to the weapon as it gets deployed in various parts of the globe. As the world gets increasingly connected and integrated, will the weapon lose its power because of overuse? Can public undressing, say in New York City, influence the way it gets received in Ekiti State, Nigeria? Also to what extent do the increasing recurrences of nudity in magazines and X-rated films, and in pageants with scantily clad women and men influence how we answer the above questions. As more and more bodies get naked, what has been the ultimate weapon for some women might become just one more spectacle. In fact, an increasing number of naked bodies -- whether as a weapon or not -- may contribute to blurring the lines between resistance and subjugation and between protest and spectacle.

[32] Haun Saussy. "Naminata/ Tentative Dissertation Topic/ Prof. Saussy." Email to Naminata Diabate. 12 Jan. 2008.

Conclusion: *The Tour de Force* of a Double Narrative Fiction

An interesting case of a double narrative fiction, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* accomplishes a tour de force, addressing several dissimilar audiences: colonial Igbo patriarchal culture, the British colonial historiography, contemporary scholars of power, and contemporary continental West African women. The 1992 recreation of 1929 event is beneficial to the reader, who is given the opportunity to consider the historical a 1929 Women's War from several vantage points. These two narratives complement each other; whereas the 1929 version may consider larger issues and architectures, the 1992 version takes a microscopic approach to women, their issues, worlds, defeats, and triumphs. Between the two narratives exist gaps and inconsistencies that allow the reader a less constrained look at the fascinating historical event. Unlike the linearity and self-containment of the historical narrative, Nne-nne's recreated version is circular and links current events with past events.

Moreover, through the depiction of various women and their modes of resistance, *ISSCF* becomes part of the literary tradition that documents subversive ways in which women use their soiling bodies to inscribe resistance. In the novel, the series of remarkable women in their daily acts of resistance against social configurations that limit women's right to self-determination shows West African women in their diversity and modes of social agency. Their quotidian acts of negotiation displace our understanding of resistance as a grand act of heroism, and empower contemporary women who make contact themselves with their foremothers through this historical fiction. As Brian Friel

argues in *Translations: A Play* (1981) "[I]t is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. […] We must never cease renewing those images, because once we do, we fossilise" (80-1). The novel's images of resisting women, Ufo Aku, Ugbala, Ahunze, Nwanyi-Uguru, and Nne-nne, before and during the Women's War of 1929, are renewed images that seek to call contemporary African women to stand up against neocolonialists' interventionist practices. In the process, it unsettles the trope of the victimized Igbo and, by implication, African women, without falling into the equally problematic trope of the mythical all-powerful African woman.[33]

As we recognize the strength of women who dare use genital powers against patriarchal configurations and colonial incursions, I also invite us to view their strategies and weapons as temporary and paradoxical. While genital power is an emphatic celebration of corporeality, an equal degree of violence is brought to bear on it, highlighting the difficulties of abrading patriarchal values. However, whether in the form of genital cursing or genital work, female sexuality embodies the promise of female triumph over patriarchal cultures that stigmatize their bodies and deny them full human rights.

[33] Diedre L. Bádéjo, "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent" (1998).

Chapter Three

Positioning Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop* (2001) within the Archives of West African Same-Sex Sexuality

> "That night, she decides to give her version of the life history of the old witch […]. In any case, she ought to tell her own life history, and those of voiceless women, condemned to silence" "Ce soir là, elle décide de donner sa propre version de l'histoire de la vieille sorcière [..] De toutes les façons, elle doit conter sa propre histoire, y compris celles des femmes sans voix, condamnées au mutisme."
>
> *Chuchote pas trop* (42)

This goal of this chapter is manifold. It analyses *Chuchote pas trop* to show its radical departure from most narrative imaginings of female same-sex erotic practices in the West African context. In fact, in the novel, women challenge the patriarchal mechanisms of female oppression (female genital mutilations, systematic rape, and bodily dissection) by engaging in an array of socially-scorned corporeal intimate practices, retrieving stigmatized female stories, and strategically recuperating their abject bodies to haunt the oppressive community. The diversity of these non-conventional sexual practices speaks to the novel's disavowal of heteropatriarchal practices and its goal of transcending social and cultural boundaries. In addition to accounting for the novel's radicalism based on its content, I also pay attention to the novel form, which I consider paradigmatic of *l'écriture feminine*. Although *l'écriture feminine* has been critiqued as essentialist and outdated, I still think that this narrative's lyrical language and its refusal of linearity serve the purposes of resisting a reading practice that easily consumes, digests, and dispose of images of dissected female bodies. In the chapter, I

also explore the consequences and the ways in which the novel increases the visibility of female queerness. In keeping with its patriarchal logic, the postcolonial state trivializes and even ignores the practice of women loving other women. The consequence of such a social and political misrecognition -- manifest in the focus and criminalization of male homosexuality -- is that women are discursively stripped of the desire to engage in non-conventional sexuality. I suggest that although the novel's goal of shedding light on female queerness is salutary, it is still is a double-edged enterprise. By lifting the veil of secrecy off stigmatized sexual practices, the novel also exposes them to the wrath of the heteropatriarchal postcolonial state.

Until the mid 1990s, questions related to same-sex sexuality in West African literature -- and the cultures they document -- were relatively shrouded in secrecy and taboo. The very few novels that took up the question started to emerge in the 1960s. The most canonical of these pioneering works include Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), Malian Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1968), Sierra Leonean playwright, novelist, critic, and performing artist Yulisa Amadu Maddy's *No Past, No Present, No Future* (1973), Ghanaian novelist and playwright Ama Ata Aidoo's *Sister Killjoy* (1977), and Cameroonian-born and French resident Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* (1996). In these narratives, same-sex corporeal intimacies are either saturated with questions of foreignness or couched in a rhetoric of deviancy. However,

since the development of "queer theories," an increasing number of literary and cultural critics are revisiting these narratives with new eyes and explicative frameworks.

From the 1990s and onward, several cinematic and novelistic narratives have ushered in a different representational politics and a less pathological and moralistic rhetoric. These narratives have rekindled the conversation around same-sex erotic practices in West Africa and, in their own ways, have contributed to the expansion of queer theories. Presented at the 1999 Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (Fespaco),[1] two major cinematic representations made waves in the then nascent field of Francophone West African gender and sexuality studies: *Dakan*, by Guinean director Mohamed Camara, and the documentary *Woubi chéri* by French director Philip Brooks. Both films augmented the visibility of male same-sex erotic practices, respectively in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and have allowed literary and cinema critics to reflect on the phenomenon from angles other than those of morality and religion. In 2001, Senegalese director Joseph Gai Ramaka in his adaptation of the myth of Carmen in *Karmen Gei* (2001) presents the possibility of female same-sex intimacy with a romantic but doomed relationship between a warden, Angelique, and the transgressive, seductive, and crowd-favorite inmate, Karmen. Alongside these films, major fictional narratives include Frieda Ekotto's 2001 *Chuchote pas trop* (Whisper Not Much), Togolese novelist Sami Tchak's *La fête des masques* (The Party of Masks) (2004), Nigerian Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), and the most recent, "The Shivering" in *The*

[1] Created in 1969 and held annually in Burkina Faso (West Africa), Fespaco is regarded as the most important African film festival.

Thing Around Your Neck (2009) by Nigerian award-winning novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Although the recent imaginings are somewhat overt in their representations of same-sex sexuality (male and female), none matches the boldness of *Chuchote pas trop.* The novel moves beyond traditionally-sanctioned female genital powers and genital work to imagine socially taboo subjects such as interracial, intergenerational, and "incestuous" same-sex sexualities, and what can be considered sadomasochistic acts. I believe the radicalism of *Chuchote pas trop* partly explains the cold scholarly and publishing attention it has received so far.

I-Introducing the Narrative and Defining Sexual Identities

1- The Cold Scholarly Reception and the Necessity of Reading *Chuchote pas trop*

A review in the March 2006 issue of the magazine *Africultures* remains one of the very few published works to examine Ekotto's novel. The reviewer, Chadian novelist and literary critic Bema Nimrod, praises the fragmented and challenging nature of the narrative, compares it to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, but glosses over its content (2006). By ignoring questions related to female same-sex corporeal practices, so conspicuous in the novel, the reviewer seemingly perpetuates the silence around queer African female sexuality, a silence the novel urgently seeks to destroy. So, the scholarly silence around the novel, imposed as a mode of disciplining female characters in the novel, and the absence of queer rural women in the archives of same-sex sexuality in West Africa compel me to bring the novel to the attention of readers and scholars.

Reading Ekotto's novel moves us towards a more accurate understanding of West African women's sexuality and their different modes of resistance in brutal and objectifying postcolonial spaces. The rhetoric of victimization, confinement, and loss of freedom, common currency on female sexuality in West African literature -- but also in this novel -- constitutes a limited and one-sided account of sexual and corporeal practices among women, especially queer women. In that context, this chapter takes up Neville Hoad's compelling invitation to explore other cultural products, the "less-mediated voices" for a deeper understanding of sexuality on the continent:

> I'm going to be slightly controversial here. I say you need to look at the international human rights Web sites and material with a fairly healthy degree of suspicion, because often they're invested in making asylum claims, so they're invested in making things look as bad as possible. And I actually think it's much more interesting to follow these debates in terms of cultural products -- novels, films, poetry -- to try and get to less-mediated voices on these issues rather than listening to people who have a clear ideological agenda on either side. ("Gay Life in Africa," 2009)

Although we need to consider problems of readership (audience and reception) *Chuchote pas trop* allows us, albeit momentarily and imperfectly, to listen to alternative voices, wresting away the discourse about homosexualities[2] from those who seem to mark it as their privilege: human rights websites and state-sponsored homophobic discourses.

[2] I use the plural "homosexualities" to account for the multiplicity of non-normative sexual practices on the African continent as Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe argue in the introduction their anthology *Boy Wives and Female Husbands* (2001).

Through the novel, the reader is able to make contact with the imaginary voices and lives of rural, uneducated women and mothers who desire and love other women. By imagining these voices, this novel is framing the debate around and about homosexualities from the bottom up,[3] from those absent on the local and global platforms of visibility and knowledge production. In the process, it also disturbs the male-centered archives of female same-sex sexuality in West Africa and increases the visibility of West African non-conventional erotic intimacies.

2-*Chuchote pas trop*

The novel is Frieda Ekotto's first published full-length fictional narrative. Novelist, poet, short story writer, and Jean Genet scholar, Ekotto is also Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.[4] First published in 2001 by Editions A3, a minor French publishing house, as *Ne Chuchote pas trop*, the novel was reprinted in 2005 under a slightly different title (without the negation "ne") and a different cover by Harmattan, the leading French publishing house of African literature. Since Ekotto has never revealed the reasons why Harmattan originally rejected her manuscript, I want to speculate that perhaps, in 2001 or before, the company did not imagine an audience for the novel. It has not been translated

[3] In "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," Arjun Appadurai argues for what he calls "globalization from Below" or "grassroots globalization" which might help "even the playing field" (*Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 1-19).

[4] Ekotto's second novel is *Portrait d'une jeune artiste de Bona Mbella* (Portrait of a Young Artist from Bona Mbella), published in 2010 by Harmattan. In 2000, she published *L'Ecriture carcérale et le discours juridique: Jean Genet et Roger Knobelspiess* and her second scholarly book on Genet is *Race and Sex across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical and Theater Discourse* (2011)*:*

into English, and all the translations in this dissertation are mine. The publication of the novel has been challenging; it took Ekotto ten years to find a publisher. During an interview I conducted with her in November 2008, published in *The Journal of African Literature Association* (*JALA)*, in Fall 2010, she explained the challenges as stemming from the controversial nature of the text. And when I asked her why France and not West Africa as the place of publication, she explained: "[B]ecause of the very nature of my text, which chronicles among other things, a love affair between two women, it would have been difficult for me to approach publishing houses in Africa" (181). So it seems that, being aware of the politics around homosexualities in Africa and the limitations of the local publishing industry, the novelist targeted a less "biased" environment.[5]

In four chapters revealingly entitled "*Affi ou la communion de corps*," (Affi or the Communion of Bodies), "*Le boui-boui Garba*" (Garba's Poor Abode), "Ada and Siliki," and "Ada," the narrative is set in contemporary northern Cameroon, specifically in a fictional Fulani village. The coming of age story of Ada, the young female protagonist, is interlaced with the excavation of the buried yet stigmatized stories of three generations of women with same-sex erotic practices. Told in a flashback, the narrative features a young orphan girl on two quests, first, to uncover the history and identity of her deceased and socially alienated mother and second, to unveil the mystery around her life- and sexual partner, a dismembered and rejected old woman, Siliki. On many levels, this bildungsroman is also the coming of age story of fictional imaginings of female same-sex

[5] It must be noted that given the challenges and limitations inherent in publishing locally, Ekotto has the possibility of a larger circulation by choosing Harmattan in France. For more on publishing in Africa, see Charles Larson's *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (2001).

erotic acts in Francophone West Africa. With *Chuchote pas trop*, it seems that the tradition has reached maturity. The bold characterizations contrast with the babblings of characters such as Sister Killjoy of Ama's Ata Aidoo's novel. Although the chapters are clearly titled, the ambiguously identified speakers, and the non-linear and intermixed structure of the narrative -- which I shall discuss later as a model of Luce Irigaray's brand of *l'écriture feminine* -- makes any summary of the novel challenging. Ekotto's parsimonious use of typographical markers to indicate the introduction of new speakers or shifts in the progression of the narrative combined with the continuous use of the present tense, even in the recounting of flashbacks, adds to its complexity. The interweaving plot reads like the stream of consciousness of the third person narrator in her struggle to stitch together bits and pieces of women's excavated stories.

The lived histories of the two protagonists Ada and Siliki have as many differences as similarities. Siliki is rejected from the village for several reasons, but primarily because of the stigma her mother, Sita Sophie, has passed on to her. Since she was a young girl, Siliki was socially marked by and therefore had to pay for her mother's sins. One of thirty wives of the village chief, Sita Sophie became the symbol of rebellion and stigma in the Fulani village, one for converting to Catholicism, and second, for entertaining a taboo, "abominable" same-sex erotic relationship with a Belgian Catholic nun, Soeur Gertrude. In the village, her conversion raised eyebrows as she was nicknamed *cameleonie*. Her action was seen as a betrayal of her culture and the nickname, derivative of French noun *caméléon*, served to stigmatize her as untrustworthy

and deceitful. After the affair became public, Soeur Gertrude was excommunicated and sent back to Belgium while Sita Sophie underwent marital physical and sexual abuse. To avoid confinement in an insane asylum, she gave birth to a girl who became her beacon of hope and whom she appropriately named Siliki, meaning silk in the Douala language. Although the infamous love affair between Soeur Gertrude and Sita Sophie ended in public scorn, it did intellectually empower the latter who received the gift of writing, which she passed on to her daughter Siliki, who herself passed it on to Ada, her young female lover. The non-linear line of passing women's stories and tools of self-empowerment positions the narrative as a complicated postcolonial allegory.

Following cultural prescriptions, when Siliki reached adolescence, she was separated from her mother, held in confinement, and married off. But she turned out to be a rebellious wife, flouting all heteropatriarchal cultural proscriptions. For example, she refused to respect the ritual of screaming during the "honeymoon" and secretly uncovered and deciphered her late mother's writings. When caught and tortured, Siliki alienated herself from the community. After she became a mother, against cultural proscriptions, Siliki secretly taught her daughter to read and write, while engaging in an intimate physical/sexual relationship with her. Although practiced behind closed doors, the passionate relationship of kissing and licking charged with ritualistic gestures became the village's source of fables. While the daughter was abducted at age twelve, confined, and subjected to female circumcision and infibulation, Siliki was thrown down in a well as a punishment for defying long-held cultural taboos. She lost her two legs to the caimans,

and, reduced to a state of abject freak, Siliki established a one-woman household outside the village so as to pursue her self-autonomy. The "neighborhood" she formed allowed her a space for self-expression and validation. Surprised at her ability to survive hardships, especially with the inflicted physical disability, and eager to explain her strength, the inhabitants, naturally, engineered rumors about Siliki's witchcraft.

Like all the young girls in her village, Affi is abducted and confined in the *Boui-Boui* of Garba (her future husband's abode) with three other girls. The *Boui-Boui* of Garba is a camp for disciplining young women before marriage. But, empowered by the physical/spiritual relationship with her mother and in defiance of cultural prescriptions, she executes a suicide mass-murder by starting a fire that burns down the *Boui-Boui* with all its inhabitants. However, her diary, in which she consigned her story and the rationale for the suicide murder, miraculously survived the fire. Affi's adoration for ashes and her refusal to allow her physical body to be dismembered like her mother's, justifies her paradoxical act of self-annihilation and agency through fire: "How beautiful it is to leave this world leaving behind only ashes" "Que c'est beau de quitter ce monde et de n'y laisser que des cendres" (155). The empowered daughter decided to break the cycle of oppressive violence against female bodies by becoming both the agent and the object of violence. In her own eyes, suicide is an inscriptive site of agency.

Similar to Siliki, Ada, the protagonist, was also a social outcast because of the stigmatized yet conspicuous conduct of her deceased mother. Throughout the novel, the narrator never shares Ada's mother's name or her story; that missing story is

representative of the countless and unknown stories of silenced women. Indeed, the legacy of Ada's mother is riven with paradox. Although her story is buried in the Fulani imaginary, it is still marked with stigma, which is then transferred onto her daughter Ada. Stigmatized and a rejected orphan, Ada was alienated from the community and from her father's compound. Additionally, she was not considered wife material because no man would ever marry her even if she was given in marriage without a bride price. Already haunted by the lost yet stigmatized stories of her infamous mother, Ada's curiosity about and passion for Siliki, another social outcast, was fueled by rumors of supposed witchcraft. On an unusual afternoon, during one of Siliki's impromptu wanderings into the village, Ada met and fell in love with Siliki despite their age differences and the outrage of the villagers.

Again, similar to the intellectual dimension attached to the intimate relationships between Affi and Siliki and Sita Sophie and Soeur Gertrude, the corporeal relationship between Siliki and Ada transcends the physical to reach the intellectual realm. The former taught the latter to read and write and after the death of Siliki her lover, Ada, now armed with the weapon of writing and reading, makes it her mission to save Siliki's daughter, Affi, from the *Boui Boui* of Garba. Even though Affi adopts the suicide weapon, Ada finds her diary; and it carries her story and that of her infamous mother Siliki. The narrative ends with Ada still uncovering and compiling buried and tainted women's stories. Just like Ada, Ekotto, through her novel, sheds light on the buried and stigmatized female stories and gives voice to female characters, and by extension rural

West African women who love women. Like both of them, I also seek to reclaim and uncover women's practices that suffer cultural misrecognition.

Chuchote pas trop is a narrative about silences, fragments, records, and rediscoveries, in which female characters transform their bodies, through spiritual and creative means, into subversive projects against Fulani heteropatriarchal mechanisms of control. By engaging in taboo sexual practices such as "incest," and intergenerational corporeal same-sex sexuality, they break the Law of the Father[6] that unsuccessfully attempts to silence them through institutional regimes of control: female genital surgeries, marital rape, bodily dismemberment, objectification, and spectacle. As I suggested in the Introductory Chapter, it can be overwhelming and depressing to be exposed to innumerable narratives where female bodies are trapped in a matrix of cutting and oppressive violence. Although this novel offers female characters with agency amidst sometimes painful circumstances, I still think it is useful to adopt an empowering reading praxis to bear onto it. So my own reading praxis of the novel draws from Eve Sedgwick's notion of reparative criticism, which broadens the reading practice and displaces the

[6] The definition of the "Law of the Father" shifts depending on the theorist, but the undergirding element in most definitions is the prescriptive value of culture and the male order. Lacan theorizes the Law of the Father as the necessary normative social framework that prohibits the child from immediately accessing the primary object of her desire, the mother. In that sense, the Law of the Father stands as the threshold between "the kingdom of culture" (the Symbolic order) and "that of nature abandoned to the law of copulation" (*The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1968, 40). In *Archive Fever* (1995) and more than three decades after Lacan, Jacques Derrida claims that since "archive" refers to "house" in Latin and Greek and that men are considered heads of households, "archive" usually means the Law of the Father. With the etymological gesture, Derrida aims to uncover the fictive claims of authenticity, ultimate authority, and originariness associated with archives. So drawing from Derrida's reflexion, I suggest that in engaging in same-sex erotic practices and disregarding the rules of rational writing, as I will show later, female characters and the novelist rearrange the material and discursive archives of same-sex sexuality in West Africa..

focus on the hermeneutics of suspicion (1997). Rather than dwell in the landscape of death and corporeal dismemberment as the heteropatriarchal regime would hope, I suggest a comprehensive reading and invite us to consider that "failures" are always complex. When artists present female characters who extricate themselves from positions of eternal victims, how can a reading praxis not evolve with that? I am not, of course, suggesting that every violent act against female bodies be read in positive and cheering ways, since doing so might condone institutional or random violence against women. Although I respect Heather Love's invitation to displace the focus from finding positive images and to investigate moments of loss that would remind us of the limiting forces at work in social structures (2007), I think that studies of African women have had a fair amount of what I call the reading praxis of loss. We need empowering reading frameworks capable of showing us that other narratives exist and that all is not black and black.

At this point, before moving on to discuss same-sex erotic practices in the novel, it seems necessary to explain the choice of terminology. In fact, between queer, homosexual, lesbian, or women-loving woman, it is a conundrum to settle definitely on which sexual identity (if any) would aptly designate the sexual relationships between the three couples of Sita Sophie and Soeur Gertrude, Siliki and Affi, and Ada and Siliki.

3-Definitional Excursions: Lesbian, Women-Loving Woman, Queer, Homosexual?

During my interview with Ekotto, it became clear that naming the sexual identity of the female characters would be a contentious issue. Because of the ideologically-charged nature of the terms, Ekotto rejected the terms of "lesbian" and "homosexual," and instead preferred "women-loving women" to designate her female characters.[7] By rejecting certain terms considered "Eurocentric" and inappropriate, Ekotto is partaking in a long intellectual tradition in the African Diaspora: understanding and naming sexual desires but refusing to do so with "Eurocentric" terms. Explaining that terms such as "lesbian" and "gay" fail to capture their sexual identities and desires, several social critics and intellectuals have brought forward *mati* work (Suriname), mummy-baby relationships (Lesotho), and *zami* (West Indies), to designate corporeal intimacy among women in the African Diaspora. Although most of these terms are organic to the communities in which

[7] Queering and labeling fictional characters oftentimes meets with novelists' disapprovals and Ekotto seems to follow in the footsteps of her fellow countrywoman, Calixthe Beyala. In 1997, Beyala denied writing about lesbianism but, admits the existence of female same-sex erotic practices in Cameroon: "I think that those who see lesbianism in my writings are quite simply perverted, as tenderness between women doesn't necessarily mean lesbianism. How can you explain to Westerners that, in traditional Africa, intimate same-sex relationships are not defined as homosexual?"(199). The original French version is quoted in Rangira Beatrice Gallimore's *L'œuvre Romanesque de Calixthe Beyala* as*:* "Je pense que ceux qui voient du lesbianisme dans mes écrits sont tout simplement des pervertis car la tendresse entre femmes n'implique pas forcement le lesbianisme. Comment expliquer aux Occidentaux qu'en Afrique traditionnelle les rapports intimes entre personnes du même sexe ne se définissent pas en termes d'homosexualité?" It is interesting that Beyala uses the unrevised notion of "traditional" to designate a contemporary practice. Her reliance on the term positions practices on the continent as immune to historical discontinuities and paradigm shifts. Moreover, Beyala's outrage reminds us of the debate around the importation of Euro-American concepts to define West African realities. Her response constitutes an act of self-definition against a perceived European ethnocentrism. But, the act of labeling her characters might curtail other possible readings of the novel, and should therefore not be positioned as the correct one.

they are applied, some have been creolized such as *zami* from the French noun *les amies* (friends).[8]

Although the term women-loving women is at times appropriate and demonstrates the novelist's capaciousness and her belief in the existence of multiple infused identities, it fails to account for other non-normative sexual behaviors in the narrative. Also, to play the devil's advocate, it should be said that the term is not organic to continental African communities. In fact, "women-loving wom(a)en" was widely used in the United States in the 1970s and became racialized, designating same-sex erotic relationships between African American women and women of African descent. Additionally, it was used to emphasize the emotional rather than the sexual aspect of relationships that often arose out of heterosexual frustration. Although conventionally euphemistic, useful, and all-encompassing, its original use conceives women-centered relationships as non-violent, egalitarian, non-competitive, and non-objectifying, in other words, the opposite of heterosexuality (Segal 1994). From that perspective, female homo-eroticism and same-sex erotic encounters are not conceived in their own rights but presented as derivative of heterosexuality, as more a gesture of powerlessness than a mark of active resistance. All three terms -- "homosexual," "lesbian," "women-loving women" -- are constraining since female characters do not engage in exclusive homosexual or lesbian practices or claim exclusive sexual identities.

[8] For more on terms used in the African diaspora to name same-sex erotic practices between women, see Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, A Biomythography* (1982); Gloria Wekker's *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora (*2006); Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), and Debbie Douglas and al.'s edited *Ma-Ka Diasporic Juks: Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent* (1997).

What's more, the term "homosexual," travelling through the centuries with a host of meanings, is a highly unstable term. For instance, in the nineteenth century, it was primarily used to racialize and otherize those deemed unfit for citizenship or human rights (Hoad 2007). As for lesbianism -- understood as a mode of resistance against patriarchal and compulsory heterosexual economies -- it is potentially and partly applicable to characters as they decolonize their bodies by refusing to comply with male expectations (Rich 1980, Clarke 1981). However, unlike Cheryl Clarke's lesbians or Wittig's materialist lesbians,[9] Ekotto's female characters operate within the patriarchal paradigm: giving birth, getting married, and fulfilling some of their naturalized functions. They negotiate the complexities of their lived experiences with multiple and interrelated identities as Africans, neo-colonized, women, rural, and uneducated. Their brand of women-centered corporeal intimacies resonates more with Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of negofeminism, a feminism of negotiation. Indeed, at some point in the narrative, Siliki "oftentimes notices how possible it is to fit in the mold of tradition without observing it" "la mère pense souvent combien il est possible de se glisser dans le moule de la tradition sans toutefois la respecter" (17). She seems equipped with an ever-evolving and unstable identity, navigating social constraints in order to make a world possible for herself.

I have to admit the danger in seeking to reify Siliki and Ada as "lesbian" or "homosexual" because doing so suppresses the complexity of their identities as wives,

[9] In "One Is Not Born a Woman" (1981), Monique Wittig moves beyond lesbianism and argues for what she calls "Materialist lesbianism," which allows women to escape the category of "Woman" by refusing to comply with the ideological, economic, and political regime that created the categories of "man" and "woman" (9).

daughters, and mothers and isolates a defining characteristic from a wide range of possibilities.[10] In this context, similar to the Deleuzian and Guattarian identity, they escape the stasis of identity used to define and capture them to become "desiring nomads" in a constant process of becoming and transformation. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari argue that sexuality "is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes. . . . Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like *n* [the indefinite number] sexes. . . . Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings" (278).[11] Siliki and Ada and other female characters are not just "homosexual." They are neither just women, nor African, nor heterosexual, nor bisexual, because their identity is in a constant process of formation. But, unlike the above terms, "queer" unsettles any facile notion that Siliki or Ada are solely and/or forever X, Y, and Z. I use it not because of its salience as an umbrella term that subverts categorization but because it resonates more strongly with the variety of erotic desires and sexual practices in the novel: familial corporeal intimacy, compulsory heterosexuality, intergenerational same-sex intimacy. [12]

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[10] For more on naming and erasing complexities, see also V.Y. Mudimbé, "[W]hen we define ourselves, thanks to the expectation we believe that others are having of us, we are limiting, we are simplifying, the complexity of who we are" (Gaurav Desai's "V.Y. Mudimbé: A Portrait," *Callaloo* 14. 4 (1991): 931-943. 931).

[11] In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), Deleuze and Guattari explain that "desire does not take as its object persons or things, but the entire surroundings that it traverses, the vibrations and flows of every sort to which it is joined, introducing therein breaks and captures – an always nomadic and migrant desire" because "[T]he truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on. And there is no need to resort to metaphors. . . . Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused. Flags, nations, armies, banks get a lot of people aroused." ((292-3).

[12] More than fifteen years ago in "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us?," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner critiqued the "consumerist" appropriation of the term queer in academic circles -- special issues,

In *Tendencies* (1994), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of "queer" accurately describes Ekotto's characters' lives: "One of the things 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically"(7 emphasis in original). As queer, Ada and Siliki escape the prison-house of limiting identity markers, but not the punishment for daring to step outside the dangerous boundaries of the Fulani heteropatriarchal regime.[13]

II- Fulani Heteropatriarchy, Silencing and Subversive Silence

1-Imposed Silence as a Mechanism of Discipline

As its title indicates, *Chuchote pas trop* (Whisper Not Much) refers to the near impossibility for Siliki and Ada and other female characters to voice their opinions and, by extension, to freely practice their desired sexuality without the intervention of the oppressive community. In the middle of the narrative, the third-person narrator repeatedly informs the reader that "[s]ilence rules the village" "Le silence règne dans le village"

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anthologies, dictionary entries -- as well as its commodification in popular culture (*PMLA* 1995). It is also telling that one of the first academics to use "queer theory" as a term abandoned it shortly after. In the concluding essay to the 1994 special issue of *Differences*, "More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory," Teresa de Lauretis explains her use of "lesbian" in the title of her then new book, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994). She writes: "As for 'queer theory,' my insistent specification lesbian may well be taken as a taking of distance from what, since I proposed it as a working hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in this very journal . . . has quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry" (297).

[13] To the proponents of African authenticity and reification who might critique the importation of European and American terminology to label African realities, I argue that such critiques crystallize Africans' supposed ontological differences and fail to consider the lived experiences of the modern and global African subject.

(80). The brevity of the sentence and the use of a verb associated with power and repression unequivocally signals the oppressive state of affairs. Later, in one of the countless letters Siliki left, she recounts how her own mother, Sita Sophie, qualifies imposed silence as "rooted violence" "violence immobile" (111). Silencing, through its rootedness in the Fulani society, has become a patriarchal institutional form of control that has muzzled several generations of women. A rooted yet continuous oppressive violence traverses time but, its degree remains unwavering. The pervasiveness of imposed silence allows it to reach into the family circles and impacts one of the most intimate relationships, mother and daughter. Not only cultural norms prevent Siliki from expressing her opinion in social settings, but they also forbids her to warn her daughter Affi against the upcoming abduction, confinement, and forced marriage:

> Amidst this catastrophe, a moment of courage overtakes and wisely guides Affi's mother towards her emotions. *No word shall emerge*. *Silence permeates the relationship to its core*…The mother cannot disclose to her daughter what's awaiting her…. In this Fulani village, *speaking is not always easy. Numerous are the proscriptions*." "Dans cette catastrophe, un courage envahit la mère d'Affi et la guide sagement dans ses émotions. *Pas un mot ne doit surgir. Le silence traverse toute la relation*. …La mère ne peut pas dire à sa fille ce qui l'attend… … *Dans ce village de Fulani, parler n'est pas aisé. Les interdits sont nombreux*" (15 my italics).

Imposed silence has become a mechanism for disciplining female bodies. And, the cultural world of *Chuchote pas trop* with its means of regulating characters shares with the hetero-patriarchal modern postcolonial state as many similarities as differences.

2- The Modern Postcolonial State and Female Sexuality: Tale of a Taboo

In the November 2009 interview, Frieda Ekotto declared that silence around questions of female same-sex erotic practices was a driving force behind her novel. By the time of its publication in 2001, debates around flaring state-sponsored homophobic practices in most Anglophone African countries abounded.[14] But, women were discursively absent from the conversation. Where do we trace the genealogy of silence about female same-sex sexuality in the postcolony? Was the paucity of discussions of unconventional sexual practices among women related to the ways in which heteropatriarchal cultures typically view women's sexuality, and by implication, same-sex sexual practices? Was the relative absence justifiable by the unthreatening and therefore negligible nature of unconventional female sexuality? These are big questions, but I venture to say that perhaps the silence around female queerness results from the state's rigid definition of sex as male/female penetrative sex (Tamale 2003). Perhaps the concept and practice of female –husbands (though not fundamentally sexual) among several West African ethnic groups (Igbo, Akan among other) possibly mitigated the hostility toward female same-sex erotic practices. Regardless, I think that the possible

[14] For more on Eastern and Southern African political leaders and their pronouncements on homosexualities, see Hoad's 2007 *African Intimacies*.

willingness to ignore and create silence around women's sexuality in general, and same-sex sexual practices in particular, constitutes a political misrecognition, an epistemic violence against women, and a clear indication of the heteropatriarchal environment that downplays women's inability to offer each other sexual fulfillment without the participation of a man.[15] In that context, female homosexualities need to engage two regimes: gender and sexual practices, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, as Adrienne Rich suggested more than two decades ago in the American context.

Although most of us consider silence around female same-sex sexuality as a discursive violence, others would argue that silence about homosexuality should not be considered marginalizing because sexuality in Africa, hetero or homo, belongs to the personal, domestic, and private sphere in Africa. In his 2005 "African Cinema and Representations of (Homo)sexualities," Cameroonian literary and cinema critic Alexie Tcheuyap observes that sexuality, independently of its form, is a private matter in Africa and that most Africans feel uneasy talking about it. Though such argument is useful in contextualizing the discourse on sexuality in West Africa, what it leaves out is the dichotomy between its construction as a private issue and the inclination of the state to police and discipline its citizens' sexual practices. To what extent can we still maintain the neat separation of private and public spheres regarding sexuality in West Africa?

[15] In "Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Sister Benedetta Carlini," Historian Judith Brown excavates similar trend in Mediaeval and Early Modern Europe, arguing that the absence of the subject of lesbian sexuality in law, theology, and literature reflects the active willingness to "disbelieve" lesbian sexuality. The discursive silence was a byproduct of that period's rampant phallocentrism. (*Signs* 9 (1984): 751-758).

For one, the inflammatory pronouncements of statesmen demonstrate, if need be, that what citizens do with their own genitals and in the "privacy" of their bedrooms is overloaded with political meanings and is a matter of public and/or national interests.[16] The politicization of sexuality has turned the figure of the sexual non-conformist into a public enemy. As a case in point, under neoliberalism, Nigeria, a former British colony that prioritizes sexual regulation on its political and social agendas, has resurrected residues of the sodomy laws of the British common law in an attempt to strike down "homosexuals." Here, the official repression of non-normative sexual behaviors predominantly harks back to the colonial era and the introduction of the "repugnancy clause" that governed the application of the customary law.

The pervasive family planning and child spacing campaigns, mostly engineered by international financial institutions, as well as relentless local campaigns against the spread of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancies have altered and complicated our experiences and understandings of what constitute sexuality and privacy. Not surprisingly, through the state-run family planning and child spacing campaigns, women's bodies and sexuality become politicized terrains, and the state's economic and social development is said to rest with women's abilities to exercise control over their ovaries. The fewer the number of their children, the greater are the chances of the

[16] Ironically, at the 2009 ceremony celebrating the 61th year of the declaration of human rights, Senegalese Foreign Affairs minister, Madické Niang confirms the country's beliefs in God and Islam, and overrides any possibility of depenalizing homosexuality. Madické seems oblivious to the tension in his view even while he acknowledges that discrimination on the basis of same-sex erotic activities undermines economic development. http://www.lequotidien.sn/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11503&Itemid=9 (Accessed 29 Dec. 2009).

country's economic development. Here, the paradox of female sexuality emerges; it is exploited yet invisible or more accurately misrecognized. It is silenced, yet called in the service of the postcolonial state to save it from economic impoverishment. Through the new technologies of information and globalization, the boundaries between the private and the public spheres are constantly being redefined with the mushrooming of talk radio shows on romantic affairs with listeners' participation, glossy magazines with bedroom issue sections, prime-time soap operas, and serialized romantic pictorial magazines.[17] For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, several commercial radio stations, including Frequence 2 and Radio Nostalgie, offer talk shows with listeners' participation on romantic issues, sexual questions, and domestic affairs. Moreover, social anthropologists have suggested that sexual scenes and romantic gestures in prime-time soap operas have increasingly influenced the ways in which high school girls, literate and non-literate women in (semi) urban spaces such as Abidjan and Bouaké redefine their sexual practices as well as the sexual dynamic within romantic and/or married couples (Schulz 2006, Touré 2006, Werner 2006).[18]

Returning to the question of shedding light on female sexuality, Ekotto says that writing the novel was a political gesture. According to her, the novel seeks to initiate a

[17] Called photo-romans, these glossy and colorful magazines are popular among high school and middle aged women in Côte d'Ivoire. Part of the Press du Coeur, the glamorous pictures of Italian actors somewhat position the erotic practices from Europe as the norm to uphold.

[18] Even before the explosion of the technologies of information, in East Africa for example, nationalists and intellectuals have been wary of the negative influence of non-conservative images of sexuality on women and the nation. For example, Chris Wanjala complains: "to a degree, popular literature impairs sexual morality (how many women we take to bed today and they want sex in a style of a heroine they have read about in a Ian Fleming Thrillers?" (1978, 18).

conversation around female queer sexuality, and I believe that it also advances the discussion about empowering female heterosexuality because the steps towards a social, political, legal recognition of female homosexuality will involve, somewhere along the way, a cultural recognition of empowering female heterosexuality. Yet, Ekotto opines that writing overtly about women loving other women may have reinforced her social marginalization since most readers avoid the question of homosexuality when discussing the novel with her. She is thus constantly caught up in awkward conversations and moments of silence: "I met some people and they said, 'I read your book' but did not engage further with me about the content…. they couldn't say Frieda is writing about homosexuality" (quoted in Diabate 9). Paradoxically, the silence around the subject is an epistemic oppressive violence; however, it also offers queer women the freedom to live out their sexuality outside the purview of oppressive social and political regimes of power. Dragging female corporeal intimacies out of anonymity may amount to exposing them to the wrath of the heteropatriarchal state. This paradox indicates that the relation between silence and power is complicated.

3-Ellipses, Silence, and the Proliferation of Meanings

The fog of imposed silence that hovers above the cultural world of the novel ironically becomes an effective subversive tool for women. Silence is not necessarily an expression of defeat nor a lack of expression. Similarly, speaking may limit the range of available possibilities, become a site of regulation, and therefore does not necessarily equate liberation. The narrator expresses clearly that paradox confiding: "Here [in this

Fulani village], we express hopelessness through silence, and one goes through the greatest sufferings without a word" "Ici [dans ce village de Fulani], le desespoir s'exprime par le silence, les plus grandes souffrances se vivent sans le moindre mot" (23). Female characters' choice to resort to silence, to elude language during moments of hardships does not rob them of their power, and instead may give them room for endless possibilities. They recuperate silence as a modality of expression/resistance to destabilize the masculinist power and privilege. But, since the dominant group, the heteropatriarchal system, is ignorant of the multiple significations of silence, it misinterprets silencing as an effective mechanism of regulation. And through a rhetorical question, the narrator compellingly articulates the paradoxical nature of silence: "Our discourse springs from silence. Isn't silence a form of effective resistance, although humiliating? " "Nos discours émanaient du silence. N'est pas que le mutisme reste une forme de résistance utile, bien qu'humiliante?" (29). On silence as potentially subversive and menacing, it is worth quoting Michel Foucault and his thinking on sexuality and regimes of control:

> Silence itself -- the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers -- is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. . . . There is not one but many silences. . . ." (27)

The proliferating meanings of silence make it a category that escapes the clutches of any unitary reading. On the one hand, silence may be synonymous with obscurity resulting from prohibition. On the other hand, it may be enforced through the proliferations of discourses, in which case it may be the imposition of an authorized vocabulary, the social distribution of when and where it is possible to talk about certain things, or who and within which spaces certain subjects can be discussed. Unlike liberal feminists that fetishize speaking up, here, female characters approach speaking up and silence differently. For Ada and Siliki, silence is not the antithesis of speaking, it does not necessarily "repress" meaning; rather it proliferates possible meanings. Here, silence is both a mark of restraint on female characters and a mechanism that is recoverable to multiply possibilities. There is not an antagonistic relation between these two seemingly contradictory readings of silence. In fact, they are complementary just like the female body, site of subjugation and self-empowerment. And female characters' subversive uses of silence speak to their creativity and resourcefulness. And one of the ways in which the reader encounters characters with voices is through their letters and diaries.

As the Fulani heteropatriarchy silences women, the novel gives them voice by titling three of the four chapters after them. Not only naming lends female characters voice, but it also dissipates the fog of invisibility around them and excavates their obscured stories. However, the nexus of lending voice to female characters and shedding light on their subversive use of silence is possibly a web of contradictions. In fact, the novel has very interesting and weird strategies for lending voice. It may be reproducing a

form of domination that it urgently seeks to oppose in creating female characters who are exposed despite their desires to use silence or remain in the shadow. For example, as we will see later, Affi commits suicide by fire for the sole purpose of extricating her body from heteropatriarchal constraints. Her wishes were to leave only ashes behind, but with the rediscovery of her diary, her desire and voice were not honored and heard. Like and unlike the figure of the nineteenth-century Hindu woman who practiced "Sati" or widow self-immolation, as analyzed in Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?," it seems that Affi was not heard when she spoke by writing resistance with her body.

Adding to the subversive deployment of silence, Ada and Siliki devise another method of communication, whispering, "one of the possible outlets of communication" "l'une des ouvertures possibles a cette quête" (15). Often, because of the pervasiveness of whisperings the reader loses track of speakers. A conversation in which Ada explains her romantic attraction to Siliki substantiates the difficulty. At that moment, the narrative moves, without any formal signposting or quotation marks, from Ada's description to the narrator's overarching description of the bond between women, leaving the reader with the task of finding out which voice she is listening to. The typographical indifferentiation of female characters' voices, though challenging, suggests the novelist's exploration of the concepts of individuality and community. Ada, Siliki, and others are "individuals" in their own rights, but they also form a cohesive community, an intimate public.[19] Both

[19] I use "intimate public" as explained by Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008). An intimate public is characterized by the expectation that its members "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly commonly historical experience" (viii, emphasis in original).

forms coexist without cancelling each other out. Women can honor their individualities and still be part of a constructive and empowering community.

In addition to the non-clearly identified speakers, the narrative is saturated from the beginning until the middle with unfinished sentences. And these subside as female characters grow more confident in their ability to shake off the metaphorical manacles of gendered repression such as sexual assault and corporeal mutilations. Through ellipses, the novel uses a fascinating technique to render constant interruptions, evidence of the tenuousness of communication. The recurrence of ellipses suggests women's refusal to give in or give up their rights to speech despite the silencing attempt. From the first page of the novel, the reader is introduced to ellipses, symptomatic of repressed thoughts, crushed opportunities, and curtailment of freedom. Already, the second paragraph of the novel ends with an ellipsis when the narrator informs the reader that Siliki insists that Affi take with her the mat on which they have indulged in empowering physical intimacy, "Even more, as the unique proof and the ultimate memory of their intimacy…" "Plus encore: comme l'unique preuve et l'ultime souvenir de leur intimité…" (9). Here, the narrative remains tantalizing in its withholding of "details," however, ellipses are pregnant moments and economical ways of expressing and suggesting more than what is actually articulated. In other words, what is being omitted is as important as if not more important than what is being verbally articulated; ellipses therefore become proliferating and differed meaning-making symbols (Derrida 1978, "Ellipsis"). In that context, the

narrative becomes a queer text, for it refrains from imposing on the text a limited number of readings.

On a metanarrative level, ellipses may represent Ekotto's strategy of articulating the non-inclusion of the voices of queer women in the discourse on homosexualities in West Africa, their absent presence. Ellipses communicate that within the gaps of discourses on same-sex erotic practices live queer women and mothers. Their recurrence becomes topographical reminders of women's present absence as they continuously haunt the reader and the oppressive communities. The economy of words, the ellipses, and the intermixed speaking voices reflects the challenging and resisting nature of *Chuchote pas trop*. Just like female characters that resist patriarchal constraints, Ekotto's lyrical prose narrative, a paradigm of *l'écriture feminine*, resists the predominantly male-dominated narrative on homosexualities, oversimplification, and facile consumption of images of mutilated female bodies.

III- Mangled and Violated: Tribulations of the Fulani Female Body

Superficially, one might think that physically violating the body is to push it into a matrix of elision and thus establish its insignificance. But, paradoxically, the structural physical violence against female characters in the novel bespeaks the Fulani heteropatriarchal power's fascination with, and need to reclaim and control, the female body. To subject and fixate on the body is ironically to invest it with power, to recognize it. The body is as important to the heteropatriarchal regime as it is to the novel. It is a

disputed site because of its complex nature. The title of the first chapter, "Affi or The Communion of Bodies," establishes that centrality and complexity. The coordinating conjunction "or" simultaneously reduces Affi to her physical body per order of the Fulani heteropatriarchal configurations of gender roles, but it also merges her body with her mother's for her empowerment. To structurally and symbolically reduce women to their physical bodies is not a specific Fulani patriarchal practice; it may very well constitute one of the few cross-cultural features of patriarchal cultures around the world.[20] However, while wifehood and motherhood, more specifically, the construction of the female body as a vessel of reproduction of a patriarchal economy, have been symbolically and tentatively disassociated from women in some parts of the world, they remain the exclusive cultural meanings assigned to female bodies in the Fulani society. And those meanings are inscribed on the female body through acts of violence such as child marriage, physical confinement, female genital circumcision and infubilation, and physical abuse. Representations of these issues, what I call restaging the paradigm of victimization, are salient in most novels featuring West African women. But, unlike most novels, *Chuchote pas trop* shows its female characters not as victims but as survivors and fighters.

[20] Much American feminist scholarship has been devoted to ideologically and politically separate women from the body as I suggested above.

1-Marriage, Honeymoon, and the Denial of Subjectivity

At the outset of the novel, the narrator informs the reader that Fulani girls are confined for years before being married off. Their institutional confinement aims at producing docile bodies, read better wives. At an early age, Affi, Siliki's daughter, understands that her body is the possession of heteropatriarchal cultural institutions, which deny even her mother any claim on it. But, her mother insists on writing her mark on Affi's body. The daughter's fate is sealed by virtue of being a woman because her sexual organs, vagina and clitoris, have become the exclusive markers of her identity. In other words, we are in the terrain of what Toril Moi calls the pervasive picture of sex.[21] Although Moi refers to the nineteenth-century Euro-American world, her observation aptly applies to Ekotto's imaginary postcolonial Fulani world, where the convention of biological determinism still holds purchase and marriage is saturated with a semiotics of exchange and trade. As practiced, marriage empties Fulani women's bodies of substances and feelings, constitutes them as nonbeings. Just like the colonial project and its framing of the colonized as embodiment, in the cultural world of the novel, the Fulani heteropatriarchy (a society based on male dominance and heteronormativity) turns its women into embodiment, entities incapable of expressing rational thought.[22]

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[21] In *What's A Woman*? (1999), Toril Moi traces the genealogy of the construction of the gender/sex conflation and reports that "The modern world [19th century] is a world steeped in sex: every habit, gesture, and activity is sexualized and categorized as male or female, masculine or feminine." In other words, "[S]ex saturates not only the person, but everything the person touches" (12).

[22] See Achille Mbembé's *On the Postcolony* (2001) for an explanation of the colonized as embodiment. Analyzing Hegel and his racist thinking on the colonized, Mbembé paraphrases him: "This creature, that does not 'aspire to a transcendence,' *is* but does not *exist*: '*thing that is, but only insofar as it is nothing* ' [and is] incapable of acting *intentionally* within a 'unity of meaning'" (187, emphasis in original).

The honeymoon of young women, married to older men, is often nothing more than the reduction of their bodies to holes and flesh. These young brides are fragmented and their spirits disintegrate from their physical bodies. The policing and more specifically, the thingification, of female bodies are enforced by the penis, now an instrument of conquest. The penis possesses the power to shut down or to get the young women to scream, all done with the purpose of inflating the male ego. During their "honeymoon," obviously a misnomer, as the penis makes its way through the matrix of suture and thread (infibulation), young brides are expected to scream to testify to its power before the entire community, and the narrator reports: "The absence of coarse whimpering represents the failure of the man's virility" "L'absence de gemissements grossiers représente l'échec de la virilité de l'homme" (60). Several female characters, including Siliki, the epitome of resistance, challenge such a cultural expectation by refusing to utter the male-ego-inflating scream. After all, the patriarchal regime seeks to erect itself as the supreme power. In that context, amidst the painful experience, women's silence is their power, for the penis has failed to elicit screams from the bride. But, this is where one of the paradoxes surrounding female sexuality emerges. Whereas women's access to clitoral pleasure is short-circuited and silenced, through female genital surgeries, paradoxically they are required to scream during a heterosexual intercourse for the sole purpose of inflating the male ego.

Reflecting on her fate and using the voice of the omniscient narrator, Affi describes the unsettling scene of girls' honeymoon: "Nubile, alone that night when blood

gushes out in exfoliation, the thin layers of their hymens, sharpened by anger, as sharp as a razor, will be their only weapons of defense, necessary protection against all other types of violence. The most rigorous discipline is practiced on the body of the young girl" "Ages nubiles, seules dans cette nuit ou le sang giclera en exfoliation, les lamelles de leurs hymens, aiguisées par la colère, aussi tranchantes qu'une lame, seront leurs seules armes de défense, protection nécessaire contre toute autre violence physique. La discipline la plus ardue est pratiquée sur le corps de la jeune fille" (12). Surprisingly enough, the hymens that have subscribed the girls to the regime of subjugation will "be their only weapons of defense, necessary protection against all other types of violence." From the girls' perspective, the honeymoon is steeped in violence, with blood gushing out of cut and infibulated genital organs as their hymens are being broken. The semantics of butchering, corporeal dismemberment, and fragmentation with references to "razors," "weapons," and "sharp[ness]" announces the young girls' social death in the eyes of the heteropatriarchal regime.[23] They are expulsed from humanity to become just bodies and objects.

2- The Penis as Weapon and Heterosexual Intercourse as Institutional Rape

As the penis is converted into a weapon, the narrator conflates all heterosexual intercourse with rape, saying that women are "brought up in a society where rape and sexual act are undistinguishable" "élevées dans un milieu ou le viol et l'acte sexuel se

[23] Social death differs from biological death, which is the dissolution of the physique. Social death is the death of the self that consequently shapes the transactions between the self and the environment of people. For more on social death, see Claudia Card's "*Genocide and Social Death*" (*Hypatia* 18. 1 (2003)) and Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1985).

confondent" (93). In a different context, although he would nuance his reading five years later, Achille Mbembé goes as far as to compare the penis to the gun saying: "[T]he violence of the penis that 'makes' a hole in a woman is undistinguishable from that of the gun that dangles and awaits its prey"(2001, 158).[24] By default, all female characters are systematically raped, "always mutilated like all women of our culture" "toujours mutilée exactement comme toutes les femmes de notre culture" (94). With an obsessive reference to failed heterosexuality, the novel somewhat exposes the shifting norms of marriage and disrupts the ideological fantasy of the companionate marriage -- which the modern state wields and enforces as the prerequisite of a viable, ethical, stable society. Indeed, the state enforces its goals by punishing single and childless individuals through heavy taxation and/or denying them certain institutional and political prerogatives. For example, as a single woman in Côte d'Ivoire, one cannot aspire to a top administrative position because of state-sanctioned but unofficial censorship.

It must be noted that by framing heterosexual intercourse as rape and queer female sexual practices as blissful and empowering, the novel runs the risk of creating dichotomies. Not only does the dichotomy idealize and reify female same-sex erotic practices but it also reinforces stale notions of good vs. bad, men vs. women, and homosexuality vs. heterosexuality, thereby disrupting the vision of queerness that I believe the narrative hopes to embody. Moreover, the dichotomy potentially trivializes

[24] In 2006, Mbembé revised his thinking to acknowledge the polysemic meanings of power, trickery, deception, and danger attached to an erect penis. He opines that while an "enlarged penis might well allude to 'fears concerning infertility, sexual inadequacy, and impotence,' … an erect phallus may as well serve 'to encourage erections'" and exults power and danger (164).

female same-sex erotic practices by positioning them as derivative of heterosexuality. From that perspective, women-centered relationships may be depoliticized and presented more as a mark of powerlessness than a critical act of resistance. These are moments when the narrative may seem to break down and fail to transcend the very processes of subjugation it professes to oppose.

Although it might appear that the grim picture of heterosexual intercourse inexorably pushes women to turn to one another for an escape, I believe their actions and choices are more an expression of resistance and desire than an expression of powerlessness. To illustrate, not only do they resist the choice of their sexual partners, but they also use mechanisms such as silence to inscribe agency. Despite being used and misused, placed, displaced, misplaced, confined, exhibited as spectacle, and offered as objects of study, female characters show their resourcefulness and modes of resistance through their redeployment of silence. They are more than objects since they make subversive choices and extricate their reproductive bodies from the heteropatriarchal sexual economy. As female characters take back the control over their bodies, the patriarchal culture consistently creates other mechanisms of control. Resistance and subjugation therefore become an incessant game. In addition to marking their bodies and lives with taboos and proscriptions, the regime of power offers women as spectacle and objects of anthropological studies.

3- Spectacle and the Trope of the UN "Gender and Development"

Toward the end of the novel, the reader unexpectedly meets two young American anthropology students, Kate and Bill, who are visiting the unnamed Fulani village to study the status of women. At that point, it becomes clear to the reader that the *Boui Boui*, the locale of girls' confinement, attracts American researchers and anthropologists and seems to function much like a research center even though the narrator claims the contrary (28). Foreign anthropologists' interest is fueled by the female characters' nakedness, which the narrator frames as spectacle. She reports that women go about naked because men deny them clothing, a mark of privilege reserved to them: "Looking at naked women and satisfying fantasies or simply admiring beautiful women are the activities that attract visitors to this village" "Ce qui attire les gens dans ce village, c'est de voir les femmes nues et satisfaire leurs fantasmes, mais aussi tout simplement le plaisir de se rincer l'œil à la beauté" (149). By denying women clothing, Fulani males institutionalize nakedness as part of the apparatus of subjugation.

The near institutionalization of women as objects of study throws the reader back in the rhetoric of the Dark Continent, when teams of "scientists" of all stripes, in the nineteenth century, swarmed in to study and make sense of the "aliens," the ones several times removed from the norms. However, one needs not refer back to the nineteenth century, especially with the UN developmentalist programme "Gender and

Development," of which Gayatri Spivak is one of the most insightful critics.[25] The undergirding principle of the program -- "listening" to the silenced and authentic voice of the "third world-woman-as victim" in need of the philanthropic hand -- has somewhat encouraged a donor-driven scholarship, and authorizes the academic or the development practitioner to "witness" the natives and reports what matters to the development programme (Beverly 1993). As well-intentioned as the UN programme is, it remains highly problematic, for it unintentionally constructs "third world women" as timeless objects of investigation through a new or renewed form of homogenizing (Wood 2001). Second, as Trinh T. Min-Ha has observed, the encounter between the "agent of development" and third world women is scripted and biased since the former will probably avoid women opposed to development. Similarly the agent's demand of authenticity from previously silenced women belies a form of domination.[26] In the novel, the heated debate between the young anthropologists and two western-educated Fulani female characters, Nafi and Sula, shows the unhealthy impact of the voyeuristic scholarship on the lives of local women.

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[25] Not only does Spivak explore the ideological underpinning of "Women in Development" but she also tracks its mutation into "Gender and Development". In "American Gender Studies Today" (1999), Spivak links the expressions and programmes to the shifting forms of global capitalism. "Women in Development" (modernization) was initiated in 1975 during the Declaration of Mexico, but it was replaced with "Gender and Development" (New World Economic Order) at the 1995 Beijing conference. While the first aimed at increasing wage labor for women, the second encourages lending financial institutions' unmediated and unregulated access to rural women. However, the direct access carries with it the unfortunate consequence of thrusting rural and/or non-literate women into the global economy (223).

[26] Min-Ha opines: "Now, I am not only given permission to open up and talk, I am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it. . . .They . . . are in a position to decide what/who is 'authentic' and what/who is not. No uprooted person is invited to participate in this 'special' wo/man's issue unless s/he 'makes up' her/his mind and paints her/himself thick with authenticity. Eager not to disappoint, i try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their beings and makings" (88).

Surprisingly, the pervasiveness of patriarchal mechanisms of control contradicts the absence of Fulani male voices in the narrative. It appears that women have internalized patriarchal modes of control to the point of self-disciplining. The practice of female genital surgeries, performed by women on women for men and in the absence of men very well constitutes the most salient internalized patriarchal value.

4-Female Genital Surgeries and Fixing the Individual in her Gender/Sex

Initially, I attempted to avoid the issue of female genital surgeries in this dissertation.[27] My desire to avoid a much-rehashed conversation motivated my attempt, but the practice is such a prevalent subject in West African literature and literary criticism that stumbling upon it is almost inevitable. The fact that all three primary texts discussed in this dissertation imagine or refer to such practices literalizes the commonness of the question. Interestingly, they also show that female circumcision is performed for different reasons, including cure and punishment. In the Igbo society of *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* as explained in Chapter Two, women use female circumcision to "cure" Oyoyo Love, who in their views is suffering from a voracious sexual appetite, "unnatural" for a woman. In Chapter Four, the Beti society in which the imaginary world of *Les Saignantes* is grounded considers female circumcision as the ultimate punishment of an adulterous woman.

[27] In order to designate the practice as a category of analysis, I avoid the contentious term of "Female Genital Mutilation" which implies the overt assumption that African societies deliberately butcher and mangle women en masse (Okome 2003). In addition, the term FGM, according to Okome, is sensational and headline grabbing that impedes the engagement in thoughtful scholarship.

The pervasiveness of questions related to female genital surgeries in fictions mirrors its commonness as a practice in some West African communities, not only on the continent but, also in diasporic communities in the northern hemisphere: France, England, Belgium.[28] While countless women on the continent still undergo female genital surgeries, much African feminist scholarship on the question has focused on critiquing European and American scholars and their patronizing practices in West African women's lives. In "What Women Whose Development?" (2003), Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies Mojubaolu Okome called this type of field research "kamikaze scholarship." She defines the "kamikaze" scholar as one that "dives in very quickly for a brief period, observes the natives in one small pocket 'doing their thing' and draws broad conclusions which grossly exaggerates [her] findings" (71). Often used to construct difference between the first and third worlds, the contentious subject has been a priority question on the UN agenda and has subsequently preoccupied agents of development and first world academics, eager to "save" the lives of victims. The attention that the practice has garnered in the U.S academy substantially reinforces the belief in West African women's bodies as the locus of their subjugation and obliterates the ways in which they also may constitute their sites of resistance. As numerous other novels have done in the past, *Chuchote pas trop* sheds light on the very controversial

[28] According to France 24 in 2009, "every year around 20,000 young women risk circumcision in France." "Female Genital Mutilation, a Social Reality in France." http://www.france24.com/en/20090702-female-genital-mutilation-social-reality-france- (07 Feb. 2009). In Italy, the estimated number is 1100, see "Girls are at Risk of Genital Mutilation in Italy" http://www.stop-fgm-now.com/girls-are-risk-genital-mutilation-italy (Accessed 06 Oct. 2010).

subject.[29] But, it does in a resisting mode of writing -- refusing to reproduce in print the verbal snapshot of the practice.

While I have been using the less sensationalist phrase female genital surgeries or female genital circumcision, in this chapter I will also use female genital mutilation when referring to the practice in the novel. I shift the naming politics because here the narrator frames the practices as horrible and debilitating to women. I will follow her lead with the awareness that such naming can potentially invite critiques from West African women's scholars, including Oyeronke Oyewumi, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Mojubaolu Okome.

Unlike, say an ethnographer or anthropologist who might extensively detail the practice for the purposes of increasing the emotional emphasis, in the novel, the narrator is thrifty in her reference to infibulation and female genital circumcision. For example, this is how the reader finds out that Sita Sophie's clitoris has been cut off: "[Sita Sophie] lacks almost everything, love, caring, her family, and even a part of her body; like all the young women in the village, she underwent infibulation without protesting" "Il lui [Sita Sophie] manquait presque tout, l'amour, la tendresse, ses parents, même une partie de son corps, comme toutes les jeunes filles de son village, elle avait subi l'infibulation sans trop contester" (110).The narrative is either tantalizing in withholding details or chooses the economy of words (read silence) as a mode of resistance against the overexposure of clitoris cutting and partial closures of vulvas and vaginal orifices. A reader expecting to read an extended description of clitoris cutting and infibulation will be frustrated, but she

[29] West African novelistic representations of female genital surgeries include Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* (The Rebel) (1998), Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968), and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) etc.

will also have the opportunity to use her imagination to fill in the blanks. I think the narrator avoids the details partly because the novel contains sufficient scenes of butchering female bodies, including sexual assault and corporeal dismemberment. Further, perhaps the furtive references bespeak the indescribable nature of female genital mutilations. Although the narrator refrains from offering justifications of the rituals, the reader can infer that the practice constitutes patriarchal mechanisms to silence Fulani women sexually. But, that silencing practice and the need to get women to scream show that we are in a web of contradictions, as I suggested above.

In addition to the understanding of female genital circumcision as a mechanism of subjugation, it is also possible to consider it as an attempt to fix the individual in her sex, to construct her social positioning (Niang and Boiro 2007, Ombolo 1990).[30] In other words, the cutting off of Sita Sophie's protruding, "phallic," threatening, and dangerous clitoris fulfills the need to correct any confusion biology might have created and to unmistakably assign her to a specific gender/sex role.[31] By removing her clitoris, the patriarchal culture prevents Sita Sophie from becoming a "*bilakoro*," literally a young

[30] Back in 1988, African American scholar Wendy Wall discusses Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and refers to female genital surgeries as gender recodification. She says: "In some African cultures, clitoridectomy is an attempt to strip away what's masculine in the female genitalia, deny woman's phallic power by removing this protrusion […] Genital mutilation is thus an attempt to recodify gender distinctions, to write sexual differentiation on the body through ritual. While the violence of these rituals seems to police the power structures of the society in a quite inhumane way, these rites also contain the radical notion that gender can be inscribed" ("Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in *The Color Purple*" *Studies in American Fiction* 16/ 1 (1988): 83-97. 87).

[31] I consider the clitoris dangerous because from my experience growing up in the Malinké society of Côte d'Ivoire, I witnessed women being coerced into female circumcision on the basis that their newborns will suffer neurological and congenital malformations if they touch their mothers' clitorises during delivery. See also Ombolo's *Les mutilations sexuelles en Afrique noire* (1981).

man in Malinké.[32] Her new categorization is based on her modified genitals, what I call her cultural biology -- an odd and intricate mixture of culture with biology. The Fulani society's practice of female genital circumcision is a step toward regulating anatomy, thereby reinforcing an official intolerance against women who defy the cultural boundaries by desiring other women. Siliki, Ada, and other queer women simply destroy the boundaries used to fix them in their role. They tread men's jurisdiction, threaten men's privileges by desiring men's objects of desire, and become men, so to speak. Just like female characters engage in same-sex sexuality and "familial corporeal intimacy" to flout the Law of the Father, Ekotto adopts the paradigm of *l'écriture feminine* to resist the facile consumption of images of mutilated female bodies.

5- *L'Ecriture Feminine*: Resisting Facile Consumption of Images of Mutilated Female Bodies

Ekotto's language explores the relationship between word/writing, sexuality, body, and resistance, and as such seems to explore the full extent of her feminine "language of flow," to use Luce Irigaray's terminology (1985, 79). The novel takes the antithetical form of the linear, hierarchical, and logical structure. In other words, its narrative technique of using multiple and often undistinguished speakerly and writerly

[32] Sembène Ousmane's last film, *Mooladé* (2004), features a woman challenging the traditional and social practice of female genital circumcision. The film bears out Ombolo's observation on female circumcision. The fixation of gender is more compelling because after undergoing female genital circumcision, candidates to the initiation are said to have become women, thus ceasing from being young men. Fixing the individual in a social position based on her sex interrogates the exclusive association of social constructionist theories to progressive spaces. Here, we learn that the social construction of gender/sex needs not be positioned as the hallmark of "advanced" societies because it also evolves in those erroneously considered "backward."

voices, reminiscent of Mikhael Baktin's heteroglossia, confuses the reader, who seems to be listening to the third person narrator pushing out of herself women's stories and histories. As the narrator painfully pushes out or rather births (to use the semantic of maternity) repressed female stories, words resound like wild drums that hammer the body (78). In this way, Ekotto's style takes a "new insurgent" format, which I think is paradigmatic of *l'écriture feminine.* As described and performed in "This Sex Which is Not One" (1985), Irigaray positions *l'écriture feminine* as women's biology making itself heard in women's texts. The resulting style is a lyrical language that defies the grammars of the phallocentric language (understood as a male-dominated discourse privileging the phallus), the rigorous rules of logic, and the inclination towards classifications and facile oppositions. Irigaray performs and opines: "'She' is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious [...] not to mention her language, in which 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (28-29).[33] Although *l'écriture feminine* has been critiqued as essentialist and outdated (Jones 1981, Wittig 1983),[34] I still think it is a

[33] In the performing essay, Irigaray deliberately mixes the theoretical with the lyrical. Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) and "Women's Times" (1986), respectively, make a strong argument for *l'écriture feminine* as well. However, they do so from different angles.

[34] However, In "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture Feminine," Ann Rosalind Jones challenges the essentialist nature of *écriture feminine*. (*Feminist Studies* 7. 2 (1981):247-63). As for Monique Wittig, she castigates "feminine writing" as a reinforcing mechanism of women's oppression. Wittig's theories aim at doing away altogether with the categories of sex and gender. In "The Point of View: Universal or Particular," she argues: "That there is no 'feminine writing' must be said at the outset, and one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression. […] What is the 'feminine' in 'feminine writing'? It stands for Woman, thus merging a practice with a myth, the myth of Woman. 'Woman' cannot be associated with writing because 'Woman' is an imaginary formation and not a concrete reality; it is that old branding by the enemy now flourished like a tattered flag refound and won in battle." (*Feminist Issues* 3. (1983): 63-69. 63).

valuable concept that captures here the non-symbolic use of language in Ekotto's performance of resistance. In her stylistics of resistance, the novelist is unconscious or dismissive of the culture and its rules. Similar to the "him" that fails to follow the whimsical woman in Wittig's quotation above, here the reader struggles to follow Ekotto's female characters and their attempts to stitch together and recount the obscured, yet stigmatized stories of queer women. The recounting resembles, the shattering of prescriptive cultural boundaries, the return of the repressed, a trance-like emotional state which breaks the masculinist logic. Here, *l'écriture feminine* is accomplished through word choice and syntax but also through unconventional logic.

The lyrical language and the varying length of sentences betray a mix of emotions. For example, in the sexual scene between mother and daughter, the brevity of the first three sentences at the beginning of most paragraphs is contrasted with the longer, qualifier-loaded, and lyrical ones. In concrete terms, we read: "At that specific moment, something inexplicable materializes between Affi and her mother. Suddenly, the daughter shudders. An irresistible power props her head up" "A ce moment-là se révèle quelque chose d'inexplicable entre Affi et sa mère. La fille ressent soudain un frisson. Une force irrésistible lui fait relever la tête" (10).With the short sentences, the narrative culminates as the narrator fills in details and adds to the reader's insight. Seemingly, the reader needs to be prepared for the unfolding of events and should not be overwhelmed at first. In the long and winding sentences, the grammatical layering (adjectives and adverbs) enhances the narrative complexity and the narrator's pent-up emotions: "When she appears on the

face, as visible as a ray of incrusted emerald in an endless play of mirrors, the scar carries the mark of an exemplary singularity. Its invisibility painfully strikes when it appears" "Quand elle apparaît sur le visage, aussi visible qu'un rayon d'émeraude empierré dans un jeu de miroir sans issue, la cicatrice porte ainsi le signe d'une singularité exemplaire. L'invisibilité de la cicatrice frappe douloureusement quand elle apparaît" (31). To the lyrically-laden sentence is added a content-based complexity that superficially defies "logic": the invisibility that painfully strikes. For most readers, perhaps this oxymoronic association will slow the reading and the discursive consumption process. Indeed, the narrative proves more challenging and requires some effort from the reader. Similar to Siliki and Ada in their resistance to patriarchal constraints, Ekotto resists the facile consumption, digestion, and possibly disposability of her narrative and its images of mutilated female bodies.

IV-Toward a Radical Queerness

Female bodies in the imaginary Fulani village have been policed and fragmented, yet, in that dark landscape of mangled, decapitated bodies, the narrator and Ada celebrate what are left of them and search for their buried stories. While the Fulani heteropatriarchal regime uses physical bodies to condemn Fulani women to a life of subordination, women recuperate and turn them into spiritual and intellectual forces to nurture themselves. For instance, after Siliki's death, grief leads Ada to contemplate suicide, but she is reminded not to take away her body because it is her weapon of

resistance (91). Not only is the body a weapon, but it is also the locus of sexual pleasures and erotic desires, queer female characters seem to recognize with Patricia McFadden that "sexual pleasure is fundamental to [their] right to a safe and wholesome lifestyle" (2003).[35] In that vein, Ada and the narrator do not shy away from the sexualized descriptions of female bodies.

1-Displacing the Male Gaze and the "Saartje Bartmann" Trope

Both Ada and the narrator dwell on women's physical attributes, lingering on the roundness and fullness of buttocks and breasts, quintessential feminine body parts especially revered in the Fulani village (32). Describing Siliki before her dismemberment, the narrator offers the image of a timeless beauty: "Her wrapper, always neatly tied around her hips, showcases a rear with tight and exaggerated undulations, and which might misleadingly suggest her loose sexuality" "Son pagne toujours bien noué autour des reins met en valeur un derrière dont les ondulations fermes et exagérées confortent peut être à tort son goût pour le libertinage" (15). Here, through these words, the narrator acknowledges the woman's physical beauty and most importantly, she subtly makes a political intervention by disassociating the protuberance of Siliki's physical attributes from any assumption of unbridled sexual practices. In other words, she describes body parts without a stigma, problematizing the "Saartje Bartmann" trope that

[35] For example, Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Negresses (Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa)* (1978) gives the floor to illiterate, literate, college-educated, middle, or working-class women of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Sénégal, Ghana, and Nigeria. In the interviews, women report and complain about the discursive and oftentimes physical violence of patriarchy and how they have been denied the possibility of enjoying sexual pleasures. Although relatively dated, Thiam's study remains compelling in explaining structures of oppression against women.

intimately connects African women's supposedly disproportionate body parts to their licentious sexuality. In addition, Ada celebrates and finds pleasures in watching Siliki's dismembered, read queer, body which the Fulani heteropatriarchy finds abject. As Siliki comes out of the river after a bath, Ada describes her breasts as "needle-like" "pointus en formes d'aiguilles" (5) couching them in a rhetoric of vivacity and resistance. As queer, Siliki's breasts escape the exclusive indigenous and colonialist meanings of nurturance and licentiousness. Indeed, the times of the docile and subjugated bodies have expired; and women's bodies have metaphorically become "needle-like," capable of prickling and bleeding.

Through the unabashed sexualized descriptions of women desiring other women, the female gaze displaces the privileged and potentially objectifying male gaze. By replacing the male gaze with the female's, *Chuchote pas trop* shows women invading male terrains of fantasizing and possessing metaphorically and literally women's bodies. In fact, it is more a displacement of the male gaze than its reversal; we are still in the landscape of the object/subject dynamic but in a female/female coloring rather than in the stale male/female paradigm.[36]

[36] On the West African literary scene, the male gaze has been historically privileged since the publishing industry (writers and publishers) was male dominated. However, as I have shown in Chapter One, since the 1990s, several progressive female novelists have been rewriting and "gazing" back. For more on the male gaze in West African literatures and cinema, see Melissa Thackway's *Africa Shoots Backs* (2003) and Florence Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994). On a global level, Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Screen 16.3 (1975): 6-18) remains the most cited. Mulvey theorizes the objectifying male gaze opining: "In a world of sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly" (11). But, it is important to note that an increasing number of critiques have pointed out the essentializing and reductive nature of most feminist

Not only does the narrative displace the female/male paradigm, but it also manipulates variables of class, age, location, and/or educational level, in order to move beyond the figure of the educated, young, urban, and frequently middle-class West African "lesbian." Although that figure is elusive to the point of non-existence, the modern reader might expect same-sex sexuality to emerge from urban and educated spaces. But, instead of the expected figure, she encounters women with very limited educational opportunities resisting, albeit not without consequences, homophobic sentiments and compulsory heterosexuality. In the novel, "[T]o love someone of the same sex outrages the community" "Le fait d'aimer ses semblables dégoute tout son entourage" (41). In other words, against the denial of subjectivity through marital rape, female genital mutilation, corporeal fragmentation, and the "spray of semen" (Clarke 1981), female characters fight back by living out their desires for same-sex partners.

2-Siliki and Ada: Queer Spatialization vs. Communalism

The forbidden and norm-abrasive erotic relationships in the novel predominantly bloom in secret places and outside the boundaries of oppressive communities. Interestingly, like many Francophone West African novels featuring same-sex desires, *Chuchote pas trop* imagines non-normative female sexuality as taking place in "unsocial" spaces. The intimate encounter between Tanga and Anna Claude in Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* and between Karmen Gei and the warden Angelique in

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analyses of the male gaze, which is positioned as always already objectifying the female body. See for example Edward Snow's "Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems" (1989).

Ramaka's *Karmen Gei* are exemplars. By placing practices of alternative sexuality in prisons, spaces twice removed from conventional communities, writers seem to reinforce the transgressive and shame-producing nature of same-sex erotic encounters. Even though the protagonists are not incarcerated for engaging in queer desires and activities, they are already constructed as transgressive characters. Perhaps it could be that only transgressive characters have the courage to engage in same-sex erotic activities. I situate *Chuchote pas trop's* imagining of queer female sexuality somewhere between what I call radical outsiderness, as practiced in *Karmen* and *Tanga*, and insider outsiderness.

Unlike the film and the novel where sexual encounters between women occur exclusively in "prisons," here, they take place inside as well as outside normalized social boundaries. According to Siliki, it seems impossible to live out her queer sexuality in the community: "I had given up on human beings long time ago. Here in this miserable house, I breathe and live my desires" "Il y'a longtemps que j'ai abandonné la race humaine. Ici dans ce reduit je respire et je vis mes désirs" (73). As a response to homophobic acts of violence and normative spatialization, Siliki produces and enacts a non-normative mode of living, metaphorically cutting herself from the oppressive social skin by residing outside the community. By doing so, she escapes compulsory heterosexuality, gives up the aspiration to normalcy, and as Julia Kristeva would have it, founds her existence on exclusion (1982). Also, her behavior seems to actualize Michael Warner's argument that the introduction of normalcy goes hand in hand with that of

compulsion.[37] By giving up normalcy, Siliki escapes the manacles of compulsory heterosexuality.

I think that by relocating outside of her community of origin, Siliki goes even further than just renouncing normalcy; she rejects one of the foundational principles of West African societies, the timeless and essentializing communitarian ethos. In *African Socialism* (1964), Léopold Sédar Senghor, whose views have since been contested, defines the "Negro-African" society as one that "puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the community of persons than on their autonomy" and he unequivocally proclaims: "Ours is a community society" (93-94).[38] That overrated form of sociality was paradoxically wielded by both the colonial ideology and later by African intellectuals to produce racial differences.[39] In the emphatic pronouncement, transgressive figures like Siliki get lost in the cracks. Her pursuit of self-autonomy bespeaks of her determination that her life is not totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, and goals of the community. And despite being punished for their abrasive behaviors, she, Ada, and Oyoyo Love, the genital worker in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, choose to renounce their communities, thereby radically disavowing so-called organic African values.

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[37] In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Michael Warner writes: "Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all. Especially in America where [being] normal probably outranks all other social aspirations" (New York: The Free Press, 1999. 53).

[38] Senghor has been critiqued for his ideological choices. See for example Abiola Irele's "Negritude or Black Culturalism" (1965) and Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976).

[39] For more on communalism as a privileged form of sociality in Africa, see Pieter Coetzee's "Morality in African Thought" (1998) and Eric Ayisi's *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture* (1972).

However, perhaps their chosen form of being is too radical for their societies as they do not survive the duration of narratives. Also, the non-normative spatialization is a mixed victory because it contributes to the intolerance against non-normative sexuality. As they choose to disavow collectivist belief systems, Siliki and Ada also transcend variables of race, nationality, age, religion, and bodily ability to form intimate corporeal relationships. Unconventional erotic acts lived out in *Chuchote pas trop* are unrestrained and cross most cultural boundaries to include ritualistic, sadomasochistic, and what some might consider as "incestuous"-- but, which I designate as "familial corporeal intimate" practices. It is because of the variety of practices that I choose to refer to female characters as queer and not lesbians and women-loving women. They build protective and spiritual walls around their intimate public through the communion of bodies.

3-Soeur Gertrude and Sita Sophie: Transcending Religious and Fanonian Racial Boundaries

Whether in reaction to the normalization of rape as heterosexual intercourse or sheer attraction, sexual encounters between Sita Sophie and Soeur Gertrude, the nun, open a realm of pleasure and fulfillment unknown to them before. For instance, it is in a queer intimate moment that Sita Sophie reaches her first sexual orgasmic state: "It was the first time Soeur Gertrude was touching a female body with no clitoris. And it was the first time that Sita Sophie reached orgasm" "C'était la première fois que Sœur Gertrude touchait un corps de femme sans clitoris. Et c'était la première fois que Sita Sophie jouissait sexuellement"(110). Here, Soeur Gertrude's corporeal acts with Sita Sophie

represent the most transgressive behavior in the eyes of the former's religious principles. Not only does she stray away from her vows, but she also savors the pleasures of flesh, with a same-sex partner of a different race. One may be tempted to surmise that Soeur Gertrude's erotic pleasures seem to take precedence over all her other affiliations. On many levels, this relationship is as offensive to the Fulanis as it is to the Europeans. By positioning Sita Sophie's discovery of anti-Catholic model of sexuality, Ekotto makes an unlikely association. Ironically, although religious practices are supposed to wrest her away from her "heathenish culture," her naturalized filiation, they end up losing her to her personal sexual desires.[40] It remains unclear in the narrative whether or not the corporeal relationship between Sita Sophie and Soeur Gertrude predates Sita Sophie's religious conversion. Either way, the relationship between the women proves to be empowering and healing because it is built around the logic of pleasure, sharing, and mutual empowerment. Not only does Soeur Gertrude introduce Sita Sophie to sexual pleasures but, she also gives her writing as an empowering intellectual tool that allows her to write the "sacred texts of women's lives" (74). By way of Catholicism, Sita Sophie metaphorically founds a gendered "religion" with women, for women, and women's lived histories as the "sacred texts." The masculinist religion that Soeur Gertrude practices and to which Sita Sophie subscribes is being displaced by a woman-centered one. Needless to say that these religious practices are irreducibly different. Whereas

[40] For more on the connection between colonialism and religion, see V. Y. Mudimbé's *The Idea of Africa* (1994); in this seminal study, Mudimbé examines the ways in which Christian missionaries in colonial Congo attempted to alienate the natives from their cultural roots through language, resettlement, naming, and daily routines**.** See also Ifi Amadiume's *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (1997).

Catholicism disavows sexual pleasures, especially those classified as non-normative, the woman-centered one embraces same-sex erotic practices. But although the intimacy between the characters is fulfilling both physically and intellectually, their racial identities seem to raise the question of authentic love. To what extent is love possible in this context?

A Fanonian reading of the couple may rule out the possibility of love. In "The Woman of Color and The White Man" (1973), Fanon argues the impossibility of authentic love between the woman of color and the white man, asking "to what extent authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority or that Adlerian exaltation, that overcompensation" (42). Using the Martinican novelist Mayotte Capécia's novel's *I Am A Martinican Woman* (1948), Fanon castigates Capécia for preferring white men and her "obsession" with whiteness.[41] Although Fanon is not particularly concerned with same-sex sexual relationships in his chapter, the dynamic he describes is transferable to Soeur Gertrude and Sita Sophie. It mimics the one between the Fanonian black woman and the white man, for Soeur Gertrude is positioned with the phallic symbol (her clitoris is intact), while Sita Sophie is constructed as the female, the one lacking the phallic symbol, her clitoris. Given the possible transposition of the heterosexual dynamic to the couple, is Sita Sophie's relationship with Soeur

[41]Interestingly in the following chapter, "The Man of Color and the White Woman," Fanon absolves Jean Veneuse, the character of René Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres* (1947), of the same "crime" for which Capécia is being charged. Not surprisingly, feminists have critiqued Fanon's masculinist proclivities; see for example, Gwen Bergner's "Who Is That Masked Woman? Or, the Role of Gender in Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks" (*PMLA* 110. 1 (1995): 75-88). However, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting disagrees with Bergner and constructs a profeminist Fanon. See "Fanon, Conflicts, Feminism" in *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998.

Gertrude motivated by this desire for whiteness? Probably not, since the narrator overlooks Soeur Gertrude's whiteness and instead focuses on her religion. The invisibility of Soeur Gertrude's whiteness potentially "erases" Sita Sophie's blackness. The absence of confrontation between blackness and whiteness overrides the possibility of a pathological blackness, which would have to be cured through mimicry.[42] Authentic love between them becomes a possibility in that Sita Sophie seems immune from an inferiority complex that her blackness can potentially create.

Transcending the gendered Fanonian reading of the novelist's choice of an interracial couple still raises a controversial question, especially when much debate on homosexualities in Africa focuses around their construction as colonial and neocolonial imports. How are we to read a reenactment of the dynamic of the European as the initiator of sexual pleasure and the provider of literacy? Whether an effect of the authorial intention or not, the couple's racial constitution recalls the trope of the helpless and infantile West African woman positioned as receiver and the white woman as benefactor. In other terms, since the black man has mutilated and raped the black woman, the white woman is called upon to rescue her emotionally and heal her wounds. Here, a white woman is introducing a black woman to same-sex erotic encounter. This is a differential repetition of what Gayatri Spivak, in a different context, evokes as "White men saving brown women from brown men." According to her, the triumphalist and "hyperbolic admiration" served to legitimize the civilizing mission (1999, 287). Ekotto's thought-

[42] The use of term "mimicry" here is inspired by Mary Ann Doane's use as explained in "Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema" (*Femmes Fatales*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 209-48).

provoking reenactment seems countercurrent to much work in postcolonial theories, which aim at deconstructing the paradigm of the European as the savior.

But, interestingly, Ekotto seems to be writing in a tradition because her imagined interracial couple echoes previous novelistic and cinematic representations of female queer interracial couples. For instance, in Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* (1996), the protagonist Tanga was involved with the Jewish Anna Claude, and Sissie, the protagonist of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Sister Killjoy* (1977), was introduced to homo-eroticism by the German Marija Sommers. Moreover, in Joseph Ramaka's feature film, *Karmen Gei* (2001), Karmen's female lover is the mixed-race Angelique. In these examples, non-Africans are constructed or at least suggested as importers or carriers of queer desires, making these imaginings of cross racial women-centered erotic acts a double-edged venture. While the imaginings show the ways in which same-sex desires escape the realm of the "unAfrican," and other socially-constructed variables to become an expression of caring, they also risk buttressing the dominant discourse of homosexuality as a Euro-American import. Doing so will harden homophobic tendencies to further silence West African female same-sex erotic practitioners. Even with the imagining of the trope of the Belgian nun benefactor, the novel still makes an argument about the humanness of same-sex erotic practices by transcending variables of bodily condition and age.

4-Ada and Siliki: Intergenerational Same-Sex Corporeal Intimacy

No "moral" and social boundaries seem to constrain the intergenerational love story between the young girl Ada and Siliki the old woman. Through it, *Chuchote pas trop* pushes the envelope, flirting with what is potentially impermissible from the perspective of the postcolonial modern state, and bordering on what I call radical queerness. Although the narrator withholds details of female genital mutilation, which is debilitating to and needlessly exposing women's bodies and psyches, she does not shy away from sharing with the reader titillating erotic descriptions between the age-disparate partners: "She [Siliki] turns around without moving her hands and licks her cheek several times. Ada wriggles with joy, the feeling of the tongue on her cheek fills her heart with a rare bliss" "Elle [Siliki] se retourne sans bouger les mains et lui lèche la joue plusieurs fois. Ada se tortille de joie, tellement la sensation de la langue sur sa joue emplit son cœur d'un bonheur rare" (53). Although, the image of the intergenerational women-centered intimacy offered here is empowering and pathology-free, it still carries a strong connotation of problematic sexual practices for the Fulani heteropatriarchal structure. This system, however, is riddled with inconsistencies. On the one hand, it rejects, and therefore treats Ada as an adult, leaving her to fend for herself, and on the other, it considers her a minor when she contracts an intergenerational same-sex erotic relationship. An additional inconsistency concerns the double standard: while the patriarchal culture institutionalizes intergenerational heterosexual sex as marriage, it condemns age-disparate women-centered corporeal intimacy.

Despite the opposition of the village, Siliki offers Ada compassion and the gift of literacy. In that context, the narrative is imagining an uplifting image of intergenerational same-sex desire and presenting it as a haven of intellectual growth, self-empowerment, and survival. That representation resonates with, but differs from the "mummy-baby" relationships observed in Lesotho. "Mummy-baby" relations constitute important emotional and economic networks of support for women. But, while the novel suggests exclusive same-sex erotic acts between the parties and no prospect of heterosexual relationships, the "mummy-baby" practice prepares the "babies" to enter heterosexual relationships and marriage (Blacking 1978, Gay 1986).

Unlike the cultural world of the novel, intergenerational same-sex sexuality does not "exist" in the postcolonial modern state. But, with regard to intergenerational same-sex intimacy, the postcolonial state position on the question is paradoxical. When brought up, it is discussed in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In that case, intergenerational sex is pathologized, and older men are positioned as preying on young female "victims," those I prefer to call "survivors." Social scientists consider economic deprivation and poor living conditions to be coercive catalysts of young women engaging in "consensual" heterosexual sex with older men (Leclerc-Madlala 2008). On the other hand, the State tolerates or fails to see the practice, especially when it occurs in rural areas or in the sprawling slums in urban centers, away from the prying eyes of international donors who sponsor HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns.

Even in the neoliberal ideological script, this age-disparate corporeal intimacy between Ada and Siliki would probably startle a mainstream reader, since intergenerational sex, even consensual, frequently carries with it the stigma of pedophilia and pathology. Usually the image of the pedophile is male; here it is not only female but also one that is stripped of pathology -- another way in which Ekotto pushes the envelope. But, the shifting nature of modes of judgment of the practice explains why mainstream queer theories interrogate the pathology attached to age-disparate erotic activity.[43] This novel provides a rich opportunity to discuss intergenerational intimacy and to move beyond the dichotomy between the colonial and postcolonial eras. Whereas in the colonial and precolonial eras, age-disparate sex was predominantly viewed as educational and/or ritualistic (see anthropological works) in the postcolonial era, it is either relegated to the landscape of pathology or the matrix of elision.[44]

[43] The hysteria attached to children's sexuality results in the under theorization of children and same-sex sexuality. In *Homosexual Desire,* Guy Hocquenghem argues for "[young people's] right to dispose of their own sexuality" (141), and before him, in "Thinking Sex" (1983), Gayle Rubin became a precursor on the question of children and sexual rights when she critiques the hysteria over child pornography and speaks even of the need to sympathize with "the community of men who love underaged youth" (7). Published in 2004, the anthology *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004) provides a host of different ideological positionings on child and age-disparate same-sex sexuality.

[44] Seminal anthropological works such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard's "Sexual Inversion among the Azande" (1970), and Will Roscoe and Stephen Murray's ed. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* (1998) have produced an impressive number of examples of intergenerational same-sex sexuality between men. However, at the exception of "Mummy-baby" relationships as explored among others in Judith Gray's "'Mummies and Babies' and Friends and Lovers in Lesotho" (*Journal of Homosexuality* 3-4 (1985):97-116), and Evelyn Blackwood's "Breaking the Mirror: the Construction of Lesbianism and the Anthropological Discourse on Homosexuality" (*The Many Faces of Homosexuality*, 1986), very few anthropological examples involve age-disparate women.

5- Siliki and Affi: Familial Sexual Intimacy and S/M

Continuing on the trend of a radical queerness is the passionate and sadomasochistic, same-sex familial corporeal intimacy involving the mother Siliki and her daughter Affi. The relationship transcends the corporeal to enter a spiritual realm, which is reminiscent of the Mevoungou, the clitori-centric female ritual among the Beti of Cameroon and the subject of Chapter Four of this dissertation. Since female characters in Ekotto's novel lack the external part of their clitorises, the spiritual and sexual bonding between Siliki and Affi is clitoris-less but no less powerful and probably sexual. The title of the first chapter of the novel, "Affi or the Communion of the body," establishes the spiritual and physical bond between daughter and mother. They merge into one body, the flesh with spirit, in a process comparable to transubstantiation, the communion of Christians with the Christ. To sanction their communion and oneness, the ultimate acceptance, Siliki and Affi perform cannibalistic practices (rituals of eating flesh and drinking blood) and uttering incantations: "She [Affi] moves her mouth closer, her forehead softly touching her mother's chin. Their lips lock in a kiss of infinite violence. The rusty steel buckle decorating the mother's lower lip snaps open and catches Affi's tongue. A lukewarm and salted liquid drips from the daughter's mouth." "Elle [Affi] rapproche sa bouche, effleurant de son front le menton de sa mère. Leurs lèvres se touchent en un baiser d'une violence ininterrompue. La boucle en acier rouillé qui orne la lèvre inferieure de la mère s'ouvre et accroche la langue d'Affi. Un liquide tiède et salé dégouline de la bouche de la fille" (10). The blood oath and their violent intimate

interaction embody the dissolution of individual identities and belong to the realm of the queer that defies the normative construction of intimacy as life-giving, non-violent, and nurturing. The scene, a display of both violence and trust between the partners, is potentially offensive to the average reader's tastes. However, the characters' vision of intimacy, grounded in a spiritual bond, empowers them.

This sadomasochistic act is reminiscent of Monique Witting's challenging "novel" *The Lesbian Body* (1973). In the narrative poems, Wittig turns tables and shocks the reader by letting women devour one another with passion and violence: "M/y most delectable one *I* set about eating you. ... Having absorbed the external part of your ear *I* burst the tympanum, I feel the rounded hammerbone rolling between m/y lips, m/y teeth crush it, I find the anvil and the stirrup-bone, I crunch them"(22). I think that like Wittig, Ekotto is revolutionary in politics, but unlike Wittig, who rejects the politics of feminine writing, Ekotto espouses the idea of writing the feminine body. "Borrowing" from several and often opposing feminist theories enhances the effect of the novel in breaking boundaries by marrying differences.[45] Just like Wittig has done in the French feminist context, here Ekotto is imagining a different modality of what it means to love in the West African context. Unlike the imagined heterosexual love that exclusively rapes, cuts, and takes away, corporeal intimacy between women simultaneously fulfills, purifies,

[45] I place the term "borrowing" between quotations because I have not empirically established the influence of Cixous, Irigaray, and Wittig on Ekotto's writing. In addition, I am aware that some might argue that ethnocentrism and/ or inferiority complex make me construct French feminism as the point of departure, the norm and Ekotto's version of queer theory as mimicry. Nevertheless, the globalizing trend and Ekotto's education in the French school system combine to make a compelling argument for a possible influence of French feminism on her fiction.

cuts, and empowers through sadomasochistic acts. In the novel, while heterosexuality concentrates on the body and seeks to objectify it, female same-sex sexuality couples the mind with the body and allows women to enjoy erotic pleasures as well as access the intellectual realm, through writing and the creation of their own "sacred" archives. As a Cameroonian woman, Ekotto seems to use an adapted form of the Mevoungou to create a female secret society, where ritualistic gestures of blood-letting and tongue-locking sanction and build a sacred bond between women.

The mother empowers her daughter with incantations: "Affi, do not cry […] You are born with a smooth skin, a brown skin which the sun can't burn, which needles can't prick, and which venom, even that of skilled snakes, can't penetrate." "Ne pleure pas Affi [...] tu es née avec ta peau douce, ta peau brune, que le soleil ne peut plus brûler, que les épines ne peuvent plus piquer, ou le venin, même celui des serpents habiles ne peut plus pénétrer" (20-21), (repeated twice). The communion and the sacrificial blood spiritually strengthen Affi's skin and body against patriarchal constraints and its forms of curtailment of freedom: confinement for years, female genital mutilation, and child marriage.

V- Suicide, Bodily Dissection, and Death: Impossible Figurations

1- Suicide: Weapon of the Weak or Assertion of Subjectivity?

Rather than allow the Fulani heteropatriarchal regime to attack the integrity of her physical body, Ada it takes back by committing suicide, which in her own view, is a

more empowering and liberating act than corporeal dismemberment and social alienation. On many levels, her death/sacrifice reenacts the idea of the virgin martyr whose body escapes the soiling male touch. However, through Siliki we learn that social exclusion and physical fragmentation are recuperable to achieve transgression and sovereignty. Ada's act is a tricky way to present women's resistance because suicide is overloaded with innumerable conceptual taboos and social meanings.[46] For some, it is the weapon of the weak and for others a testament of courage. In Affi's diary, which she hopes will not outlive her, we learn that in her case, suicide is invested with the sense of transgression, and it even becomes a self-constituting act. That reading resonates with the Bataillian notion of sacrifice. In "Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice" (1955), Georges Bataille highlights the intimate relationship between sacrifice and sovereignty. He explains that through spectacle and death, man knows and therefore constitutes himself: "In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself he would have to die but he would have to do it while living--watching himself ceasing to be" (19). Planning, executing, and seeing herself die, in other words dying while aware, confers existence to Affi in Hegelian terms.

[46] Indeed, suicide is a complex issue that needs to be treated with caution. In "The Suicide Weapon," Ian Hacking opines: "We need shaking up because suicide is encumbered with so many conceptual taboos that we do not know how to think it. The meanings of suicide itself are so protean across time and space that it is not so clear that there is one thing, suicide" (*Critical Inquiry* 35 (2008): 1). Three years earlier, in an interview with Homi Bhabha and speaking of suicide bombings in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Noam Chomsky defines suicide bombing as senseless: "It was easy for him to block them because of the suicide bombings. You know, people are driven to desperation, to make and say terrible things. But, as a tactic, it was senseless. And I've been saying this for thirty-five years" (*Critical Inquiry* 31.2. (2005): 419-424).

The juxtaposition of Ada's refusal to commit suicide with Affi's suicide shows the novelist's ambivalence toward taking one's own life. In the novel, suicide is paradoxically self-empowering as well as self-defeating; for example, Affi can take away her body but Ada cannot because it is her weapon of resistance. This seeming inconsistency on suicide demonstrates the narrative's flexibility and its acknowledgment of changing circumstances. Rather than weaken the narrative, the contradiction strengthens it by allowing leeway. It is necessary to bring the same flexibility to bear on corporeal dismemberment, a paradoxical act of violence that empowers yet victimizes the object/subject.

2-Corporeal Dismemberment: Between Objectification and Empowerment

Bodily fragmentation, like suicide, is one of those acts that defy a monolithic approach; its impossible figuration highlights the unstable relation between power and subjugation. In the novel, Siliki is thrown into a well of caimans and left to be dismembered for defying the social proscriptions. Her corporeal fragmentation figures in the continuum of the Fulani society's economy of cutting and marking female bodies as disposable, of denying women subjectivity. Indeed, the society is a mobile laboratory in which structures of powers test drive the possibility of bringing rebellious women like Siliki back into line with social expectations and proper gender roles. Because her body is found indigestible and thus impossible to "conventionally" regulate, it needs to be policed through the cutting off of the feet, which subsequently limits her mobility and the possibility of wandering outside dangerous literal and metaphorical boundaries. The

limitation of women's movements through space is a major tenet of heteropatriarchy and a clear mechanism of delimiting and maintaining social order. By quarantining her body and containing its germs, her captors naively believe that Siliki will not corrupt other women with her queer sexual practices. As I suggested in Chapter Two, these patterns of control have as many similarities as differences with the ones colonial administrations instituted in the colonies for the exercise of colonial power. Such heavily gendered systems of control aim predominantly at containing female bodies, considered then and even now as the site of indigenous and nationalist cultures. In *Citizen and Subject* (1996), Ugandan political theorist Mahmood Mamdani refers to such processes as the containerization of rural subjects.

By attempting to weed out unfit and unconventional models of womanhood, the Fulani's patriarchal configurations of social and sexual deviance turn Siliki into spectacle. The public performance of the physical dissection of her body resonates with the Foucauldian display of power, in this case, of the heteropatriarchal power. Its publicness seeks to set her up as an example of what not to be, sow terror in the minds, and spread intimidation. Her physical amputation replaces her death and functions as a recursive visual reminder to her and to the community. Thus, the repeated act not only seeks to legislate but also to shape the present and the future. Here, the heteropatriarchal power is a semiotic display, while Siliki's body is a displaced temporality and spatiality. Here, Siliki's skin is imprint with horror, turning her body into a "semiotic system of remembrance" (Lochrie 37). But, the need of a repetitive and ongoing practice shows the

limitations of the cultural mechanism of control. I think that in many ways, Siliki's body shares similarities with the paradigmatic body of the postcolonial, which is literally and symbolically dismembered. Here, I am thinking of the widespread and systematic use of amputation in Sierra Leone in the 1990s as a method of terror.[47]

After the physical dissection of Siliki's body, the Fulani heteropatriarchal system feels victorious, but again it ignores the mechanisms of resistance of marginalized groups. In fact, the corporeal dissection tests the limit of their strategies of regulating unruly female bodies, for Siliki turns her violated body into a "meticulous exhibition of the forbidden" "exhibition meticuleuse de l'interdit" (43). This "meticulous exhibition of the forbidden" reenacts pain until it becomes pleasure, collapsing the boundaries between them. In that sense, her act is a differential repetition of what Lee Edelman has defined as queerness "which is never a matter of being or becoming, but of embodying the Real internal to the Symbolic order. One of [whose] unnameable remainder, as Lacan describes it, is jouissance, sometimes translated as "enjoyment": a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain" (25). In other words, Siliki embraces the pathologized and demonized body bequeathed to her to the point of

[47] For more on the gruesome images of brutality in the postcolonial space, see "Sexual Violence: An 'Invisible War Crime.'" http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol18no4/184sierraleone.htm, http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=131404&page=1. Also, Siliki's physical fragmentation parallels the psychic fragmentation of the neo/ postcolonial African subject, whose condition according to Frantz Fanon is a nervous condition. Indeed, the effects of colonization coupled with the whirlwind of globalization constitute recipes for nervous conditions. The postcolonial subject undergoes simultaneously self-hate and self-love as she struggles to reconcile the two parts of the self; one thrust into the whirlwind of globalization forces over which she exercises limited control and, the second is drawn to the traditions that have sustained her ancestors for centuries. However, there is a caveat. Although more pronounced in the postcolonial subject, harboring a double personality is not specific to her, since most all of us wear masks when we tread in the world.

merging pain with pleasure. Intended to alienate her, she constructs her torture as a subversive project against the community, exercising an act of individuation. Wearing stinking and tattered clothes whose "foul odor […] soon causes Ada to throw up" "l'odeur infecte des haillons que porte Siliki ne tarde pas a faire vomir Ada" (45) allows her to keep villagers at arm's distance and yet terrorizes them, thereby reversing momentarily the dynamics of power.

Indeed, Siliki rejoices in unsettling the village with her visits, which curiously always gather frenetic and nervous crowds: "The shouts of the crowd, from the village square, caught her [Ada's] attention. People were running in every direction; panicked mothers were frantically looking for their children, fearful men were mumbling threats. The luminous ghost was venturing towards the village, finally the witch was coming out of her abyss" "les cris de la foule sur la place du village attirent son [Ada] attention. Tout le monde court de partout, les mères affolées cherchent leurs enfants, les hommes craintifs murmurent des paroles de menace. Le fantôme lumineux s'aventure dans le village, enfin la sorcière sort de son abîme" (43). The village is horrified because it cannot sustain the gaze of its own creation, the sight of the monster it created. Here, she represents the symbiosis of opposites, the forbidden and the exhibit, the ghost and the luminous, attractive and repulsive, the presence absence. Her queerness is manufactured through her sexual practices, her spatial location outside of the normative community,

and her denaturalized and disabled body.[48] Siliki's subversive practices urge us to recognize that successes are always complex, contingent, and painful.

I think there is more to Ekotto's choice of a disabled and subversive character than just bring into focus sexual queerness. The choice raises some interesting questions and also invites us to reflect on disability as a category of analysis in West African literary studies.[49] The sobering numbers of people living with disabilities in Africa (between 10 and 20 percent of the general population) and the emerging field of Disability Studies in the United States behoove social and cultural critics of African societies to theorize ways to remove the person with disability from the shadow. Just as

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[48] Here, I draw from disability studies, where disability is understandably theorized as queerness. So for more discussion on the intersection between disability studies and queer studies, see for example Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability (*1996). In it, Wendell argues that compulsory able-bodiedness operates on grounds similar to compulsory heterosexuality. In line with Wendell's argument, Robert McRuer claims: "This consolidation [of disability and homosexuality] occurs through complex processes of conflation and stereotype: people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter, would suggest)" ("Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," 1997, 305). As for Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, her essay, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" (1-22), calls for traffic of ideas, methodologies between feminist theory and disability studies, since both fields of inquiry belong to what she calls "identity studies" (race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality). She elaborates, saying: "Disability coming-out stories, for example, borrow from gay and lesbian identity narratives to expose what previously was hidden, privatized, medicalized in order to enter into a political community" (268). Michael Davidson's "Strange Blood: Hemophobia and the Unexplored Boundaries of Queer Nation" (*Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. Timothy Powell. 1999. 39-60) remains one of the most compelling discussions on disability as queerness.

[49] In Côte d'Ivoire, the country I am most familiar with, those living with disabilities, more than any other segment of the population, miss educational and employment opportunities and are often reduced to begging as the means of survival. The figures are sobering. The USAID estimates between 60 and 80 millions, 10 and 20% of the general population, the number of Africans living with disabilities. They add that "School enrollment for the disabled is estimated at no more that 5-10 percent. Only 1 percent of disabled women living in developing countries are literate. As many as 80 percent of working age people with disabilities are unemployed." http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/features/disabilities.html (05 Dec. 2005) (Accessed 15 July 2010). For more information on Disabilities in Africa, see also "Sénégal: Children with Disability- When Stigma Means Abandonment" in http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=90139 (11 Aug. 2010) (Accessed 22 Aug. 2010).

individuals with disabilities unwittingly shape our views on reality, so too does Siliki's physical disability, which shapes our readings of her acts of resistance to social and heteropatriarchal constraints. Indeed, my metaphorical transaction with the character became more emotionally charged once her physical disability was disclosed to me. Then, I found her actions more compelling and empowering. And I suspect that my reading is not isolated and unusual. But, is Siliki's process of making a viable world for herself possible despite hostile social mores? The easiest answer is negative and hints that her death indicates the utopic nature of her defiance and the ultimate victory of the Fulani heteropatriarchal order.

3- Death of Transgressive Females: Haunting Absence

As I discussed in Chapter Two, reading the death of transgressive female characters is an exercise fraught with tension. Several scholars of West African literature have read the death of transgressive queer female characters as failed attempts to imagine major societal changes. In "Erotisme subversive et transgressif ou apologie de l'ordre moral dans la société sénégalaise contemporaine" (2003), Cameroonian literary critic Natalie Etoké reaches that conclusion when she examines the resistance against female same-sex erotic practices in Ramaka's *Karmen Gei*. Etoké argues that in his attempt to break the taboo of female homosexuality in Sénégal, Ramaka fell short in his mission by having a male lover kill the subversive and transgressive bisexual protagonist Karmen. Similarly, seven years after publishing *Chuchote pas trop*, Ekotto critiqued Ramaka for

perpetuating conservative state ideology and neocolonial readings: "This erasure [Karmen's murder] also illustrates the filmmaker's underlying reestablishment of the patriarchal order, which shows how difficult it continues to be to confront the oppression, marginalization and alienation of women in West Africa and around the world" (80). Ekotto can be criticized for the death of her queer character Siliki. But, Ekotto refuses to see in Siliki's death a limitation in her feminist political agendas since the character dies for reasons different from those that kill Karmen, "Siliki is killed by a long illness. I think Ramaka makes these two lovers disappear because they have broken the taboo" (quoted in Diabate 186).

Even though Ekotto offers a compelling reason that her feminist political agenda remains intact because her character does not die a violent death, I think that how Siliki and Karmen die matters less than why they die.[50] The reason for a character's death is important because the novelist controls her life. But, when I probed Ekotto, she revealed the rationale behind Siliki's death:

> During the writing process, I felt that I had taken everything from her. I could not explore her more as a character because she has given everything to that young woman [Ada], all of it. But as the writing was interesting I did not know how to

[50] The juxtaposition of Ekotto's critical essay on *Karmen Gei* with her novel and interview shows the challenge of navigating two literary landscapes, criticism and fiction writing. Several West African writers including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, have successfully led the two selves to cohabit. The point is to admit possible contradictions. In the critical essay, Ekotto exercises control over her reading, laying out her feminist political agenda, however the fictional genre proves much more slippery and uncontrollable. In addition, while I gave Ekotto the opportunity to explain the reasons of her character's death, Ramaka did not receive similar opportunity and Karmen's death could be read in ways that contradict the filmmaker's intention.

> get out, to make her remain alive. I wanted her lover, Ada to take her space to continue the work; then I got exhausted and could not write anymore [….] Siliki dies because once she had done this work she needed to give room to the younger generation. (186)

As a queer character, Siliki operates outside the logics of storytelling that assumes the writer's control over her characters. Just like the Fulani heteropatriarchal order failed to discipline her, so did the novelist who decided to kill her off. Yet, in what looks like queer continuity. Siliki transmits to Ada forms of resistance and self-empowerment and lets her take over. In that context, queer practices do not die with the physical death of queer female characters. In fact Siliki's haunting absence is as powerful as her physical presence, and her death means not her dissolution in the memory of the Fulani people or in the memory of her surviving young lover, Ada. Siliki's diaries and letters outlive her bodily presence. As Terry Eagleton would say, Siliki's letters and diaries carry "all the traces of [her] body" since they witness her rage, her sweat, and her tears in the journey as a queer subject in the Fulani society (44). Siliki's legacy persists through the disembodied voice and the "signifying presence" (Eagleton 44) of her absence, especially if we consider the continuum between the dead and the living, a key belief in most African cosmogonies, including the Akan.

In "African Traditional Religion" (1993), Kofi Asare Opoku explains the continuum between the dead and the living by way of the Akan concept of "man," according to which, every person possesses an *okra* (a pre-earthly and post-earthly

existence) linked to God and that confers her life. He continues: "The person lives when the *okra* is in the body and the person dies when the *okra* departs from the body to go back to its source. Death is therefore, a return, not an annihilation […] the divine spark in each person survives death and is not subject to the destructive forces of death."[51] In light of Opoku's reflexion, Siliki need not be physically materialized to be invested with transformational powers. Implied in the necessity of a physical body is the endorsement of the metaphysics of presence so foundational in the mainstream Western thought. In a move away from the rhetoric of presence and the material body, I would argue that Siliki's death, absence/presence, continues to affect and transform the Fulani society. To use Sue-Ellen Case's definition, Siliki "[L]ike the Phantom of the Opera, dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the dominant" haunting the community of the living with her writing and empowered lover (Case 3). Whether alive or dead, Siliki's body refuses to surrender and continues to disturb the silencing mechanisms of the Fulani heteropatriarchy.

[51] Kofi Asare Opoku "African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage" (*Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, 1993, 67-82). For more discussion on the continuum between the departed and the living, see Chapter 7 of Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005); Karla Holloway's *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Sharon Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000). For example, reflecting on the invisibility of black women and their haunting of the American imagination through the character of Beloved in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Holland asks: "how might a return from the dead, from silence, be viewed as a tragic empowerment for black women?" (7). Although compelling, Holland's reading brackets the continuum between life and death.

Conclusion: Compiling the Sacred Texts of Women's Lives

It is almost tautological to say that recovering silenced female voices has been at the core of feminist intellectual, social, and political agendas. The investment in recovering marginalized voices indicates the crucial role of the past in the present and the future. Not surprisingly, in Ekotto's novel the absence of women-generated stories/histories[52] causes female characters emotional and psychological strain because they are left in a vulnerable social position with no role models. For example, "Affi's mother never knew the story of her mother nor that of her grandmother, and that ignorance will haunt her own daughter as the indelible sign of an obscure and continuing fate" "La mère d'Affi n'avait jamais connu ni l'histoire de sa mère ni celle de sa grand-mère, et cette ignorance poursuivra plus tard sa propre fille comme un signe indélébile d'un destin ténébreux et persistant" (9). Since Siliki's and Ada's mother stories have been suppressed, they desperately need ways of affirming themselves in the face of condescension and scorn by the Fulani heteropatriarchal system. Aware of the damaging impact of lost female stories, the narrator urges not only female characters but also the reader to decenter the male point of view and redress the historical wounds. The epistemic violence will be countered by "engraving where void leaves its tragedy" "graver partout ou le néant laisse son tragique" (100) women's own versions of female stories. And that is what Ada, Ekotto's alter ego, is determined to do, from the beginning of the narrative: to challenge and queer the multiple "official," "authorized" biased

[52] The French word "histoire" simultaneously means history and story, collapsing any difference one might perceive between them in a language such as English.

stories on Siliki by presenting her own revision: “That night, she decides to give her version of the life history of the old […] witch. In any case, she ought to tell her own life history, and those of voiceless women, condemned to silence” “Ce soir la, elle décide de donner sa propre version de l’histoire de la vieille sorcière … De toutes les manières, elle doit conter sa propre histoire, y compris celles des femmes sans voix, condamnées au mutisme” (42). And, to some extent, my project of bringing forward other forms of resistance in the postcolonial space echoes Ekotto’s and Ada’s. But, unlike Ada who decides to speak for the silenced, I seek not to because ventriloquism -- speaking for and about others supposedly silent or silenced -- is a risky venture (Spivak 1993). For the purposes of minimizing risks of condescension and gossip, like Trinh T. Min-ha, I prefer to speak next to and not for West African rural and non-literate women.[53]

By writing women’s stories as I do here, women break the cycle of ignorance and engage in what the narrator calls compiling women’s sacred texts (74), which she compares to the Koran and the Bible. Women’s lived experiences, stories and histories become sacred because they function as lighting guides, spiritual pathways that illuminate the path of future generations of women. To make contact, identify with queer women like Sita Sophie and Siliki is necessary for younger women like Ada; as it also makes a strong political statement. It truly is a powerful way of countering the derision and dismissal of a larger homophobic culture.

[53] See Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s interview “Speaking Nearby” with Nancy N. Chen (*Visual Anthropology Review* 8.1 (1992): 82-91).

Similarly, Cameroonian novelist and playwright Werewere Liking invests writing with healing powers. In her latest novel *The Amputated Memory* (2007), the protagonist Halla Njoké finds in writing the power to heal the wounds inflicted by the violence of the father: "I needed to shake loose the silences about experiences that should have been told, seeing them as facts of life if not test cases, and at least force my own people to say, 'Never again'" (8). In these contexts, the power invested in writing operates on two levels: at the local level with female characters and the Fulani heteropatriarchal power and at the global level with the patriarchal postcolonial state and its repressive mechanisms of female same-sex erotic acts.

These realities make even more compelling the narrator's injunction to women, fictional and real, to build an ongoing female conversation about life. It resonates with Hélène Cixous' 1975 invitation to women to write. In the "Laugh of The Medusa" (1975), a foundational and much-challenged essay, Cixous unequivocally urges: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...] Woman must put herself into the text -- as into the world and into history -- by her own movement" (875). As I suggested above, *l' écriture feminine* might be considered outdated in the middle of the so-called postfeminist era as well as inappropriate for African women's texts. However, Cixous' "call to arms" is still relevant to female characters and by extension to West African women writers since they still lag behind male writers in terms of the

volume of publication.[54] The social and political urgency to write at this specific historical juncture goes a long way, especially in a culture where the average woman spends little to no time writing and where the literacy rate remains the lowest in the world. [55] As empowering as writing may be for the dispossessed -- as Jean Genet argued in 1979 -- we need to be aware that it is not available to all the dispossessed.

In this novel about mangled female bodies and their recuperation through corporeal intimacy, writing, and recovery of lost voices, we move beyond the mere "restaging" of the neurosis of victimhood. Here, the reader is given the opportunity to make contact with female characters capable of stepping outside the box of victimization in which society would like to confine them. The women-centered intellectual activities of excavating lost female voices and the sexual transgressions are scandalous to the patriarchal nationalist framework of domesticated female sexuality because it cannot be accommodated within the heteronormative institution of marriage. As I have attempted to show, the patriarchal culture takes pains to silence non-normative female corporeal intimacy. One of these mechanisms of control is imposed silence, in the form social misrecognition and the saturation of discourse of homosexualities in West Africa with masculinist meanings. This form of privileging gives the false impression that only men engage in "unofficial pleasures," denying women the possibility of, or the desire for

[54] In the Introductory Chapter, I explain the reasons behind women's limited involvement in formal education, writing and publishing.

[55] According to a 2009 Oxfam International report, in West Africa 65 million young people and adults (more than 40% of the population) cannot read and write and 14 million children, aged 7 to 12, are not receiving any primary education. http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/west-africa-closed-books-open-doors. (Accessed 12 July 2010).

engaging in queer sexuality. And to the biased representational politics, more and more women writers are opposing a new tradition by excavating silenced female stories. Excavating silenced female stories is as important to female characters as it is to Ekotto and to this dissertation. However, I have to admit that the modern state's willingness to "see" female same-sex erotic practices is not entirely disempowering because it potentially allows women to engage in queer corporeal intimacy away from the prying eyes of the normalizing society.

Ekotto's openness about her own queer sexuality, unusual in West African writers' circles, partly explains her unabashed imagining of non-normative female sexuality. For her, more than silence about same-sex erotic practices, *Chuchote pas trop* represents an opportunity to destabilize all forms of marginalization; and the silence imposed on her postcolonial female queer characters mirrors her own personal feelings of constraint in American academia. Art is echoing the lived reality of the novelist, and the processes of confinement migrate from Ekotto's academic and personal lives to creep into the pages of her novel and the lives of her female characters. For example, as an expert on Jean Genet's work, Ekotto experienced academic marginalization in the United States and social and sexual marginalization in African social circles. The identity politics of academia initially confined her to the studies of African literature and/or black studies, especially African women's literature. However, her academic and political interests in Genet proved far more compelling than the well-intentioned warnings of her professors. According to them, the gap between an African woman and a controversial

French playwright and novelist was widened by the scholarly interventions of Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, and Felix Guattari, among others.[56] In other words, Ekotto could contribute little, if anything, to the existing scholarship on Genet as produced by other thinking minds of the twentieth century. So, just like the characters in her novel who struggle to reclaim their voices, so too did Ekotto, who worked continually to reclaim her voice by writing her dissertation and two books on Jean Genet. In 2004, with Bénédicte Boisseron, she published "Genet's *The Blacks:* 'And Why Does One Laugh at a Negro?'" in *Paragraph* alongside Derrida's article on Genet, "Countersignature."

Ekotto's interest in Genet was fueled by her struggle to understand her sexual marginalization and other mechanisms of oppression: "Confinement is a serious issue for me -- and it is not just the confinement of being behind closed doors or in prisons or whatever. What I call confinement is the impossibility of feeling free, of being able to participate in the world without feeling constrained by one's race, one's gender, one's sexual orientation" (quoted in Diabate 183). Shaking the walls of confinement is as crucial to Ekotto's characters as it was for her as a Cameroonian-born woman working on a supposedly distant author with queer sexual practices. Her success in breaking the shackles around her academic interests echoes her success in breaking the emptiness of silence around female same-sex sexuality. As a cultural product with a brazen radicalism,

[56] Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (1974); Georges Bataille, "On The Sacred Character of Criminals" (*Oeuvres completes* XI. 1949, 1988, 468-7) and *'Genet' in Literature and Evil* (1997); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet. Comedien et martyr*. (1952)*;* Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman* (1996); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78*. (2009); Félix Guattari's "Genet Regained" (*Journal: A Contemporary Art Magazine* 5. 47 (1987): 34-39).

Chuchote pas trop makes an important contribution to the visualization of West African female queerness, at a specific historical moment when being excluded from digital and publishing spaces equals nonexistence.

Chapter Four

Staging Horror and Mevoungou Ritual in the Postcolonial State: Jean Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005)

> "Mevoungou was the foundation on which the society of tomorrow was being built […] It's really a Mevoungou we all needed in this country." "C'est autour de Mevoungou que la société de demain devait se construire […] C'est de Mevoungou dont nous avons tous besoin."
>
> Postscript, *Les Saignantes*

In this chapter, I examine the film, *Les Saignantes*, to argue that it adapts the ritual of the powerful female secret society of the Beti of Cameroon for the purposes of healing allegorically the corrupt postcolonial State. The film and the Mevoungou are important to this project because the putative power of the secret society and its rituals are predicated upon the clitoris, which women worship. I suggest that the director's excavation of the pre/colonial society is a political gesture that defies two entities, the colonial ideology and the postcolonial State and their disavowals of threatening indigenous practices. To show the necessity of a collective purification ritual, I use Achille Mbembe's analytical framework of the "deathscapes," calling attention to the rampant corruption, the spatial dilapidation, and the engineering of the living dead. An investigation of the historico-anthropological descriptions of the secret society and its rituals contextualize the uses to which the director puts his adapted pre/colonial ritual. I conclude that in order to move rigid cultural and gender boundaries, the director

degenitalizes the ritual and yet shows female characters as active agents in the new formulation of the postcolonial State.

As most African countries celebrate amid controversies and in spectacular style their fiftieth constitutional independences, their balance sheets are depressing. With a slew of challenges including post-election civil conflicts, stagnant democracies, dictatorships, socio-political corruption, economic regression, and collapsing educational systems, postcolonial African states seem to exemplify Achille Mbembé's "deathscapes," spaces mired in a slow and constant process of desubjectification. If the past and the present are the best predictors of the future, the vision of the continent in the year 2025 is one of calamity. With his latest movie *Les Saignantes: A Story of Corruption, Sexuality, and Supernatural Power* (2005), Cameroonian filmmaker Jean Pierre Bekolo seems to subscribe to this vision of the continent's downward spiral into an abyss unless an allegorical purification ritual drawn from female ritual is performed. By staging the horror and the economy of predation, this postmodern film seeks to create a malaise in the viewer, and it invites her along with the postcolonial state to the symbolic cleansing ritual.

In this chapter, I argue that the film retrieves a traditional ritual of the powerful female secret society of the Beti of Cameroon, giving women's rites the power to heal the postcolonial state.[1] By doing so, *Les Saignantes* highlights the possible contributions of

[1] According to French anthropologist Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, the ethnic designation of the Beti and their current geographical location, around Yaoundé, are recent phenomena. In *Les seigneurs de la forêt* (1981), he explains that the term "Beti" was not originally an ethnonym, it meant "honorable ones" and/or "Lords."

two marginalized entities (women and traditional rituals)[2] to the new reconfiguration of the postcolonial space. This chapter is an examination of how the film grapples with two fundamental issues (power and female sexuality) and their obvious and increasing interaction in the postcolonial state. I start my analysis by contextualizing the film and exploring the experiential event behind its production. I also examine the director's political and social goals in producing such a challenging movie. With an understanding of the film's context, I analyze the processes that turn the postcolonial state into a deathscape, a dystopia in need of purification. In the third section, anthropological and historical descriptions of the secret society allow us to analyze the socio-political imperatives of calling on a precolonial female genital ritual to heal an allegorical diseased state. Section four closely reads the film's adaptation of the Mevoungou to show the uses to which the director puts a ritual that nineteenth-century German missionaries abolished. Finally, in section five, I explore the tropes of decapitation, emasculation, and human sacrifice as purificatory forms that female characters use to cleanse the postcolonial state and themselves.

However, it came to designate a grouping of kin-based groups among others the Eton, the Ewondo, and the Manguissa (169). For more on the Beti and their history, see also Jean Pierre Ombolo's *Sexe et société en Afrique noire* (1990) and Jennifer Johnson-Hanks' *Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis* (2005). Johnson-Hanks opines: "In contemporary local discourse, the term 'beti' implies enduring membership in a circumscribed ethnic group that has resided in Southern Cameroon since before human memory" (28).

[2] Here, "traditional" is used in the sense of "longstanding," and not "backward," which is frequently opposed to what is constructed as modern.

I-Contextualizing *Les Saignantes:* Cinema and Socio-Political Intervention

1-*Les Saignantes*

Set circa 2025 in an unnamed postcolonial West African state, this postmodern horror, science-fiction, and crime film features two young sexy women who operate in official spaces and engage in transactional sex (negotiation and exchange of sexual favors) for business contracts.[3] However, the decadent and corrupted state of the country calls for the Mevoungou's healing intervention to rebuild it.[4] One of the most revered precolonial female secret societies of the Beti of Cameroon, the Mevoungou's power is predicated upon the clitoris. The goal of the society is to restore prosperity to the entire community by purifying the village of evil forces. Further, it aims to empower its members against patriarchal practices (Vincent 1976, Laburthe-Tolra 1985, Ombolo 1990).[5] In the film, unbeknownst to the young women, the spirit of the secret society takes possession of their bodies and diverts them from their own personal financial concerns and towards a larger social mission. In conjunction with five initiated members, the power of the Mevoungou leads the female protagonists Majolie (Adele Ado) and

[3] Several critics of African cinema including Kenneth Harrow and Olivier Barlet have described Majolie and Chouchou as prostitutes. I argue against that label because sex trade is not the protagonists' exclusive source of income. In fact, they use sexual favors to land business deals and to gain leverage in Cameroonian high social and political ranks. Their practices can be categorized as transactional sex.

[4] The term "Mevungu" is spelled differently depending on the scholar. We find "meuvoungou," "Mevoungou," "muvungu," and "Mevoungou". In this chapter, I follow the spelling of the film, "Mevoungou."

[5] The Mevoungou was the most respected female ritual among the Beti; but several others existed: the Ngas, the Evodo, and the Onguda. For more on female rituals among the Beti, see Jeanne-Françoise Vincent's *Femmes beti entre deux mondes: Entretiens dans la forêt du Cameroun* (2001).

Chouchou (Dorelia Calmel) through a purification ritual performance, and together they challenge corrupt state apparatuses in order to heal the diseased postcolonial state.

The film opens with a sexual encounter between Majolie and a high-ranking official, known as the SGCC (Secrétaire General du Cabinet Civil). It is an encounter that results in his death. Panicked and frustrated over the loss of her sexual investment, Majolie (unaware that the Mevoungou possesses her body) calls her best friend Chouchou to help her cover up the terrifying incident and dispose of the body. Their attempt to dispose of the corpse leads them to explore the various political and socio-economic strata where corruption, decadence, and death lurk. After their abuse of the corpse, "Les Saignantes," the titular characters, take it to the butcher shop and attempt to convince the animal-like butcher that it is a "load of fresh meat, prime beef." Miraculously, the butcher recognizes the SGCC's body by tasting it. Yet, he proceeds to separate the head and the testicles from the trunk, which he hands to the protagonists. Confident that they have hidden the incident, Majolie and Chouchou realize that they may land other business deals during the SGCC's funeral. So promptly they devise a plan to reconstitute the body so that the SGCC's funeral may be organized. In the middle of the night, they visit the mortuary and bribe an alcoholic middle-aged mortician who provides them with a body that matches the head.

With a reconstituted body, the SGCC's family and state officials organize his funeral, but before long the SGCC's wife realizes that the body is not her husband's. As for the protagonists, in order to strike the business deal, they attempt to seduce the State

Minister (Emile Abossolo Mbo). An intelligent man, a sex maniac, and a voodoo adept, the Minister proves to be more insightful than they anticipate, and he challenges them. However, throughout the film, the young women go through several purification rituals that strengthen them. And at the end, with the help of the Mevoungou, they use their supernatural powers in a type of martial arts dance scene to defeat the State Minister. Through the invisible force, acquired during their purification and flowing through their bodies, les saignantes throw waves of energy at the Minister, weakening him and by extension the corrupt elite itself. However, they continue to roam the streets of poor neighborhoods to escape corrupt state-sponsored forces. Collective healing and self-discovery are thematically central to the film, but it is the female characters' rediscovery of the constructive powers of their sexuality that makes *Les Saignantes* a compelling film.

Les Saignantes was produced in 2005 and previewed during the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), where it received unfavorable reviews -- a point I analyze later. In 2007, it was previewed at the Cannes Film Festival and the Pan-African film festival (Fespaco), where it won the *Etalon d'argent de Yennega*, the second prize.[6] Despite its international exposure, the film failed to find a distributor until May 2009, when it was distributed in France. Like the two other primary texts discussed in this dissertation, the film subverts heteronormative gender dynamics; but specifically it also subverts form by mixing different filmic genres. Its unconventional lighting and editing

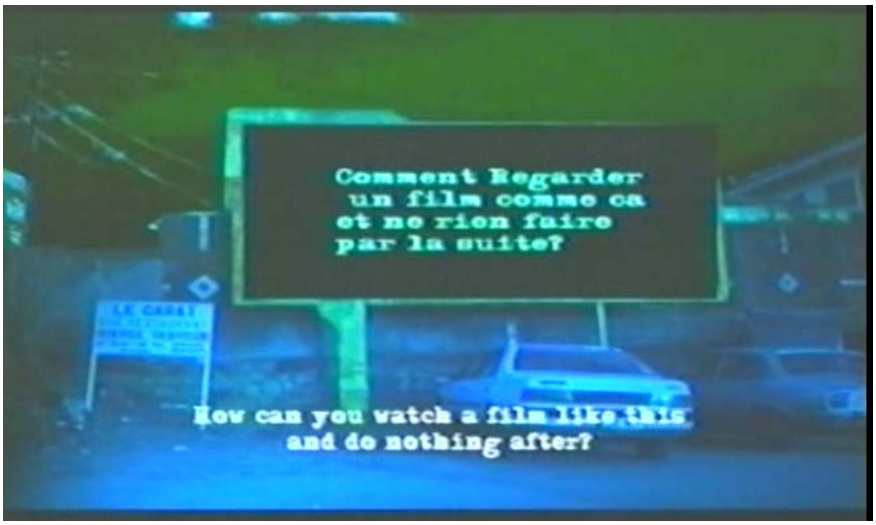
[6] The second prize came with the check of 5 million CFA francs, which is approximately $11,000.

led French African film critic Oliver Barlet to compare it to an abstract painting that is more comics-like than realistic. Barlet also compares Bekolo's creativity to that of the Japanese filmmaker Takeshi Kitano: "There is a touch of Takeshi Kitano in Bekolo's work: a scathing burlesque under cold lights to scoff at death" (2007). Along with Barlet, I think that Bekolo is unlike any other West African filmmaker; he is a maverick in the ways in which he approaches filmmaking and questions related to gender, body, sexuality, and death.

Although *Les Saignantes* resists pigeonholing, it can still be categorized as a politically and socially-engaged film. The director achieves his socio-political critique through the storyline and also by structuring the film around six interstitial title cards. These strategically placed title cards reflect different film genres -- action, detective, pornography, romance, mystery, and science fiction. Shaped like billboards and displaying rhetorical questions, the cards serve as a visual rude awakening of the viewer's social awareness, bestowing on her social and political responsibility.[7] For example, the first billboard-like title card asks: "How can you make an anticipation film in a country that has no future?" Another one poses the question: "How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party?" Truly, death permeates the film, and several scenes use conventions of the horror genre. Not only does the use of billboards emphasize the political urgency of the rhetorical questions, because they are symbols of the popular but,

[7] The six rhetorical questions are: "How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive?," "How to make an anticipation film in a country that has no future?," "How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party?," "How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden?," "How can you film a love story where love is impossible?," and "How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?"

they also allow the reader to momentarily step away from the macabre and violent atmosphere of the film. In other words, they function as markers that help redirect the viewer's attention. The final card at the close of the movie is the most telling and the most action-oriented: "How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?" With this last title card, it becomes obvious that the film is geared towards socio-political ends; it is indeed a roughly disguised, scathing critique of the decadent and corrupt postcolonial state. Ultimately, the film seeks to shake up the status quo; it is invested in calling for change because it was inspired by a real life experience.



The last title card and last scene in the film *Courtesy of Quartier Mozart Films*

In an interview in 2005, Bekolo bitterly explained how he had discovered the corruption and degeneration in the postcolonial state and the influence that the "misused" female sexuality, reduced here to transactional sex, has on the predominantly male ruling body: "During a stay in Cameroon, I wanted to meet a Minister but I didn't succeed. A young woman told me she could sort it out for me. I quickly understood it was a network

and I could have met the whole government that way! These young women control the workings of the system and they have a certain power" (Interview of Barlet and Bekolo 2005, my translation). Therefore, as a filmmaker, Bekolo used cinema to explore, in unsettling ways, the horror in the postcolonial state as well as to uncover the crippling influence of women's bodies on the body politic.

2-Women's Bodies and the Diseased Postcolonial State: The Poison as the Cure

On several other occasions, Bekolo explains his choice of female protagonists and highlights the thread between female bodies, moral contamination, and the ills of the postcolonial state. For example, in "The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism," an interview with Akin Adesokan, the director says:

> I had the idea that if I focused on women, I would really touch on very sensitive issues in society. I was trying to make a film about Cameroon, and so it was important to bring up the issue of women's relationship with men in power. That is a sensitive issue, and it would seem more interesting than if the central characters were to be boys. Also, *there is a connection between the idea of human corruption and girls*. (2, my emphasis)

Then, in the interview with Claire Schaffner at the premiere of the movie in France (2009), Bekolo frames women as instruments that draw attention to questions that would otherwise remain without notice, adding: "Concerning the girls, they become interesting when they adopt an ambivalent behavior because everyone gets involved: traditions, the

police…. *It would be less radical if the characters were male. The girls allow me to politicize my views of society*" (My emphasis and translation). [8]

Before I consider Bekolo's views on women, let me say that his use of the term "girls" is an interesting and problematic way of speaking about women because it ignores the variable of age and infantilizes the female protagonists. It appears that women, for Bekolo, occupy a crucial position in the postcolonial state and that unfortunately they seem to contribute to its decadence. In other words, their actions either perpetuate or/and justify the centuries-old patriarchal beliefs that stigmatize women's bodies as source of moral contamination, available only to satisfy men's sexual and reproductive needs. Additionally, Bekolo's answers could easily be interpreted as reducing the effects of female bodies to the specific experience he mentioned. As I suggested before, only women's rebellious sexuality gets the attention of the state, writers of fiction, and social critics. Any other use to which it may be put, say female-centered eroticism, slips through the cracks.

[8] "Quant aux filles, elles sont un sujet intéressant car lorsqu'elles ont un comportement ambivalent, tout le monde s'en mêle: les traditions, la police… C'est moins radical lorsqu'il s'agit de garçons. Elles me permettent de politiser mon regard sur la société" (" '*Les Saignantes'*: film africain d'anticipation," 2009). For more on Bekolo's choice of female characters, see also the interview with Tunde Oladunjoye, "African Filmmakers Should Define Cinema for Africa." Although insightful, this interview is full of typos which make me question its source. Since the website is fairly legitimate, I emailed the webmaster six months ago about the typos and have not heard back from him yet.

By juxtaposing different postfaces/extra texts,[9] read interviews, we find out that Bekolo's reading of women's bodies is a web of contradictions. On the one hand, he acknowledges their importance in the advancement of the postcolonial state and seems to argue that long-term solutions to its ills will be unsustainable without addressing questions related to women's status and conditions. On the other, he makes questionable moves by reducing female sexuality to transactional sex and by instrumentalizing women ("it would seem more interesting than if the central characters were to be boys"). By using women as marketing instruments in his critique of the postcolonial state, Bekolo reproduces the rhetoric of the 1960s nationalist movements and their uses of women's images to advance decolonizing agenda. Even more so now than in the decolonizing era, women's bodies continue to be regarded as exclusively in the service of the nation.

Perhaps the pervasive belief in the dangerous powers of female sexuality has led the director to consider it as the antidote to the ills of the postcolonial state, in other words, to set up the poison as the cure.[10] This approach is refreshing because it moves beyond reified categories, which resonates with the spirit of this dissertation. As I have

[9] In this era of fledgling technological advancements with the easy and instant access to most writers' and directors' commentaries and interviews, to what extent should a text be read as an isolated utterance? Interviews and commentaries after the release of the film or the publication of the book, after the fact to use Derrida's phrase, can be considered iterations that help the director or the author disseminate her preferred messages of the text. The Derridian approach would suggest that interviews are postfaces and/or extra texts that do not constitute superfluous additions to the film; in fact they participate in constructing its meaning. For Derrida, there is no outside of the text that does not contribute to the text. I think that since the viewer or the reader can be influenced by an interview, the critic should not bracket it in the name of the self-sufficiency of a piece of work" ("Outwork: Hors d'Oeuvre, Extratext, Foreplay, Bookend, Facing, Prefacing" *Dissemination* (1971, 2004, 1-65)). It is in the light of this approach that I refer, whenever necessary, to Bekolo's interviews.

[10] This reading is reminiscent of the Derridian Pharmakon as explained in "Plato's Pharmacy" published in 1972 and translated into English in 1981.

shown in the first three chapters, any rigid distinction between power and powerlessness, between the body as an exclusive site of subjugation or of resistance is unproductive at best and dangerous at worst. In the film, the director seeks to reclaim a feminine modality of power that would disturb the exclusive meanings of pathology and utility assigned to it. To do so, he draws from the past, from women-centered rituals known for showing female bodies as highly productive and useful in collective healing. Those uses that benefitted the social community in the precolonial Beti society may look like instrumentalization. But, contrary to that society, the postcolonial patriarchal framework sees female bodies as mainly destructive; and it is that unitary thinking that *Les Saignantes* seeks to undermine.

The film presents female protagonists invading male spaces and wielding masculine forms of power in science fiction, a genre conventionally dominated by male protagonists. These female characters appropriate and wield guns in the "shooting position" (the phallic symbol *par excellence)* and stand up like men to urinate rather than squat. In that sense, this film is a "photoshopped" version of the grim reality that the director experienced; and the software that serves to "beautify" the image is the Mevoungou ritual.

3-Intellectual and Professional Influences on the Making of *Les Saignantes*

Now an established filmmaker on the West African cinema scene, Jean Pierre Bekolo achieved continental and international recognition in 1992 at the age of 26 with his debut film, *Quartier Mozart*. The film reflects on the sexual politics in a Yaoundé

neighborhood (Cameroon) featuring a young school girl with the power to assault masculinity. Known as queen of the neighborhood, she is transformed into a young man by an old witch who also gives her the power to make men's genitalia disappear with a handshake. With his allegorical film, Bekolo tackles crucial questions related to power and masculinity and the anxiety associated with the disappearance of the penis.[11]

Bekolo studied screen editing at the *INA* (National Audiovisual Institute in France) in 1988-1989 and later worked for Cameroon Radio and TV (CRTV), editing short films and video clips for African musical groups. He also directed several documentaries and a television series, and taught filmmaking and African cinema in several American universities.[12] Despite these experiences, his creativity was tested and established with the limited budget of $300,000 on which he shot *Quartier Mozart* (Aufderheide 1994*).* To overcome the challenges of distributing the film in Duala, Cameroon, a city with two main commercial theaters, the director screened it in the city's town hall for weeks and advertised it on taxicabs. The making and distribution of *Quartier Mozart* suggest Bekolo's burgeoning innovative spirit, which *Les Saignantes* reinforces.

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[11] *The Complot d'Aristote, Aristotle's Plot* (1996), followed *Quartier Mozart* four years later. Produced and directed by Bekolo, *Le Complot d'Aristote* was his commissioned entry in a series sponsored by the British Film Institute to mark the centenary of cinema. Other directors in the series included Martin Scorsese, Jean-Luc Godard, Stephen Frears, Bernardo Bertoluci, and Georges Miller. A creative and humorous film on mimesis, the film was nominated at the British Awards in the same category as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, and became the first African film to be presented at the Sundance Festival in 1997 (Adesokan).

[12] For more on Bekolo's biography, see his interview with Bernard Verschueren, Clément Tapsoba, and Cheik Kolla Maïga. "The Vision of a People Must Not Be Reduced to Reality: Interview with Jean Pierre Bekolo" (*Ecrans d'Afrique* 2 (1992): 16-18).

Bekolo's intellectual and professional connections constitute major influences on his filmmaking and the subject matters he tackles. Questions related to the body and cannibalism and women's empowerment, so pervasive in *Les Saignantes*, may reflect Claire Denis' influence. The French feminist film director grew up in Cameroon and collaborated with Bekolo on *Quartier Mozart*. Her interest in the body and cannibalism is visible in movies such as *Trouble Every Day* (2001), *The Intruder* (2004), and *Beau Travail* (1999).[13] In addition to Claire Denis' influence, it is safe to say that Bekolo's focus on the body and its disintegration and cannibalism stems from the postcolonial culture's fascination with the body and excessive consumption, which is best known in Francophone West African popular parlance as *la mangecracie* or *la politique du ventre (*the politics of the belly). Excessive consumption permeates every sphere of the postcolony, to the point of becoming a hallmark of political ruling classes.[14]

Although the subtle feminist touch undergirding *Les Saignantes* may show the influence of the professional association with Claire Denis, Bekolo's feminist tendencies hark back to his experiences growing up with a polygamist father. In "De Maestro du *Quartier Mozart*" (1994), an interview with Pat Aufderheide, he explains how his lived experiences inform his filmmaking. We learn that his father was a polygamist police officer and that the conflicts in the family forced the filmmaker to take his mother's side

[13] In "In the Limelight: Claire Denis," a 2010 interview with Matthijs Wouter Knol, Claire Denis does not establish her influence on Bekolo. However her knowledge and insight on his filmmaking and the financial struggles he faces show their collaboration.

[14] Jean-François Bayard has also referred to the practice as "*la gouvermentalité du manger"* (the governmentality of eating) in *L'Etat en Afrique: la politique du ventre (*1989). In East Africa, member of the Kenyan Parliament and Human rights Activist, Koigi Wa Wamwere terms a similar practice as " 'Our Turn to Eat': The Philosophy of Ethnic Eating" (*Negative Ethnicity: from Bias to Genocide*, 2003).

against his father: “Maybe that’s why I made movies, because if I were on good terms with my father I could be an engineer making a good salary” (Aufderheide 17). This biographical account seems to indicate Bekolo’s rebellion against the figure of the unjust and authoritative father and by implication, the corrupt dictator. He seems to transfer his own cross-generational conflicts onto his films with the choice of young women who emasculate, literally and metaphorically, the patriarchal male elite or what it stands for.

French film critic and semiologist Christian Metz, Bekolo’s former screenplay writing teacher, is another major influence on his filmmaking.[15] As I will show later, Bekolo’s semiological approach to the film (structuring it like a night-long Mevoungou ritual) is similar to Christian Metz’s reading of the structure of language in the structure of films. The interpretive possibilities as well as the creative flexibility that the allegorical genre allows turn Bekolo’s productions into subversive and challenging cultural products. In terms of genre, *Les Saignantes* departs from the realist mode that has come to be associated with West African cinema.

Like Sembène Ousmane, Bekolo sees in cinema a means for social change but unlike him, he rejects the documentary, the mimetic transposition of reality into the screen. Bekolo seeks to achieve consciousness-raising with thought-provoking and at times disturbing films. In a revealingly titled interview “The Vision of a People Must not be Reduced to its Reality” (1992) conducted after the release of *Quartier Mozart*, Bekolo voices his preferences for the extremes and the allegorical, which he argues stimulate

[15] Christian Metz writes among others *Film Language: A Semiotic of the Cinema (*1968) Translated in 1991 by Michael Taylor and *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (1977, 1982).

imagination: “The vision of a people must not be reduced to its reality. This is sometimes the tendency of African films that have been made so far” (quoted in Tapsoba, Verschueren and Maïga 16). However, transcending conventional boundaries did not come without challenges: the Cameroonian film Commission rated *Les Saignantes* NC-17 and imposed a short-lived ban on it. The film was banned on charges of pornography, and the commission demanded that the director edit out sections considered indecent (Schaffner 2009). The incident of the ban demonstrates the political permeability in Cameroon, where supposedly independent commissions actually receive orders from the ruling party. In reality, the ruling political class was embarrassed about how the film had exposed its weaknesses. The incriminating scenes disturb the decadent comfort of the male ruling class by metaphorically and literally baring its failures and emasculating it.

Although the messages of Bekolo’s productions have been considered inaccessible to mass audiences, he still envisions his films to be entertaining as well as educational. On his professional blog, he has written that he sees filmmaking and public service as two sides of the same coin adding: “It’s all about education. The tools are there, the interest is there, we just need to create a method of acquiring knowledge that uses what is today the most immediately accessible medium” (“New York Premiere” 2006). As the director uses the blogosphere to bridge the gap between his productions and his audiences, in *Les Saignantes*, he uses the science fiction genre to attract a larger young African audience.

4-Cinema, Audience, and Political Urgency

The choice of cinema as a means of documenting the litany of problems afflicting the African continent as well as suggesting solutions is compelling because the medium was part and parcel of the apparatuses of colonization (Shohat 1991). Regardless of its contribution to the colonizing mission, today cinema constitutes the primary medium of reaching the largest number of West Africans. Known as the Father of African cinema, Sembène Ousmane argues the popularity of cinema claiming: "In Africa, there exist numerous art forms, but cinema brings in another dimension. Of all the art forms, it is the most popular, the closest to us because it takes us from orality to image. And as a film director, I would like to reach the largest number of Africans" (my translation).[16] In "Orality in the Films of Sembène Ousmane" (1996), Sada Niang explains that cinema is popular for several interrelated reasons. One, the majority of the population is non-literate and second, they have learned to distrust the written document, which is closely associated with colonialism and its repressive mechanisms. Finally and more importantly, cinema is popular because it allows the non-literate a space of self-representation that increasingly closes the social divide between them and the literate.[17] In *Singular Performances* (2002), Michael Syrostinki argues along similar lines that the cinematic

[16] Sembène Ousmane says: "En Afrique, il y a beaucoup d'arts, mais le cinéma apporte une nouvelle dimension. De tous les arts, c'est le plus populaire, le plus proche de nous, car il nous fait passer de l'oralité à l'image. En tant que réalisateur, je veux m'adresser au plus grand nombre d'Africains" ("Leçon de cinéma d'Ousmane Sembène au Festival de Cannes 2005").

[17] In his contribution to the anthology dedicated to Sembène Ousmane's films, Niang elaborates: "Through orality, the marginalized characters in society redefine themselves as citizens, charting a course for themselves against the literate law-makers" (57).

text's ability to provide a more authentic representation of socio-economic realities makes it an increasingly appropriate medium for political and social intervention.[18]

Although these arguments have been useful in understanding the popularity of cinema in Africa and its importance in political exigencies, they may have overlooked the evolving material realities and the powerful impact of modernizing forces. For one, the preeminence of the visual is not exclusive to the continent. Second, the rapid expansion of mass communications (radio, television, and the "new" technologies of information), the continued growth of filmmaking techniques, and the sprawling market economy (that allows most households access to a television set) are some of the contributing factors. Various other influences, local and foreign, foster enthusiasm for cinema in Black Africa. Continuing to dwell on Africans' supposed inclination toward orality would be to subscribe to their imaginary ontological differences.

By exposing the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power, *Les Saignantes* contributes to our understanding of power and socio-political relations in postcolonial African spaces. Indeed, the choice of cinema as a vehicle of social consciousness seems indisputable, but one can argue *Les Saignantes*' unsuitability for a general audience. The first reason concerns the allegorical nature of the film and how it might be potentially

[18] Here I quote Syrotinski at length to give an idea of the different factors that he deems contribute to the popularity of cinema in Africa: "These distinct *artistic* advantages for the filmmaker have a corresponding *didactic* value for an African public: the wider accessibility to an illiterate audience, the powerful impact of cinematic images, the incorporation of traditional and contemporary African music, the visual humor of films such as *Xala*, the more effective transposition of the oral dimension of traditional African narratives, the vividness of historical dramatizations, and the use of African languages in addition to, or instead of French, all of which suggest cinema can provide a far more authentic representation of the socio-historical reality of African culture and is thus more appropriate to its political exigencies" (101).

challenging to a viewer unfamiliar with the history of the Mevoungou ritual and with the director's ways of encoding his messages. Fortunately, Bekolo seems aware of those challenges and attempts to overcome them by directing the viewer through title cards and the voiceover. The straightforwardness and clarity of these devices stand in contradistinction to the metaphoricity of most scenes. Second, even if the director allows the general audience access to the film's core message with the title cards, issues of the graphic images of decapitation and sexual acts still remain unresolved. And one is justified to ask: For whom was the movie made? Immediately, we might think that it is made for a westernized audience looking for an alternative image to Hollywood productions or for an audience looking to satisfy the need for stereotypical and exoticizing images of West Africans. However, considering the blog reviews after the screening of the film in Canada, we may amend the first answer.

In 2005, *Les Saignantes* received from bloggers attending the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) angry and frustrated reviews. Most of the critiques were directed at the film aesthetics and the director's choice of departing from the conventions of filmmaking. Although it will be simplistic and reductive to position the reactions as accurately representative of the trend among non-African viewers, they still indicate the challenges relative to the understanding of the film. One writer, Todd Brown from *Twitch* -- a website claiming to specialize in "spreading the news on strange little films from around the world -- gives the film a failing grade at all levels: lighting, soundtrack, writing, and more: "[W]here does this film go wrong? Pick something.

Anything. Literally. The first thing you notice is that it is shot on what looks to be a mid grade home video camera, and poorly lit. Visually this would receive a failing grade as a film school project" ("Tiff Report"). This review is a harsh critique, particularly from a writer supposedly knowledgeable about the material conditions that govern filmmaking in "third world" countries. Another blogger, simply named Matt, echoes Brown, claiming how disastrous the film was on all counts: "The lame-duck attempts at fitting the story into that genre do more damage than good. This is science fiction as an underdeveloped 14-year-old with limited means would shoot it: cheap, stupid, and ugly" ("*Les Saignantes*"). Contrary to the above-mentioned unfavorable critiques, a few others support the director's aesthetic choices.[19] But, they racialized the debate, labeling as racist the unfavorable reactions. A supportive blogger, Jarheed, claims: "This is simply called 'avant-garde', your criticism reminds me some of the Godard's [sic]. I didn't take this film at all the way you did. First your perspective is a white male perspective. I felt this film didn't want to serve you the same thing you guys want to see about Africa" ("Blog To"). Racializing the debate could activate visceral emotions, thereby limiting the scope of the intellectual conversation. Needless to say, the polarization of aesthetic views reflects the film's challenging approach.

[19] The screening of the film at the Toronto Festival met with harsh reviews on the director's supposed ignorance in filmmaking. For more strong points of view on various aspects of the film, see ThirteenDamnDollars another blogger. With the hilarious username, he has this to say: "This director does not know how to tell a story with pictures. The editing is distracting and terrible, the plot advances in fits and starts, the acting is best left unmentioned, and due to an ill-advised decision to use a cool type-writer style font, even the *subtitles* are a failure."

I propose that *Les Saignantes* is a visual re-creation of Achille Mbembé's "deathscapes". In fact, I think this movie is a blow to postcolonial African dictators and more generally to corrupt dictators around the globe. Although Bekolo anchors it in the precolonial ritual of the Beti, he delocalizes it and couches it in a language somewhat accessible to non-Africans.

As a fictionalized record of the challenges facing the African postcolonial state, *Les Saignantes* seeks to introduce social change, albeit in an oblique way, by unsettling the viewer with her own image. On the path to development and liberation, from the state of nominal and constitutional independence to political and economic independence, it seems necessary that the characters as well as the viewers (characters themselves in the postcolonial tragedy) go through their own mirror stage, by which I mean the chance to usher in a new era in their own lives. The specular image that Bekolo provides of postcolonial subjects might serve as a rude awakening to the monstrous realities of their quotidian lives, to which they might have become insensitive.

II- Imagining and Re-creating the Dystopian Postcolonial State

1-Corruption and Dysfunction: Normal Paradigm of Governmental State

As I mentioned above, in *On the Postcolony* (2001), Achille Mbembé draws our attention to the particularity of the postcolony where the lines between "production, extortion, and predation have been blurred" (50). Discussing the (in)significance of the fiftieth Anniversary of Independences in Africa and approximately ten years after

Mbembé's monograph, a Senegalese university history professor, Ibrahima Thioub, observes the worsening of what he terms "the system of predation" ("système de prédation") of African elites ("L'Afrique et ses élites prédatrices" 2010). What we learn from Mbembé and Thioub is to displace the emphasis placed on the so-called West for the challenges in the typical postcolonial state. While the Atlantic slave trade, the Arab slave trade, and colonialism may have contributed to the African economic underdevelopment, most West African leaders themselves have replicated and/or devised predatory measures to starve their own populations.[20] It should be noted that to locate in one space, whether international or local, the agents of "underdevelopment" is at best tricky and misleading at worst, for globalized economic and political forces, small and large, known and unknown, originate from rhizomatic horizons. *Les Saignantes* paints a picture of a postcolonial city, marked for degeneration and morbidity, and where corruption and dysfunction have become the normal paradigms of governmental state.[21]

The first title card of the movie, "How can you make an anticipation film in a country that has no future?" sets the tone of the conundrum to be solved and of the urgency to make sense of senselessness. From the beginning, the viewer is invited to a journey of problem-solving with a set of rhetorical questions. As she ponders the

[20] In *Le Genocide voilé: enquête historique* (The Buried Genocide: An Historical Inquiry) (2008), Senegalese Historian Tidiane Ndiaye argues the similarity of effects between the Atlantic slave trade and the Arabo-islamic slave trade. According to him, the Arabo-islamic slave trade was more genocidal that the Atlantic slave trade because out of the seventeen million of Africans deported to the Arabo-islamic countries, very few survived whereas the descendants of Africans shipped to Europe and the then New World constitutes an important size of the current world population.

[21] The film's portrait of the city is reminiscent of that of canonical films such as *Metropolis* (1927), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Sleeper* (1973), *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982, and *1984* (1984).

significance of the first title card, she is offered an aerial view of the city, created through the high-angle shot, and covered with the number 2025. Although the scene is a projection into the future, the aerial view confers it a familiar and a realistic touch. The all-encompassing image becomes closer to reality as many complex and detailed realities are erased to make space for the symbols of street lights and tall buildings. Immediately, the elision of details allows the viewer to capture the city at glance and to experience feelings of domination. However, these feelings are instantly restructured into those of discomfort and anxiety with the temporal ambiguity as the voiceover, a mature female voice, gravely announces: "It was 2025 and nothing had changed." The expectation that the city of 2025 would be challenging to recognize is immediately frustrated because the editing is fast erasing the sense of estrangement that the viewer might hope to experience. Although the space seems familiar, the period is not. It is the far future, but things look eerily familiar. It is simultaneously a projection into the future combined with the regression in the past: "It was 2025."

The feelings of anxiety produced by the loss of markers are reinforced by the nighttime setting of the film. The first tableau seems to a static movement of familiarity and estrangement, in a space where things work the opposite of how they ought to. The camera movement and the jump cuts between the tableaus speed up the unfolding of events and as a result, shape the viewing experience of the film. Without any hiatus, feelings of control chase away those of anxiety and vice versa.

In the world of the movie, corruption has reached an endemic proportion to become the *de facto* mode of structuring relationships. From the average man on the streets to the State Minister, all transact on the basis of corruption. The butcher in his shop receives a bribe in order to accept "a load of prime meat," which is actually a corpse. The mortician is contacted in the middle of the night to provide a body that matches the head. The negotiation between the young women and the mortician for the price of the service is quite revealing.

In the attempts to gain the mortician's sympathy, Majolie and Chouchou explain: "…the body disappeared and all that is left is the head," to which the mortician acquiesces, grinning at the opportunity of illicitly making money. He finally manages to say, beaming: "This is not a small business, how much do you have?" As the impatient protagonists urge him to name his price, he mischievously answers: "This is at least 100,000 *fcfa* business." But, the young women bargain and reach the amount of 10,000 *fcfa*. After receiving the bribe, the mortician starts the search among frozen corpses for a matching body. The panning out of the morgue with its cold lights and rows of unreclaimed and unnamed dead bodies sends chills down the viewer's spine and shows the pervasiveness and banality of death in the postcolony. Finally, the mortician finds a body that he decapitates and sews onto the SGCC's head. The reconstitution of the SGCC's body with a random and unnamed body, found at the mortuary, suggests the interchangeability of all bodies in the postcolonial state; in this way the film begins to destabilize the exceptionality of the male ruling body.

As it documents the misuses of bodies, the film highlights the dysfunction and failures of the found(l)ing fathers.[22] In fact, most masculine symbols (gun and policemen) are marked with dysfunction. Police officers are incapable of investigating as one title card rhetorically asks: "How do you investigate in a country where acting is subversive?" which is reinforced by "How can you make a detective film in a country where you can't investigate?" The fact that a patrolling senior police officer continually empties bottles of alcoholic beverages literalizes the notion of dysfunction of the state and the precariousness of masculine forms of power. At the sight of les saignantes driving the SGCC's Mercedes, the officer marvels: "If this country didn't have pretty women, it wouldn't be worth a goddamn" and adds that he could drink more beers depending on the generosity of "this car's driver." The generosity he mentions actually suggests his intentions of extorting the passengers. Similar to police officers who cannot act against crime and corruption, guns play an impotent role in the film. They do not fire bullets or even if they do, they repeatedly fail to hit their targets. For instance, during his "investigation" of the alleged coup d'état that Majolie and Chouchou have been plotting against the state, a rookie police officer, *Inspecteur* Rokko, repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempts to fire his gun.[23] Also, towards the end of the movie, in his struggle to annihilate

[22] The pun is meant to designate the political leaders of the decolonization and postcolonial eras who position themselves as the founding fathers of the postcolonial state. Based on their failures and the endemic corruption in the postcolonial state, I consider them the foundling rather than the founding fathers.

[23] Majolie, Chouchou, and the society's genitally-derived powers threaten the authorities so much so that the police officer informs the Minister of Homeland Security and, by extension, the President of the imminent threat that women are plotting against their rule. The supposed or real threat to the state speaks to women's contribution in the reconfiguration of the postcolonial state. After all, they did decapitate and reconstitute the body of the SGCC.

les saignantes, time after time, the State Minister pulls the trigger, but his gun fails to fire or misses its target.

Like guns, banknotes are used in the opposite manner than usual. In the film, taxpayers' money or, worse, high interest rate loans from international financial institutions serve three major purposes, all different from those they are supposed to achieve. Instead of being used to maintain the streets, they are collected in a van and become pocket money for the elite's use. Kwame Anthony Appiah's observation of postcolonial governance is useful here. *In My Father's House* (1992), Appiah is adamant in his indictment of corrupt ruling classes, opining: "[T]he national bourgeoisie [that] took the baton of rationalization, industrialization, and bureaucratization in the name of nationalism, turned out to be a kleptocracy" (349-50). One of the other ways in which taxpayers' money gets spent is its unjustified distribution during funerals and social gatherings. Just like the State Minister who distributes banknotes to random audience members at the SGCC's funeral, high-ranking politicians in West African countries hand out banknotes on the streets to strangers in order to boost their popularity.[24] In a society caught in an infernal cycle of destruction, guns, police officers, and banknotes have all become useless figurations, symbols of a demobilized system.

[24] Searching for sources to document this common phenomenon in West Africa; suggestions are welcome.

2-Spatial Dilapidation and Claustrophobia

The loss of markers in the dystopia is reinforced by the spatial dilapidation, when smoke incessantly covers the sky and envelops everything on its path. After the death of the SGCC, Majolie calls her friend Chouchou for help; and during the latter's cab ride, the viewer has the opportunity to assess the extent of the spatial dilapidation. The slow motion and the long shots show the streets with unsightly and uneven pavements, holes, smoke, and moving and indistinct human figures. The discomfort-generating sight is eerily reminiscent of the images of African cities, as routinely depicted on television screens by international news channels. The pervasive foul odors of dead dogs and probably of corpses that Chouchou notices are reminiscent of a wasteland or of a war-devastated area. Here, degeneration, the metaphorical war, has turned humans into moving bodies, zombie-like, and socially dead. With this fateful view, we have the impression that the state is physically and metaphorically being consumed through *la mangecracie* and in a state of "mutual zombification" (Mbembé 1992). The smoky streets reflect the smoky minds of the inhabitants who have become shadows of themselves, more like caricatures and unable to shake the yoke of degeneration. The view of the streets creates an uncanny blend of nightmare and of reality.

Indeed, the feeling of an unending nightmare envelops the film. The sense of openness in the first tableau is rapidly set in contradistinction to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the rest of the film. The jump cut between that first and the second tableau -- in the bedroom with a man lying down with arms stretched out and a dangling woman -

- shows the gap between two opposed realities; one of a society marching towards progress and the other given to destruction. In the nightmare/reality, the viewer seems encased in a world soon to close down on her and from which no exit is visible. In the room, the low-key lighting combined with diffuse shadows and pools of light is potentially titillating and inviting to a sexual adventure, especially with an almost naked heterosexual couple. However, the scene simultaneously creates a gripping, scary, and surrealist atmosphere. And the use of red, orange, green, and blue as dominant colors does little to reassure the viewer.[25] The sense of a thriller or mystery genre is reinforced with the blurry quality of the lighting. The continued movement of openness and closure and of reality and nightmare stretches the viewer's tolerance and patience as well as her abilities to continue this journey of self-discovery and awareness. After all, self-discovery and becoming aware of one's weaknesses for the purposes of correcting them are challenging and at times a painful experience.

The monstrosity of Bekolo's imaginary country is compounded by human beings exhibiting animal-like behaviors. The cab driver taking Chouchou to Majolie's apartment

[25] Even though they are dazzling, considered individually, the colors constitute a compelling way of encrypting the state of affairs in the postcolony. The history of colors in West African cultures is long and complicated and here I will only briefly scratch the surface, using the Akan system of color symbolism to contextualize Bekolo's manipulation of colors. My use of the Akan system of color symbolism perhaps deserves a comment. The first reason is the inaccessibility to scholarship on the Beti system of color symbolism and the second reason is that different West African cultures have similarities in rituals and customs. The director's sophisticated uses of colors re-create the atmosphere of the ritual. The color red associated with blood, sacrificial rites, and a heightened spiritual awareness resonates with the spiritual mood of the Mevoungou ritual. Considered as the color of transition, orange is associated with stimulation and thirst for action; here it suggests the director's goal of sparking a debate about the country's future. A symbol of fertility, prosperity, and abundance, green represents the expectations of the community after the performance of the Mevoungou ritual. The blue, which is associated with stability and harmony, gives the viewer hope about the future of the postcolonial state.

after the SGCC's death animalizes her when he threatens to rape her and predicts that she will howl like a dog. The taxi driver himself does not escape animalization with his debilitating stammering. Just like Chouchou, who will howl like a dog when being raped, the butcher to whom the SGCC's body was delivered for dismemberment is growling like a dog with cannibalistic tendencies. As if stripped of his linguistic abilities and possibly of his social agency, the butcher's preferred mode of communication is growling when he approves and wielding the rusty chainsaw when he disapproves. He cuts and tastes a section of the corpse, magically recognizes the SGCC, and begins crying. In that scene, the viewer is taken aback and seeks to understand why the animal-like butcher displays feelings of empathy for the SGCC to the point of crying. With these disturbing images, unusual in West African cinema, most men act as if stripped of fundamental human attributes: speech and self-determination. And one rightly wonders about the possibility of reclaiming subjectivity in a space designed to fabricate the living dead, and where social relations are fundamentally structured around "raw" sex, that is sex unmediated by emotional or erotic relationships.

3-Sex: Structuring Economic and Professional Relations

Just like corruption, transactional sex permeates the traffic of social relations. For instance, in her dealings with the State Minister, the Director of Hospital, Dr. Amangoua, uses it for professional advancement. Similarly, the business transactions between the SGCC and Majolie, and between the State Minister and les saignantes are negotiated on the basis of genital services. But, in hindsight, the viewer realizes that the sexual

interaction between Majolie and the SGCC is actually cleansing, as it allows her to rid the diseased state of a cancerous and elite body.

Wearing only a bra, her pubic hair exposed, and suspended in a harness, Majolie gyrates over the SGCC and executes ritualistic movements including the "shooting position." Known in Côte d'Ivoire as *la position du tir*, the "shooting position" is a dance move created in 2002 by young Ivoirian artists imitating the shooting positions of soldiers and rebels during the 2001 armed rebellion that has divided the country for more than a decade. The integration of dance/celebration and shooting/death, two seemingly contradictory phenomena, blurs the boundaries between life and death. The combination also turns traumatic events into regenerating ones, and also reflects the creativity of the postcolony. With the inclusion of an Ivorian dance in a Cameroonian–directed film, Bekolo reveals his choice of producing a cinema that transcends national boundaries. The erotic/death scene pushes the boundaries of African cinema further by showing close-ups of Majolie's pubic hair and her breasts. In African cinema, it is unusual to bare the female character's naked lower body. According to Alexie Tcheuyap, African films discuss and make many allusions to sex, but they usually show no sexual act on the screen: "Despite appearances, the representation of sex acts in African films remains taboo and ellipses are

used to play the fundamental role" (2003, my translation).[26] Tcheuyap elaborates that the viewer is given the opportunity to see women's upper bodies and that the lower sections are framed and/or hidden through strategies of substitution, including long shots, dark screens, jump cuts, and ellipses. Contrary to other directors, Bekolo chooses to cover up the breasts and expose the pubic hair. With exposed genital parts, the scene is provocative but also titillating in its withholding of details. The absence of dialogue preceding and during the unexpected scene contributes to the suspense level and raises the viewer's feeling of apprehension. The voyeuristic hand-held camera, generally used in documentary-style filmmaking to capture a realistic touch, compounds the anxiety level in the scene. [27]

[26] "En dépit des apparences, la représentation de l'acte sexuel dans les films africains demeure encore l'interdit et l'ellipse est amené à jouer le role fundamental." (Alexie Tcheuyap, "Sexe Hors Cadre," 2003). While films avoid intense sexual images as Tcheuyap suggests, Ivorian film director Desiré Ecaré's 1985 *Visages de femmes* (Faces of Women) was groundbreaking. To date, it remains the most sexually explicit film in West African cinema. In 2008, I checked out *Visages de femmes* from the University library, and since it was in-library use only, I sat on one of the screening stations in FAC to watch it for the first time. I could not help being paranoid and uncomfortable thinking that I would be accused of watching an X-rated movie in the public space. The film was considered so offensive that it was banned in Côte d'Ivoire. For more on *Visages de femmes*, see Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike's *Black African Cinema (*1994) and Francoise Piaff's "Eroticism in Subsaharan African Films" (1996).

[27] With close-up shots of Majolie's butts and pubic hair, the viewer is primarily led to believe that she is watching a sexual or even a pornographic scene, but as events unfold, it turns out to be a scene of death. Most critics consider the scene pornographic, but Kenneth Harrow in his 2006 ALA Conference paper, "Let Me Tell You about Bekolo's Latest Film, *Les Saignantes*, but First…," argues against this labeling of the scene, claiming that the real is never pornographic. In the same paper, speaking of a Cameroonian journalist who interviews him after the premiere of the movie, Harrow reports: she "averred that Africa was not ready for such overt, and [..] would fain add, Europeanized sexual images."

Majolie and the SGCC *Courtesy of Quartier Mozart Films*

After a moment, the gravity-defying Majolie springs on the man and jumps away. The dynamic of teasing, so manifest in the scene, mimics the director's play with the viewer's expectations. Using the prerogatives of the elevated and flexible position, la saignante finally chooses the moment of contact between the bodies, which turns out to be unusual. Her shooting position and her gyrating, engulfing, and therefore virile hips take the SGCC, the welcoming and obedient old male organ and the viewer from the terrain of the superficially pleasurable into that of war, submission, and death. With the death of the SGCC, the viewer realizes that what seems like an enjoyable sexual scene is actually a scene of horror. The traumatic shock of that scene is indicative of things to come, of the constant reversal of received norms.

The new terrain that the viewer is invited to tread with the characters represents what in *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (1962), Georges Bataille has named the erotic, a world of sensual pleasure in which degradation and death are constant presences**.** Unlike the conventional and comfortable view of sexual acts as

enjoyable and life-giving, the film cautions that in them may reside the seeds of death. The death of the SGCC subverts the image of the beautiful and sexy young African woman as a source of pleasure for the affluent. Here, contrary to comfortable expectations, the film shows female sexuality as cleansing, especially through the Mevoungou. From being an agent of moral corruption whose body is a site of annihilation, Majolie has changed into a purifying agent, sacrificing the powerful male authority figure. In this scene, her body is imagined as in the service of the community, but later at the funeral, she attempts to use it for personal financial gains.

With the State Minister, the young women propose genital services in exchange for a government business contract of building a hospital. As the negotiation gets intense, Chouchou asks the Minister: "If YOU, YOU give us a contract, who's to say anything?" to which the Minister replies: "If your friend let's [sic] me visit her little hidey hole who's to say anything?" Getting impatient and eager to speed up the negotiation, Chouchou gets closer to the Minister and arouses him with sexual gestures. She removes a rosy candy from her mouth with which she caresses the Minister's lips, and erotically commands him to sign the contract. Aroused, the Minister eagerly designates the meeting place -- at the hotel where the funeral of the SGCC is to take place. The location, in addition to its convenience, suggests how death has truly become banal. But, before he hands les saignantes the signed but fake contract, he requests their underwear, a demand they satisfy, partially sealing the deal. In addition to serving as a commodity in business

transactions and professional advancement, sex has also become a means of punishment, a site of power play.

An adept of witchcraft, the Minister uses sexual contacts with women, and especially with women's underwear, to feed his mystical powers. He collects women's underwear, stores them in a business suitcase, and smells them when in need of supernatural powers. That female genitals function as sorcery paraphernalia suggests the power invested in them in the postcolonial state. And not surprisingly, in the movie, women's bodies are cleansed of corruption and marshaled for a collective healing.

In the absence of a social, political, and financial position that will confer the cab driver social power over Chouchou, he threatens to use rape as a stylistic of discipline. After she complains about his reckless driving, the stuttering cab driver lashes out: "Are you in the middle of fu… fu… fucking or what? 'Cause if that's the case, I can always find a more comfortable place. I co… co… could turn here on a street side and ra… rape you right now and no…no one would hear you how… how… howling?" It seems that only in a state of impunity can rape be used as a threat. Of course, no one will hear her because they are all zombies, living dead, and intoxicated with an endemic corruption. Affected by a speech disability and therefore unable to linguistically articulate his thought in an effective manner, the cab driver is left with the penis to discipline a rebellious woman.

As I have shown above in my analysis of Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop*, in the diseased postcolony, the penis is an instrument for the production of docile bodies. It

is readily available to all heterosexual and virile men, and it replaces the gun where guns no longer fulfill their conventional roles. The penis and female genitals contractually regulate relationships between men and women, and are not primarily tied to erotic pleasures or reproductive needs. Anthony Giddens' notion of "plastic sexuality," sexuality severed of its traditional expectations, can be applied to forms and modalities of sexual acts in *Les Saignantes*.[28] Not only are they divorced from eroticism; they are emptied of feelings of passion/love and/or the reproduction of descendants. On that note, the director guides the viewer with the title card: "How can you film a love story where love is impossible?" Indeed, love does not exist in Bekolo's dystopia, and death is a pervasive presence.

4-Necropower and the Deathscape

Just like in Mbembé's description of the deathscape, in Bekolo's imaginary land, the macabre atmosphere enwraps and confounds everything, and one justifiably wonders if the society of 2025 is not the apocalyptic vision of an annihilated State. In the film, the suave female voiceover is aware of the situation as she informs the viewer by axiomatically claiming: "We were already dead." And later, in a rhetorical question, she drives home the message: "How does one recognize Mevoungou from others in this country where it's impossible to separate the living from the dead?" Indeed, in the dystopian society, it is impossible to distinguish the living from the dead because just like

[28] According to Giddens, at the difference of "fixed sexuality," "plastic sexuality" is freed from the constraints of heterosexuality, marital and normal, read coital sex. Plastic sexuality can be shaped to honor erotic desires be them perverse (anal, autoerotic, and sadomasochistic). (*The Transformation of Intimacy*: *Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, 1992).

the living often do, the dead also vomit, creating an obscene and senseless world. For instance, even dead, the SGCC still reacts to the outside world by vomiting in Majolie's face, thereby refusing to be confined to the state of silence. At first, the vomit causes both Majolie and the viewer feelings of revulsion. For a moment, they believe in the resurrection of the body, but realize that after all, that is not part of the plan; and both are left to search for the meaning of an act that probably has no meaning except to materialize meaninglessness in the postcolony.

With regard to the banality of death, one title card asks us: "How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party?" The characters even coined the expression "DGPs," the "*Deuils de grandes personnalités*," translated as "W.I.P:" "Wakes of Important Personalities" to underscore the festivities around death. WIPs and funerals have turned from mournful gatherings to joyful celebrations where drinks and food are plentiful and where the poverty-stricken feast. The confusion of predation and production imitates the confusion of death and life. These are typical representations of paradoxes of the postcolonial space: rich in natural mineral resources, yet poverty-stricken and heavily indebted.

As the viewer strives to make sense of the senseless, to navigate the litanies of monstrosities, the title cards pull her from what seems like a long nightmare. At the beginning, she has been tricked to believe in the familiarity of her environment and to enlist her participation in an erotic scene that turns out to be a scene of death. This apparent disjunction complicates the viewing of the film, especially when the normative

framework is no longer normal. Nothing looks like it should. Order is in disarray, death is a party, love is death, and even the genre of the film is almost impossible to define. Trapped into the claustrophobic world, the viewer turns into the object of the gaze. And one wonders, what happens when the viewer becomes the object of the gaze? She enters into the world of surveillance, fear, and anxiety. But when there seems no way out, opportunely, the voiceover relieves the viewer's anxiety: "The country could not continue like that without a future. It had to change." Truly, it has to change through a purification ritual, the atrocities have to stop, albeit momentarily, because "There was no place for despair." But, the process involves pain, sacrifice, emasculation, and theophagy. Rather than men and masculine modes of power and production, which have failed, women and traditionally-feminine forms of power take center stage. Women's occult forces will liberate the viewer from the claustrophobic space and purify her. But, the film moves beyond normative frameworks; it proposes a degenitalized ritual to replace what was originally a female genital ritual as a signifying practice to reach collective healing and freedom.

III- Rituals in the Postcolonial State and the Mevoungou in Anthropological Texts

1- Rituals in the Postcolony: Political and Social Functions

As I have suggested above, the film performs an allegorical purification ritual in the postcolony. The task is even more compelling in the postcolonial space where chaos is the *modus operandi* and precolonial cultural practices and beliefs are under siege. To suggest a ritual performance amounts to disavowing the forces of modernity. Originally positioned in comfortable opposition to European modernity and the Enlightenment forms of being, rituals have been constructed as backward, anti-progress, and the hallmarks of primitive societies.[29] So with the legacy of colonialism, most "[P]ostcolonial authorities see the belief in witchcraft and other occult forces as creating a basic impediment to development initiatives in Africa"(Fisiy 143, 1998).[30] But ironically, while the ruling classes publicly disavow occultist practices and rituals, they may resort to them for their personal profits, just like the sorcery-practicing State Minister in *Les Saignantes*. In these spaces, most native rituals are conveniently packaged under the culturally-loaded term of witchcraft and for political longevity, vicious ruling

[29] For more on the opposition of ritual to modernity, see Jean and John Comaroff's introduction to their anthology *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (1994) and Stuart Hall's "The West and The Rest: Discourse and Power" in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Society* (1996).

[30] It must be noted that it is almost impossible to neatly categorize postcolonial ruling classes along pro modernity and anti ritual lines. African nationalisms have taken and continue to take various forms. Those who subscribe to the African renaissance (return to the past movement) do not necessarily endorse rituals and occultist practices and those who disavow them do not systematically espouse the forms of European modernity. For example, while Sékou Touré was witch hunting so-called practitioners of witchcraft, he was a fervent advocate of cultural nationalism and a passionate opponent to any political influence from the former colonial power. For more on Sékou Touré's cultural nationalism, see Nomi Dave's "*Une nouvelle révolution permanente*: The Making of African Modernity in Sékou Touré's Guinea" (*Forum for Modern Language Studies (*2009): 455-471).

classes even engineer accusations of witchcraft as mechanisms to muzzle opponents. The most patent example is the late Guinean dictator Ahmed Sékou Touré. In *In Search of Africa* (1998), African Studies scholar Manthia Diawara demonstrates how Sékou Touré banned "tribal masked dances, idol worship," masks, secret societies, and sculptures, which he considered counterrevolutionary (179). Entire segments of the population, especially the most vocal political opponents, were systematically exiled on charges of witchcraft. And the Guinea case is far from isolated.

With the erosion caused by colonial rule, modernizing forces, and nationalist dictatorships, reclaiming and performing rituals becomes a political gesture, a cultural nationalism not from the ruling classes, but from the marginalized. Given the dynamic of recuperation and disavowal, a strong scholarship developed around what is now known as Ritual Theatre and Drama. Scholars interested in these fields have identified two main functions, political and social, that rituals play in contemporary Africa. The first concerns resistance against dictatorships and their unexamined proclivity towards European modernity, and the second is the collective social therapy. With regard to the second function, a reference to Marie-José Hourantier, the French anthropologist is obvious. Hourantier is a leading figure and an advocate of the avant-garde promotion of ritual performance in Côte d'Ivoire that started in the late 1970s; she argues that ritual performances: "create a healthier and stronger body, more stable and refined emotions; [..] define a clearer and more creative love of thinking, a firmer and better directed will; [..] assert oneself with more open consciousness" (1984, 63). Through these words, it

appears that Hourantier extracts rituals from the matrixes of backwardness and elision in which they have been consigned since colonialism. In other words, what has been scorned is being called upon in the postcolonial era when it is obvious that the betrayals of constitutional independences have gathered dust.

In *Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa* (1994), African Theatre scholar John Conteh Morgan echoes Hourantier, but he primarily analyzes the political dimension of ritual performances. Using Cameroonian-born and Ivorian-based playwright, novelist, and poet Werewere Liking as the exemplary figure of the trend, Morgan suggests that her use of the structures of ritual in her performances is possibly attributable to "a conscious *intellectual* and cultural nationalist decision to reconnect with an ancient theatrical form" (30 emphasis in original).[31] He continues saying that Liking's performances in West Africa "resist any reading in the realist mode" (30). Based on Morgan's remarks, we can see parallels between Bekolo and Liking. With the cinematic re-creation of the Mevoungou ritual, Bekolo seems to follow in the footsteps of his fellow country woman. In addition, *Les Saignantes*' structural affiliation with the Mevoungou is a clear indication that the director makes a political decision to dissociate from the current destructive and oppressive form of governmentality in the dystopia.

[31] Werewere Liking is a multi-dimensional artist and a leading figure in ritual performances in Francophone West Africa. She created in Abidjan la Villa Ki-yi, a pan-African training Center dedicated to the spiritual and artistic formation of economically-destitute young men and women. The Villa and the Foundation Ki-yi housed about hundred artists of all vocations: from sculpture to singing, stage performance, and jewelry making. For more on the Kiyi Foundation, see Thérèse Migraine-George's *African Women and Representation* (2008), Anne Adams' "To Write in a New Language: Werewere Liking's Adaptation of Ritual to the Novel." *Calalloo* (1993), Peter Hawkins' "Werewere Liking at the Villa Ki-Yi" (1991); and Richard Bjornson's *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity* (1991).

As I mentioned before, in the early decades of missionization, the Catholic Church, especially the first German missionaries, abolished many Beti indigenous rituals, including the Mevoungou (Mviena 1970, Vincent 1976). These gestures by European missionaries aimed at "civilizing" and saving the colonized from darkness. As a case in point, although himself a Beti, Bekolo never experienced the ritual or heard about it until he read *Le tombeau du soleil: a novel* by French anthropologist Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, who taught at Yaoundé University and published extensively on the Beti.[32] Ironically, Bekolo's contact with the ritual, which became possible via a non-African, shows the possible non-linearity in the perpetuation and transmission of cultures. His choice to use the Mevoungou as a ritual allows him to reclaim an aspect of his culture that had been denied him. By reclaiming the Mevoungou without the stigma of backwardness, Bekolo gives similar opportunities to those previously unfamiliar with the ritual. His social and cultural enterprise is in keeping with the 1990s cultural reclamation waves in Guinea and in other parts of West Africa where "tribal minorities" reconstituted and performed rituals in an attempt to negate the rule of oppressive nation-states (Diawara 183). But, rather than blindly fall into the unproductive dichotomy of modern vs. traditional and European vs. African, the director adapts the old or rather the extinct ritual into a relevant one. His adaptation reflects the social and cultural changes that the society has experienced since colonization.

[32] "J'ai découvert le Mevoungou à travers un roman, *Le Tombeau du soleil* de Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (Le Seuil / Points Odile Jacob) qui enseigne à la Sorbonne." "I discovered the Mevoungou in a novel, *Le Tombeau du soleil (The Sun's Grave)* by Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (Le Seuil / Points Odile Jacob), professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne." ("Être a la fois Africain et contemporain," 2005).

A historico-anthropological exploration of the ritual will allow us to assess to what extent the film adapts the Mevoungou. The cultural significance invested in the ritual among the Beti and its contribution in our understanding of power configurations in the said society partly explain the considerable anthropological attention it has received.[33] Yet, because of its secret nature, anthropologists have not been able to provide an exhaustive account of it.

Let me note in passing that the use of anthropological texts to contextualize the film is fraught with tension, since the texts cannot be taken at face value. In fact, anthropological research should be understood in the larger and contentious conversation around cultural anthropology and its objects. In his seminal study *The Invention of Africa* (1988), V. Y. Mudimbé discusses the role that anthropology plays in reifying Africans and their cultures as abnormally different.[34] According to him, the thought-objects of anthropology were partially constructed outside of their "original" context and then incorporated into an ideological and political matrix of power/knowledge: "The anthropologist did not seem to respect the immanence of human experience and went on to organize, at scientific expense, methods and ways of ideological reduction: concrete

[33] L'Abbé Théodore Tsala's 1958 "Mœurs et coutumes des Ewôndô," Paul Mviena's *Univers culturel et religieux du peuple beti* (1970), Jeanne-Françoise Vincent's *Traditions et tradition: Entretiens avec des femmes beti du Sud-Cameroun*, (1976, 2001); Philippe Laburthe-Tolra's "Le Mevoungou et les rituels féminins à Minlaaba" (1985) and *Initiations et sociétés secrètes au Cameroun: Essai sur la religion beti* (1985); Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé's "Rites et associations traditionnelles chez les femmes beti du sud du Cameroun" (1985), Jean-Pierre Ombolo's *Sexe et Société en Afrique Noire* (1990), and Charles Gueboguo's "Manifestations et facteurs explicatifs de l'homosexualité à Yaoundé et Douala" (2002).

[34] For more on the controversy on Anthropology, see also Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*. 2004. In her study, Guyer echoes Mudimbé opining: "The third is 'the cultural particularism of anthropology' -something that tends 'to make Africa look like a pathological departure from a standard model based on Western experience and institutions" (172).

social experiences were looked at and interpreted from the normativity of a political discourse and its initiatives" (89). Mudimbé's argument serves as a cautionary measure against investing the value of science in anthropological descriptions of the Mevoungou or rejecting them. Since these texts are nearly the only option for making contact with the ritual, their outright rejection will not only curtail the possibilities of understanding the Beti society but will also constitute an epistemic violence against the Mevoungou.

2-The Mevoungou in/and Anthropological Texts

Since the 1960s, French and Cameroonian anthropologists and intellectuals, including l'Abbé Tsala, Paul Mviena, Jeanne-Françoise Vincent, Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé, Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, Jean Pierre Ombolo, and Charles Gueboguo, have produced an extensive body of scholarship on the Beti and the Mevoungou.

One of the most exhaustive accounts of the ritual remains Jeanne-Françoise Vincent's *Traditions et Transition: entretiens avec des femmes beti du sud-Cameroun (*1976, 2001). In the monograph, Vincent provides an overview of the ritual as well as transcriptions of conflictive interviews she collected from seventeen Beti women in 1967 and 1971. Because colonialists abolished the society, only three of the sixteen interviewees who described the ritual, most in their sixties, actually participated in it. The majority of the accounts are therefore based not on first-hand experiences but on reports and hearsay. Not surprisingly, the interviewees differ on the significance of the ritual to the point of contradicting one another. For example, one interviewee, Cressence, thinks

that the ritual and its festivities were a way for women to eat elaborate meals, since men daily enjoy those meals at the expense of women and children. Others defined it as a ritual of purification, initiation, protection against evil eyes, celebration of femininity, and resistance against male domination.

According to Vincent's interviews, in the Beti belief system, the Mevoungou is a secret society built around the cult of the "*evu.*" Located in women's bellies, precisely in their clitorises, the *evu* is a magical gland that embodies both good and evil and when activated, is capable of giving life and taking it. The location of the gland explains why the power of the Mevoungou is predicated upon the clitoris, which is seen as the exterior physical site of this powerful gland.[35] The leader of the society, called the mother of Mevoungou or *Mevoungou Mba* in Beti, is chosen on the basis of the large size of her clitoris, believed to represent the extent of her power and fecundity. She is a woman past menopause who no longer engages in heterosexual intercourse.

Although the society is exclusively female, the entire community of men and women reap the benefits of its activities. Performed at the request of both men and women, the rituals aim to settle cases of thievery or witchcraft, for personal crises and prosperity, and during moments of drought and calamity in the community. The interview subjects in Vincent's monograph describe the typical Mevoungou ritual as a two-part ceremony (public and private). The public ceremony reunites the entire village, whereas the secret one is attended exclusively by the initiated and the *mvon Mevoungou*,

[35] According to Vincent, the *evu* also constitutes a primary organizing principle of the Beti cosmogony. The possessor of the active gland can be a healer or a witch- a person using the power for destructive purposes.

candidates for the secret society. The secret ceremony starts with the mother of Mevoungou undressing and inviting the participants to take their clothes off before she swears them to secrecy. Then, women invoke a ceremonial package known as *mbom Mevoungou*, composed of roots, ashes, medicinal leaves, and centipedes (67). The composition of the package explains women's supposed strong connection to nature and earth. According to Vincent's descriptions, the rest of the ceremony consists in transmitting the package's power to the clitoris of the mother of Mevoungou and to those of the other women. If the ritual is performed to unmask wrongdoers, the village expects them to confess or to be unmasked by an outbreak of diseases ranging from swelling to various other skin conditions to a series of unexplained deaths. Whether the offenders confess or are unmasked, the village is considered purified of evil forces.

In 1985, four years after the publication of Vincent's interviews, Philippe Laburthe-Tolra published *Initiations et sociétés sécrètes* and the essay "Le mevungu et les rituels féminins à Minlaaba." Both studies draw heavily from several sources: Vincent's interviews, Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé's 1970 dissertation, and German anthropologist Gunther Tessmann's 1913 reports. The French anthropologist defines the ritual "as a means of protection and a way of eliminating evil forces for both men and women," confirming its importance as well as the occasions of its performance (my translation).[36] But, Laburthe-Tolra silences much of the "messiness" of Vincent's interview subjects reducing their complex and indeterminable descriptions to the rite of

[36] "Le Mevungu apparaissait comme un moyen de protection et d'élimination des maléfices au yeux de tous, femmes et hommes" "For the entire community of men and women, the Mevungu appeared as a means of protection against and destruction of evil forces" (235).

passage for young girls that lasts ten days and the night-long ritual of purification performed by married women. Importantly, however, he confirms Vincent's report that the mother of Mevoungou is chosen based on the large size of her *evu* (her clitoris), believed to represent her spiritual and reproductive power. The criteria for choosing the mother of Mevoungou lead Laburthe-Tolra to observe that the ritual is a "celebration of the clitoris and of feminine power."[37]

The typical location of the ritual is the forest or the kitchen (a quintessential female space) where women start a fire, next to which they place the ceremonial package. The mother of Mevoungou undresses and invites other participants to imitate her. She then addresses her vagina and conjures it to take her life if she faults someone or save it if someone else does. After these preliminaries, women dance around and jump over the fire while invoking the Mevoungou, "symbolized by the package" to take their lives should they be guilty of a wrongdoing, or to retaliate against those who offend them. Such invocations include: "May the Mevoungou kill those who steal my yams or the one who kills my child" (my translation).[38] Expanding Vincent's descriptions, Laburthe-Tolra reports that after the transmission of the power of the clitoris to the package, women participants dance naked all night, jump over the fire, eat the foods they cook, "feed," rub, massage, admire, tickle, and stretch out the clitoris to give it the allure of a virile

[37] "Le Mevoungou en revanche, se présente clairement, du moins pour ses adeptes, comme une célébration du clitoris et de la puissance féminine" "However, in the eyes of its members, the Mevoungou was clearly a celebration of the clitoris and of female power" (234).
[38] "Celui qui tuera mon enfant, celui qui prendra mes ignames, que le Mevoungou le tue!" (237).

organ.[39] In the light of this adoration of the clitoris, one understands why in the Beti culture, its excision is the ultimate punishment for adulterous women.[40] Midway through the night, the ceremonial package is burnt and the ashes are divided into three portions. The first portion is buried with a centipede in front of the hut of the organizer, the second is made into a package to represent the Mevoungou, and the third is sprinkled on rooftops and around the village.

According to Laburthe-Tolra's account, women spend the rest of the night dancing, singing, eating, conjuring, examining, and praising members with prominent clitorises. Towards the end of the ritual, they mimic intercourse with the older women in the conventional masculine roles and the younger ones in the feminine. But, throughout, participants make fun of men's genitals, degrading them while celebrating women's. Overall, the ritual consists in establishing a communion among the different entities: the package, the clitoris of the mother of Mevoungou, and to the genitals of the other women.

Most anthropological reports show consistencies in the importance of women's genitals or what they represent in restoring social balance and prosperity to the community, but they differ on subversive and anti-patriarchal uses (such as women's double sexuality) to which the ritual and the society might have been put.

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[39] "Les femmes vont l'admirer (le clitoris) et se frotter contre lui […], on va enfin le chatouiller, le masser ou l'étirer; 'jusqu'à l'amener à la longueur d'un membre viril" "The women will admire and rub themselves against it [...]; finally they will tickle, massage, and stretch the clitoris out 'to give it the allure of a virile organ'" (238).

[40] For more information on female circumcision in the Beti society, see Ombolo (77-8) and Vincent (57).

3-Desexualizing the Mevoungou/ "A Sabbath of Lesbians"

Two French feminist anthropologists, Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé and Jeanne-Françoise Vincent, argue that the Mevoungou was also a means of women's resistance against male domination. Vincent believes that the practices functioned among other uses as "retaliatory actions deliberately taken by women against men" (30). Bochet de Thé adds that it was also a means for women to "affirm their personality, reinforce their fertility, and engage in a double sexuality" (my translation).[41] Whether Cameroonian or French, male anthropologists and intellectuals have vehemently opposed its sexualization and dismiss the subversive uses to which the ritual might have been put. For Laburthe-Tolra, it was a celebration of women's sexual organs, a desperate plan to summon the powers of nature to heal the community rather than a means of resistance and/or the constitution of a female world of pleasures (*Initiations et sociétés sécrètes*, 1985, 331-2). Charles Gueboguo admits that the description of the ritual suggests that it was a celebration of women's sexual organs and power, and that it did contain homosexual gestures. However, he opposes seeing it as erotic or homosexual, arguing that its most important use was procreation (35). Gueboguo's and Laburthe-Tolra's claims resonate with the typical heteropatriarchal bias that considers sexuality as exclusively heterosexual penetrative sex.

[41] "Pour elles, c'était le moyen d'affirmer leur personnalité, de renforcer leur fécondité et de réaliser une double sexualité" ("Rites et associations traditionnelles chez les femmes béti du sud du Cameroun," 248), Marie-Paule Bochet de Thé, *Femmes du Cameroun: mères pacifiques, femmes rebelles*, ed. Jean Claude Barbier,1985.

Cameroonian intellectuals and Catholic priests Paul Mviena and Isadoré Tabi, as well as Jean Pierre Bekolo himself, echo Laburthe-Tolra and Gueboguo in critiquing the sexualized interpretations they think French feminist anthropologists bring to bear on the ritual. In *Univers culturel et religieux du peuple beti* (1970), Mviena pleads that the Mevoungou not be regarded as "a sabbath of lesbians" ["un Sabbath des lesbiennes"](162) because it was exclusively performed for procreation and social purposes. Mviena complains that the ignorance of the ritual's real significance and its misinterpretations by colonial missionaries justified its abolition. He continues that even if the ritual contained sexual gestures, it was devoid of sexual connotations. To support his views, Mviena provides the Beti etymology of the term "Mevoungou," describing that it is composed of a plural prefix "me," "mul," meaning hair which is culturally associated with prosperity and multiplication and "ngul" in reference to potency and spiritual power (162). By referring to the etymology, Mviena presumes that the term's original meaning got lost in the colonial project, that by travelling from Beti to German and later to French, the word mutated to the point of undergoing cultural misrecognition. But, although the etymology helps extend our understanding of the practice, Mviena's methodology is problematic because it considers language as an unchanging shell of a cultural essence, as outside of social changes. With this mode of thinking, we find ourselves in the terrain of pure meanings and practices that do not register paradigm shifts and historical discontinuities.

Unaware of the possible limitations in Mviena's methodology, in a 2005 interview with Olivier Barlet, Jean Pierre Bekolo uses a similar approach to desexualize the ritual. Inferring from the etymology, he opines that the ritual focused on a force of nature (read women's sexual organs) to heal the community and did not implicate sexual relations: "In Beti, the same root [Mevoungou] refers to cohabitation, offspring, progenitor… - at least around fifteen words with no relation to the sexual" (my translation).[42] Interestingly, with Bekolo's definitional intervention, we learn that Mviena's definition is not exhaustive. Again, not only does the etymological approach assume an atemporal essence, but it also and unequivocally conflates language with social reality. Despite the director's words, however, *Les Saignantes* still shows women engaging in joyful sexual intimacy with one another for purposes of their own pleasure and self-discovery.

It is intriguing that those who desexualize the ritual are men even though the ritual is forbidden to them. The attempt at desexualization goes beyond the cultural battle between French anthropologists and Cameroonian intellectuals to enter a gendered landscape. Although the research necessary to argue that rubbing clitorises provoke pleasures lies beyond the scope of this chapter, does not the desexualization ignore the possible physical pleasures associated with such acts? By desexualizing the ritual, male observers deny women practicing the Mevoungou the possibility of experiencing sexual and erotic pleasures and of defining or modifying their own practices. Women's

[42] "En beti, la même racine désigne le concubinage, la descendance, le procréateur etc.: au moins une dizaine de termes sans rapport avec l'acte sexuel" ("Being African and Modern at the Same Time").

enjoyment of sexual pleasures during the ritual should not be contradictory to or annihilate its "spiritual" or even patriarchal aspects. To completely deny the possible pleasures associated with the ritual is to "hijack" Beti women's bodies. As a postcolonial African feminist critic, I seek here to reclaim the power of sexuality without its stigma.

IV- A Cinematic Re-creation of a Mevoungou Ritual

When juxtaposed with anthropological descriptions, the filmic adaptation is, at times, very consistent with historical descriptions of the ritual, but, at other times the film transforms and even suggests fear of it. The necessity of the ritual is unequivocal, as the viewer hears the off-screen voice gravely declaring after the shocking erotic/death scene: "Mevoungou has fallen on us like a bad dream. Now this country has a chance to escape from the darkness." Later, we hear: "Mevoungou was inviting us to join the dance." The film's ambivalence or more accurately its choice to transcend gender boundaries is reflected in these descriptions as "fallen on us like a bad dream" and "inviting us to join the dance." The juxtaposition of coercion and invitation, of a frightening event ("bad dream") and a joyous celebration ("a dance") is unmistakable. In addition, the use of the communal third person plural "us" is an invitation to the viewer to join the community of men and women that need purification through women's creative and healing powers, even if at times, the film downplays the importance of female powers by degenitalizing the Mevoungou. How does the film's representation of the Mevoungou enrich, subvert, and undermine the precolonial ritual?

To re-create the surrealist atmosphere and the participants, various parts of the film such as lighting, the off-screen voice, and les saignantes' body movements are tailored to mimic anthropological and historical descriptions of the ritual. The film exemplifies Hourantier's argument that ritual performances contribute to the transformation of the society and the establishment of order through the initiation of the community into a higher truth. As the voiceover confidently declares: "It was around Mevoungou that tomorrow's society is to be built." Represented through the mature female voiceover, the Mevoungou is central to the film as it controls, predicts, and guides all characters, especially Majolie and Chouchou.

1- The Thriller Atmosphere and Active Women

In the film, the role played by the voiceover is complex, for it seems to straddle polar opposites. Because of its constant association with the film noir, the device gives *Les Saignantes* a feeling of darkness. Yet, unlike the cold and chilling qualities of the thriller voiceover, here it is a soothing and reassuring voice that reinforces the maternal and nurturing associations with women. Simultaneously, the voiceover forces the viewer to consider the larger implications of the issues tackled in the film. As a leader and an omniscient narrator, it sets up the parameters and informs the viewer of how the plot unfolds, providing information that would otherwise be unknown to her. The ambivalence towards the ritual (joyful celebration and a bad dream) is compounded by the borderline contradictory feelings that the voiceover creates in the viewer, a reassuring figure as well as one that is reminiscent of the threat of the thriller genre.

In the film, the ritual is primarily defined in the negative: “The Mevoungou is neither a living being nor a thing. Mevoungou is not a place much less a moment. Mevoungou is neither a desire nor a state of mind. Because Mevoungou is something we see, we live and experience but cannot quite define. We don’t decide to see Mevoungou. Mevoungou appears to you. Mevoungou invites itself.” The negative statements are valuable precursory to definitions, but they do not help us clearly identify the entity. I think that the predominance of that approach indicates the difficulties of grasping the Mevoungou; it is not easily discernable because it is the immanent part of the society and of the individual that has been repressed under the pressures of colonization and globalization. Evidently, the Mevoungou defies the constraints of time and space, infiltrates the environment, escapes the control of the characters, and takes possession of their beings. Like a dormant entity or the sudden return of the repressed, it is ready to manifest itself in unforeseen and challenging circumstances. Unlike the tangible ceremonial package in the historical ritual, here, it is constituted in intangible and transcendental terms. From its original setting, the village, more specifically the kitchen or the forest, it is now relocated in the postcolonial city where corruption and death reek. In fact, it is no longer time- and place-specific nor is the ritual exclusive to Beti women, much less the prerogative of a specific gender. The use of the singular third personal “it” instead of a feminine marker “her” to define the Mevoungou reflects the director’s attempt to defeminize the ritual, framing it in gender-neutral terms and adapting it to the needs of this rapidly changing world. Thus, the viewer, whether female or male, feels

more comfortable relying on the voice to guide and protect her through the purification ritual that would save the country.

As anthropologists have reported, in the precolonial Beti community the ritual was typically performed during periods of hardship, drought, and unsatisfactory hunting trips. The fact that men would request that women perform the Mevoungou ritual after several unproductive hunting trips amounts to their acknowledgement of women's supposed mystical powers. That recognition illustrates men's inabilities to solve crucial social issues and compounds women's earth-derived powers. Like the SGCC who is waiting for sexual satisfaction from a much younger woman, the founding or more accurately the found(l)ing fathers have betrayed the dreams of decolonization and failed their peoples. Those shiny and shimmering dreams which have gathered dust and disillusionment are now constant guests in the postcolonial state. Of course, the voiceover is right: "The country could not continue like that without a future. It had to change." But how? According to the film, we have to call on and invoke the genital power of mothers and women to cure the ills of the found(l)ing fathers. To re-create the passivity of men and the activity of women, several long-shot scenes show men sitting in *maquis,*[43] drinking and engaging in lighthearted conversations or lying down like the SGCC. The long shots of men in *maquis* create indistinct and impersonal figures, and mute their voices, showing their inactivity and incapacity to solve problems. Through the device, men are framed as shadowy and unimportant characters.

[43] In Francophone West Africa, a *maquis* refers to a bar located in a popular neighborhood and usually frequented by men for drinks and lighthearted conversations; its equivalent would be the dive bar.

In contrast to the passive roles in which most men are confined at the beginning of the film, close-up shots of Majolie and Chouchou and the initiated indicate their importance to the upcoming ritual. The shots allow the viewer to hear women's voices and conversations, to clearly identify and perhaps associate with them. One such instance of a possible identification with female characters is the opening scene with Majolie and the SGCC. The spatial position that the characters occupy in the encounter reflect an unconventional power dynamic.

Harnessed in a trapeze-like rope above the SGCC, Majolie is literally and metaphorically looking down on the SGCC. Her elevated and flexible position is contrary to the prescribed norms in the African context because the West African imaginary considers the woman (and a young one for that matter), as the one who should be actively penetrated, placed physically underneath her social superior.[44] The reversal of the conventional gender dynamic with the male in the bottom position, with arms extended like an infant waiting for a maternal figure, the young woman, who like a savior figure comes to rescue a man in distress, destabilizes the normalized hierarchies of gender and seniority. Majolie chooses the moment of physical contact between the bodies. But, after the death of the SGCC as she goes through an emotional shock, the editing style of the tableau enlists in her favor the sympathy of the viewer. The eye-line shot that shows the SGCC's corpse through Majolie's eyes indicates her state of mind and suggests an

[44]In "What's an Old Man like You Doing with a *Saignante* like Me?," Kenneth Harrow argues the weakening of the authority of the father figure in African fictions. By way of Slavoj Zizek, he attributes the decline in authority to "the development of the capitalist economy from liberal capitalism, imperialist state capitalism […] post-industrial capitalism" (190, 2009).

unusual psychological distress while allowing the viewer to sympathize with her predicament. Then the close-up of her face accomplishes two goals; first it drags the viewer into the scene to experience the same horror that the character experiences, and second, it mocks the corpse. I find it a mockery because what Majolie feels has become much more important than a lifeless body. Obviously, in the dystopia death seems to have lost its "sacredness." As argued before, the viewer has been flung into the same boat of mental stress as the character, and the bond between them grows through the journey toward purification and female self-empowerment.

Truly, no ritual is complete or effective without the assistance of initiated members, represented here by five elderly women in red and blue headscarves with serious and authoritative demeanors; one of these women is Chouchou's mother. Under their guidance and watchful eyes, Majolie and Chouchou appropriate public spaces, traditionally considered male. Their physicality is reminiscent of the typical West African matron, heavy and robust and dressed in traditional cloth with matching head tie. The matrons gain their strength and confidence from their age and the accrued social and cultural powers.[45] So, as in the anthropological descriptions, in the film, elderly women share their experiences with and initiate younger ones.

[45] For a discussion on mature elders in African cinema, see Suzanne McRae's "The Mature and Older Women of African Cinema" (*African Cinema: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings*, ed. Kenneth Harrow, 1999, 241-54).

The initiated *Courtesy of Quartier Mozart films*

Through the visual effects, the viewer witnesses the ways in which this system of support functions. During the stressful cab ride that takes Chouchou to Majolie's apartment, the picture of the initiated flashes on Chouchou's cellular phone and on various other screens, including on an outdoor movie screen. These appearances suggest the extensive occult powers of the Mevoungou and its abilities to sense dangers befalling the young women. On several occasions, the society uses its space- and time-defying powers to protect Majolie and Chouchou against corrupt state-sponsored forces. The magical disappearance of the SGCC's corpse from the trunk during a routine police search is a case in point. Again, in the middle of the film when *Inspecteur* Rokko, the zealous police officer, suspects Majolie and Chouchou's subversive activities -- bribing, decapitating, and disposing of the body -- he goes to Chouchou's mother's house to arrest them. In his search, he is caressed by four elderly women who are invisible to him. They lift his gun

and move him in an instant from the house to a hospital. The protective actions of these initiates contribute to the successful performance of the purifying ritual.

2- Cleansing and Purging the Stains of Corruption

In order to lead the purification ritual, Majolie and Chouchou must themselves undergo several rituals of cleansing and purging. They need to be cleansed before any purificatory actions they execute can be successful. A bath, the first of those rituals, occurs just after the death of the SGCC. Distraught with the vomit of the corpse on her face and walking like a robot, Majolie steps outside and uses a large cooking pot to bathe. Although in the opening sexual scene she wears a bra but no underwear, in this scene of purification, she is completely naked. The shaky and unstable scene, created by the visual effect of doubling, conveys a sense of urgency and anxiety. This editing style also emphasizes Majolie's lack of control over her movements as she impulsively and vigorously scrubs her body. After the physical cleansing, she undergoes an alcohol-induced internal purging. As if an external entity is dictating her actions, she walks into a bar and grabs a bottle of hard liquor, "a sacred liquid," from which she drinks.[46] The use of alcohol to bridge the divide between worlds borrows from many African cosmogonies. In *Drink, Power and Cultural Change* (1993), Emmanuel Akyeampong reports the importance of alcohol in ritual performances among several ethnic groups of Ghana:

[46] For more on the connection between spirituality and alcohol in West African cosmogonies, see Emmanuel Akyeampong's *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c.1800 to Recent Times* (1993).

> Rites of passage illustrated the conception of life as a progression from the spiritual world, through the living world, and back into the spiritual world. Naming, puberty, marriage, and funeral ceremonies represented different epochal stages in life's journey. The human perception of the relative intimacy of the spiritual and living worlds associated with each phase was reflected in a minimal or profuse use of alcohol. (30)

Majolie's rite of passage continues through the uncontrollable consumption of alcohol, after which she urinates and simultaneously experiences orgasmic spasms, outside the bar, a foot away from other bar patrons. The background shot in the urination scene shows the public status of purification, which is invested with transformational powers, as Majolie groans and seems to be pushing out of herself the creeping stains and the pervasive corruption of the crumbling society. With the close-up of her face, the viewer intimately shares in the pains associated with and the necessity of purging the sins. Following the cleansing comes a moment of stupor, materialized by the slow motion of the scene. This first stage of the purification strengthens Majolie and allows her and Chouchou to dismember the body and dispose of it.

To consolidate the success of the ritual and female empowerment, the initiated need to appreciate Chouchou's clitoris. But, in relation to that aspect, the film chooses to depart from the historico-anthropological descriptions of the ritual. After reconstituting the body of the SGCC, Majolie and Chouchou go to Chouchou's house, where the initiated are waiting to examine Chouchou's clitoris. The examination and possibly the

rubbing, feeding, and stretching of the clitoris will empower Chouchou since the size of her *evu*, clitoris, would correspond to the level of her mystical powers. But, Majolie mocks the practice by teasing Chouchou: "They want to see your clitoris," to which Chouchou answers in a song, "They can't see my clitoris." The appreciation of the clitoris divides the young women and the initiated. Chouchou's refusal to respect a central aspect of the ritual is symptomatic of contemporary continental West African young women's rejection of most cultural and traditional practices. And Chouchou succeeds in avoiding the conventional clitoris-centric ritual and instead dances to Brenda Fassie's "Vuli Ndlela" as an alternative method of purification.

Once in Chouchou's bedroom, the powerful voice of the iconic Brenda Fassie, singing "Vuli Ndlela," throws les saignantes into a dancing frenzy, during which they change several outfits and embody several types of women. *Vulindlela*, a Zulu word for "to open the way," seems the most suitable incantation for a transformational session.[47] At a dizzying pace, created by the doubling and tripling of the shots, the viewer sees Majolie and Chouchou metamorphose from sexy to modest, from young to old, and from trashy to respectable. The editing of the shots condenses time and space and creates an uncanny sense of estrangement and familiarity. Their movements take the protagonists into the spiritual realm, where they live several lives, continuously creating and evacuating identities.

[47]For a translation of the term "*vulindlela*," see http://www.vulindlela.co.za/who.htm (Accessed 12 July 2009).

Consistent with anthropological descriptions of the Mevoungou ritual, dance moves permeate the movie; from the first scene to the last, Majolie and Chouchou dance and execute ritualistic movements. While they may appear terrifying and zombie-like, the young women are conforming to the demands of the ritual. In fact, the ritualistic movements are embodied symbols that move beyond the mere telling of a story to become an effective mechanism of involving the viewer into the world of the scene, to have her enjoy or endure, as the case may be, the emotional and psychological state of the protagonists. As John Conteh Morgan has observed, dance movements are "not used in the representational mode, that is, to signify but instead to create psychological states" (31). In addition to the cinematography and the editing, the symbolic movements seek to actively draw the viewer into the ritual performance, so that it becomes a collective experience.

Similar to alcohol, the power invested in songs and dances becomes obvious when the voiceover proclaims: "Our Mevoungou had rediscovered its integrity. It could no longer accept the slightest insult. We were ready for the final phase." The protagonists recover a desired and respectable social agency and come out as newborn women ready to deliver the last blow to the enemy. Following the purification, they attend the SGCC's funeral and subsequently disarm the voodoo-adept State Minister.

Dancing to Brenda Fassie's Vuli Ndlela *Courtesy of Quartier Mozart Films*

The scene of metamorphoses is made even more compelling with Bekolo's use of the mirror. As they dance, Majolie and Chouchou gaze into a mirror and watch their appearances change. That experience displaces reliance on other entities and propels self-reliance; the women cease being instruments of the system to become subjects. Their gaze in the mirror is reminiscent of the Lacanian mirror stage, for the specular image provides Majolie and Chouchou a triumphant turning point in their identity formation.[48] They have reached their completeness and integrity, unlike the previous stage that was characterized by "unco-ordination," fragmentation, and instrumentalization. *Les Saignantes* seems to suggest that purification and healing are predicated upon coming to terms with one's weaknesses, in this case "misused" sexuality. I think that the

[48] In *Écrits (*1966), Jacques Lacan defines the mirror stage as the period between the ages of six to eighteen months in which the child recognizes his reflection in the mirror and realizes her separateness from her mother and the world. The experience is accompanied by a celebratory and affirmative self-recognition (19).

protagonists' agreement to look themselves into the mirror is the film's cue to the viewer, especially the postcolonial subjects, to look directly and purposefully into their own eyes so as to become aware of the dystopia.

Through bathing, embodied symbols, and consuming alcoholic beverages, the protagonists successfully complete their purification ritual. However, in that performance the disappearance of the clitoris is unmistakable. Its absence, as a result of the protagonists' choice to undergo their own initiation under the guidance of the late South African singer Brenda Fassie instead of the five elderly women, constitutes a double-edged undertaking.

3-Performing a Clitoris-free Mevoungou

In the film, despite the activity and centrality of women, what we have seen performed is a clitoris-free and degenitalized ritual. Rather than praising the clitoris, the director makes the choice of a performative cliché of female sexuality, trying on clothes, thereby changing the form of what had been at least physically an exclusively female genital ritual. As shown earlier, the film is not devoid of sexual practices, it just seems to avoid extensive female same-sex erotic practices as prescribed in the ritual to reclaim a more acceptable and palatable heterosexuality, even if gendered roles are reversed in the opening scene. Although the film suggests female genital empowerment, it does not go so far as to endorse a full-blown erotic autonomy, which in its view might have contributed to practices such as transactional sex. In other words, female sexuality should be contained within certain parameters.

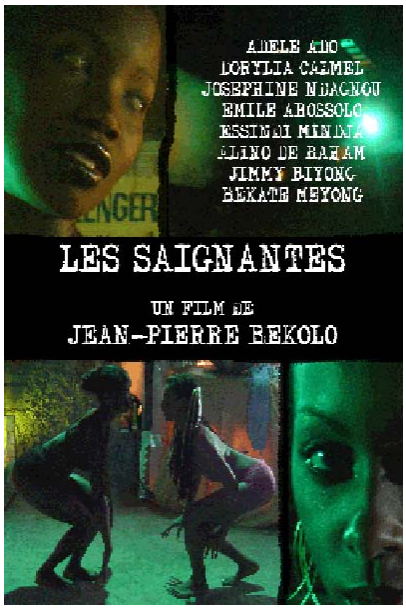
Of course, one could also argue that the erasure of the clitoris skirts the challenges of representing the clitoris to a mass audience. Or perhaps, out of respect, the director refrains from showing the clitoris, which would amount to unveiling the secrecy around the ritual and, or violating women's bodies. Anne Laure Folly argues that "Any action of unveiling [sex] amounts to violating it" (quoted in Alexis Theuyap 2003, 39). In this view Bekolo has made a respectful choice. Unlike anthropological texts and their extensive verbal descriptions of the ritual, Bekolo's medium, as a visual performance has the potential for exploitative spectacle. Also, perhaps Chouchou's rejection of the clitoral touching may suggest the filmmaker's rejection of a singular and nativist view of precolonial rituals and practices. So, against die-hard "traditionalists" with their *à la lettre* prescriptions and proscriptions regarding anything ritual, Bekolo decides to break loose from age-old constraints. He delocalizes and transforms the ritual, adapting it to a more global audience and to the demands of the screen. Rather than confine the ritual to some nativist framework, his adaptation becomes a more relevant approach and considers the larger context. In this way, I argue that even without representing women's clitoral touching, much about female genital power is still retained when the film shows a society undergoing purification at the hands of powerful women.

4-Emasculation, Decapitation, Theophagy: Purifying the Diseased Postcolonial State

In their journey to purify the state, female protagonists and the Mevoungou deploy an array of modes of purification, including sacrifice, decapitation, emasculation, and theophagy. According to French anthropologist Jeanne-Françoise Vincent, the Mevoungou ritual occasionally requires the sacrifice of a chicken or goat, whose blood is then used for purification (20). Similar to but unlike the historical ritual, in the film, the sacrifice is not that of a goat or chicken but of a human being, more specifically the SGCC. In that vein, the title of the film, *Les Saignantes*, which means cruel women or those predisposed to inflict pain, resonates with the mission that Majolie and Chouchou have to execute: purify the diseased state. They administer the cure through bloodletting.[49]

In most scenes, the film portrays the protagonists with vampire-like qualities, operating at night and with prominent lips and bloodshot eyes. Unlike the conventional readings of vampires as destructive, here they represent positive entities on a mission to save the postcolonial state. The 2005 and 2009 revealing posters of the film emphasize their bloodsucking qualities. They show the young women as devourers of the corrupt ruling elite and engaged in an economy of eating, *devoration*, and emasculation.

[49] In the light of their task, I think the film's title ought to be translated as The Bloodletters rather than The Bleeders or The Bloodettes. While the original title in French reflects the personalities of the titular characters, the current English title, *The Bloodettes*, a neologism composed of the English noun "blood" and the French noun suffix "ette," does not. In an interview, Bekolo himself suggests that *Les Saignantes* be translated as *The Bleeders*, but he admits the challenges of translating the title. The final choice of *The Bloodettes* may suggest the director's maverick spirit and his goal of doing away with comfortable concepts and translations.



2005 Poster Courtesy of Quartier Mozart Films

As part of the purification ritual and a moment of women's empowerment, Chouchou and Majolie's degradation of the SGCC's testicles is a section of the film that literalizes anthropological descriptions of the Mevoungou ritual. After les saignantes have the butcher decapitate the body and take a break from their macabre experience, they use the package representing the SGCC's testicles as their toy, and Majolie teasingly asks: "The Secretary General of the Civil Cabinet's balls?" Her question is more for the viewer than for her friend. With what I consider to be a rhetorical question, the director seeks to avoid any ambiguity as to what the protagonists are about to do: toy with the SGCC's testicles and dare disrespect old men, pillars of patriarchy, and supposed possessors of social and political powers. Concerning the degradation of male genitalia, Laburthe-Tolra reports that Gunther Tessmann, the nineteenth-century German

anthropologist, found the Mevoungou songs so outrageous and degrading that he could not report them (1985, 238). Bekolo's adaptation of the abuse of men's genitals is interesting because it goes beyond mere insult to have Majolie and Chouchou literally toy with and kick a small package shaped like male testicles. Insulting the SGCC's manhood constitutes his ultimate defeat as a man, particularly in a system where men's genitals are considered tools of conquest that play a defining role in the power dynamic between men and women. Achille Mbembé makes a similar observation in his discussion of the significance of sexuality in the postcolonial space, remarking:

> In the masculine anatomy of the postcolony, the balls constitute the privileged symbolic signifier of this surplus pleasure. Among men, this surplus pleasure operates via the fantasy of 'consuming' as many women as possible. Sexual consumption can only occur because the female body is found each time treated as a foreign body. Akin to gluttony or drunkenness, sexual consumption has as its main goal the increase of masculine mantra. Now, since it is impossible to possess the female body once and for all, pleasure (jouissance) is possible only in repetition. ("A Brief Response," 2006, 168)

This continual and necessary reenactment of heterosexual acts to confirm the male power over the female body suggests the precariousness of the male sexual organ as a site of power.

Not only is the male sexual organ crucial in the constitution and cultural recognition of manhood, it is also the exclusive site through which men perpetuate their

lineage. The West African male's anxiety over the loss of genitals therefore reflects the fear of his own extinction and that of his lineage. The loss has become in West African films a recurrent allegory, signifying the collapse and failure of the postcolonial state. Films such as Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* (1975), Souleymane Cissé's *Yeleen* (1987), Benoit Lamy and Ngangura Mweze's *La Vie est Belle (Life is Rosy) (*1987), and the previously mentioned *Quartier Mozart* (1992) have all used the male genitalia in different ways to represent the betrayals of independence.[50] *Les Saignantes*' symbolic emasculation of the ruling class is in itself a painful and humiliating blow to the imaginary patriarchy and dictatorship, and the use of young women as agents of emasculation constitutes the humiliation of the highest order.

While degrading testicles draws from the historical ritual, the scene of decapitation/sacrifice does not. Instead of a secret and all-female scene, the director creates a public and a mixed-gendered performance. The decapitation of the SGCC's body with a rusty chainsaw evokes the excessive visual display of power of ancient European regimes (Foucault 1979). Not only does it make an example of the SGCC, but it also leaves the state, literally and figuratively, without its head and testicles, in a disarticulated and infertile state. This gory and uncomfortable display of violence is not pointless, as it helps rid the state of a corrupted and cancerous body. In the film, bodily dissection is viewed as a redemptive and productive act of violence. The metaphorical

[50] In "The Anxious Phallus: The Iconography of Impotence in *Quartier Mozart and Clando*," Jane Bryce analyzes several African films, opining: "This iconography (the magical disappearance of the penis, the inability to perform sexually) is metonymic of the unstable relationship between manhood and the state in the countries concerned, and speaks to the question, not only of gender, but of power relations in the wider sense."(*Men in African Film and Fiction,* 2011*).*

and literal SGCC's body is the abject that ought to be cut from the social skin in need of purification.

The movie's representation of the butcher shop as the destination of the state official's lifeless body is both horrifying and empowering. It invigorates the viewer by reversing the social hierarchy, potentially turning the SGCC's body into meat for the people's consumption. The ingestion of the elite body, symbolic of the corrupt regime, suggests the possibility of sacrificing and consuming the entire decayed system. Here, it is suggested that purification and healing will be achieved through what can be considered an unwitting cannibalism. Through the film, we see a shift in the structure of perception of cannibalism. From its primary construction in colonialist writings as a sign of "absolute difference" between the natives and the colonialists (Stam 1989, Greenblatt 1991),[51] it becomes a mechanism of dominating and disposing of a corrupt regime in the postcolony.

In Bekolo's socio-political critique, the practice of cannibalism illustrates the continuous dynamic of power and domination, as explained in Maggie Kilgour's *From*

[51] Several compelling studies have problematized cannibalism as a sign of otherness and its uses in justifying the colonizing mission. For example, for Robert Stam writes: "Cannibalism has often been the 'name of the other,' the ultimate marker of difference in a coded opposition of light/ dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage" (1989, 125). In *Colonial Encounters* (1992), Peter Hulme considers cannibalism as a European projection onto the Others, explaining that "boundaries of community are often created by accusing those outside the boundary of the very practice on which the integrity of that community is founded. This is at one and the same time both a psychic process-involving repression and projection -- and an ideological process -- whereby the success of the projection confirms the need for the community to defend itself against the projected threat, thereby closing the circle and perpetuating it" (85). Several scholars have taken a more metaphorical approach to cannibalism, detaching it from the material body. In that line of thinking, the West and its institutions have been framed as cannibalistic and/or neo-cannibalistic. For instance, in "Cannibalism Today" (1992), Dean MacCannell opines: "The empire-building cannibal is the totemic ancestor of modern-day (tribal) capitalism" (56).

Communion to Cannibalism (1990). Kilgour argues that cannibalism is a complex site where several and often contradictory dynamics merge. Not only does it involve a negotiation of power and builds intimacy between the eater and the eaten, but also it constitutes a trap because of the eater's insatiability, which requires repetition.[52] It is this form of power -- a strange intimacy of death and pleasure uniting the ruling classes and the plebeians -- that Mbembé has so insightfully theorized. In the film, the reversal of the trope of cannibalism contributes to its overall message of doing away with reified practices.

The film becomes even more compelling in its representation of cannibalism as it moves from cannibalism to theophagy, a higher level of subversion. The intimate yet dangerous cohabitation between the *commandement* and its subjects may facilitate what Mbembé has qualified as "theophagy," when the worshippers devour their gods. I argue that the scene at the butcher shop is Bekolo's version of theophagy, especially if we consider that corrupt postcolonial elites metaphorically and literally feed on the resources of the States and their peoples. Indeed, the film seems to suggest theophagy as a means of turning the postcolonial state into a self-sufficient and organic one, a state capable of flourishing without the handouts of international financial institutions. By choosing female characters as active agents in the administration of such a cure, the film empowers women and momentarily reclaims their sexual bodies without the stigma of pathology or degeneracy.

[52]Before Kilgour, in "Manifesto Antropófago" (1927), Brazilian artist Oswald de Andrade identifies a similar practice when he urges Brazilian artists to adopt the model of the original inhabitants of Brazil, the Tupi Indians, who devour their adversaries in order to take on their strength.

Conclusion: Fiction, the Body, and Hope in the Deathscape

In this chapter, I have explored how the film portrays the corruption and the processes by which the postcolonial state confers on its inhabitants the status of the living dead. As a politically-engaged film, *Les Saignantes* takes action and proposes a purification ritual that is capable of reversing the steady implementation of the dystopia. I then argue that as a performance of the Mevoungou ritual, albeit a degentalized one, *Les Saignantes* accomplishes several political and social tasks. The first task offers the possibility of healing and purification through an allegorical women-centered ritual and the second task acts as a positive force for the new formulation of the postcolonial state. In other words, it suggests the cultural recognition of two marginalized entities: women's bodies and precolonial rituals. The use of the precolonial ritual, geared towards women's self-empowerment, is remarkable because it contradicts some erroneous view of tradition as the locus of women's subordination and modernity as the path to their liberation. In 2002, Signe Arnfred explained this view as: "The general idea is that women's subordination belongs to tradition and to the past, whereas women's emancipation—or gender equality, as the current terminology has it—belongs to modernity and to the future" ("Simone de Beauvoir in Africa"). This bifurcation has never served African women nor African feminist theory well.

Bekolo's act of "rescuing" an extinct cultural practice for the purposes of constructing the present and the future should not be understood as an exclusive return to a pristine past. The voiceover unequivocally sets the differences between the two

practices, warning the viewer and the protagonists: "Mevoungou is a serious thing that would either destroy us and or the country. We would have to use Mevoungou and get rid of it quickly if we want to survive." In other words, a fetishistic economy of return equals suicide. So, rather than searching for some precolonial primitivisms, some mythic and immanent cultural practices awaiting renewal beneath contaminations by foreign cultural invasions, Bekolo urges the viewer to consider the past with its limitations and in conjunction with the present. To advocate a return to a fantasy past is not only delusional, but it would also replicate the methodologies of some misdirected nativist intellectuals and nationalist dictators.[53]

As a political narrative, through its adaptation of the Mevoungou, *Les Saignantes* invents a different semiotic to critique the failures of decolonization. In 2008, Bekolo explained his rejection of the documentary-like filmmaking, claiming: "The challenge is to create a new language, a new semantic actually, to talk about these things. The moment we create a new semantic, we will be able to speak properly" (9). A move away from the realist genre and into a more symbolic one turns the film into a more aesthetically challenging and subversive text. Moreover, the symbolic is potentially subversive and dangerous because it offers unlimited interpretive possibilities. By avoiding the realist genre, Bekolo is able to stage the decapitation and the emasculation of the male ruling class. In that process, his representation blurs the distance between

[53]In "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" (1991), Kwame Anthony Appiah critiques the nationalist dictators' misguided nativist tendencies, writing: "[Nationalists'] enthusiasm for nativism was a rationalization of their urge to keep the national bourgeoisies of other nations, and particularly the powerful industrialized nations, out of their way" (349-350).

reality and fiction and makes room for alternative spaces, potentially usable for social and political change. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida argues that the distinction between the effective or real and the phantasmatic is not a stable one. This copy of the phantasmatic with its dismantling of corrupt state apparatuses can be dangerous because it can be mistaken for the "real." The film thus ceases being merely a copy of a copy to become a weapon against the slow implementation of the dystopia. Disposing of a "necropower," albeit fictionally, gives hope to a disturbed viewer who is alienated from self-serving politicians. In other words, in the deathscape, through ritual, fiction, and the female body, hope and resistance have become viable possibilities.

Conclusion

This project started as an exercise in bringing into focus specific ways in which certain segments of West African female populations aggressively use their genital powers to rein in abusive patriarchal practices. Some of these culturally-sanctioned, women-centered forms of resistance are known to be specific to the local communities, and others have been called into new forms under the pressures of colonialism and globalization. Although the heteropatriarchal postcolonial modern state and rural "indigenous" communities share the same episteme with regard to female bodies as threatening and dangerous, they bring different reading frameworks to bear on what I have called genital powers. In rural areas or in economically-disadvantaged urban centers where traditions are very strong, most of these genital powers receive cultural recognition, whereas in the script of the postcolonial modern state, they are all constituted as backward and/or not really seen. For example, under neoliberalism, the state strategically recognizes neither genital cursing nor female same-sex sexuality.

As I delved into research for the purposes of pointing out the processes underpinning the misrecognition of genital power in fictional narratives and in the script of the postcolonial modern state, the project about other women and their corporeal forms of resistance mutated into self-discovery. I admit it; writing about genital powers has been a painful but a rewarding experience. The journey has been painful in that I had to acknowledge that in the globalized postcolonial context, despite the advancement in human and women's rights, centuries-old patriarchal stigmatizations of women's bodies

as inferior and soiling persist. As a consequence, women continue to struggle against cultural, political, and physical assaults. However, this acknowledgment has been discursively liberating on two levels; first, it has allowed me to explore the meanings assigned to women's bodies in spaces and times different from my own. Until this project, I had no knowledge of female secret societies among the Beti of Cameroon or the use of genital cursing among the Igbo or Yoruba of Nigeria. In my realization that genital cursing among the Malinké is similarly potent among the Igbo or the Yoruba, I begin to reflect on the threads linking those who claim the label of women and to form discursive and imaginary alliances with women I previously considered to be fundamentally different from me.

As I widened my intellectual and cultural horizons, I also learned to embrace the complex nature of the female body and to avoid the luring pitfalls of rigid categories. Indeed, the body reveals both our limitations and our possibilities. Undoubtedly, it can be used to objectify, dominate, and reduce women to second-class citizenship. However, just like rebellious female characters in the primary texts discussed in this dissertation, the physical body can also be used to inscribe resistance, and not just resistance, but also female subjectivity in spaces marked for death and oppressive violence. The material conditions and the psychological states characteristic of the postcolonial state behoove us to think about what it means to carve out a space of resistance. And the scarcity of images of strong and resourceful women reflects the postcolonial intellectual's complicity in victimizing those that the ruling classes already always consider as surplus.

Just like the return of the repressed, my analysis of T. Obinkaram Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (1992), Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop* (2001), and Jean Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005) had originally, as Dr. Hoad insightfully observed, too many battles to fight and too many enemies to get even with. Primarily, I addressed multiple incommensurate regimes of power, modes of judgments and recognitions, and epistemological practices. These regimes include the indigenous hetero-patriarchal culture that subordinates female bodies to oppressive violence, masculinist tendencies in African Studies and fiction writing, the modern postcolonial state and its structural modes of silencing female bodies and female same-sex erotic practices, neo-liberal international human-rights activists and their structures of recognition that fail to acknowledge certain culturally specific modes of female self-empowerment, and racist colonialist constructions of black female bodies as hypersexual. But, as my readings of stigmatized yet misrecognized women-centered practices evolved -- from marveling to outrage and bitterness and currently to calmness -- I slowly learned to tame my analytical energy and to pick my battles carefully. As I strive to bring into focus marginalized practices, I shall continue to refine my reading and "fighting" skills.

The goals of this dissertation are multilayered and intricate. First of all, it seeks to show West African women in their diversity and to displace the preeminence of the view that holds them victims and their sexuality as pathological and disempowering. Although I do not fundamentally dispute these images as divorced from reality, I suggest that other images exist and require our critical attention. Tracking those images means that we have

to pay attention to new fictional narratives that imagine, represent, and re-create cultural praxes that cultural and literary critics may have considered dead and/or unimportant. Excavation of marginalized subjects and practices -- lost women's stories in Ekotto's novel, forbidden female-centered rituals in Bekolo's film, and distorted Igbo women's struggles in Echewa's novel -- is the thread that links these primary texts. Unlike anthropological, historical texts, and political pamphlets, these narratives have unique abilities to invite us into spaces where no other cultural product can take us. In addition, their potential for a larger circulation demands that we examine the images they show about West African societies and women.

In the process of bringing alternative imaginings to light, I also attempt to dispel the discomfort around questions of female sexuality and bodies. I think that since contemporary fictional texts and filmic representations have started an open conversation about complex and empowering images of female women's sexuality, intellectuals, social scientists, and policymakers need to join it. The invitation is all the more important if we consider the veil of silence in which sexuality has been shrouded. But, the veil cannot be kept on any longer, especially if we hope to address social and health issues such as teenage pregnancy, abortion, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and sexually transmitted infections. In fact, as the texts discussed here have allowed me to suggest, there is a disjunction between women's liberal approaches to their bodies and patriarchal nationalist frameworks and their conservative constructions of female sexuality as taboo. That secrecy, which potentially prevents a mother from discussing questions of sexuality

and contraception with her teenage daughter, is an ineffective and a damaging strategy in a society with a high rate of teenage pregnancy.

Further, my research implies that any sustainable developmental scheme must approach women in their wholeness. Women are not made of discrete and unrelated parts that can be easily categorized as market/economy, maternity, education, beauty, and so on. A holistic approach understands that the ways in which a woman views her body impact how she acquires knowledge and interacts with the outside environment. In more concrete terms, it is not sufficient to financially empower a woman with small loans if somewhere somehow the policy does not address how to educate her about sexually transmitted infections and family planning and/or child spacing programs. Sexuality affects women's lives in profound ways, and as new information technologies increasingly bring the world together, and as the lines between private and public spheres become ever more tenuous, innovative ways of thinking and conceptualizing West African women's bodies are imperative for the birth of the new and empowered Africa.

As Dr. Moore realized from the beginning of my research, for me, this dissertation represents more than an academic exercise. It is more than a partial requirement for a degree. It has been and still is a journey for me to understand the various political, social, and epistemological regimes that shape my experiences of my body as well as to explore the multiple avenues to reclaim it. In fact, "Genital Power: Female in Sexuality in West African Literature and Film" reflects how I hope to live my life as a black African woman: empowered and liberated.

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Vita

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